

# The practice and culture of smuggling in the borderland of Egypt and Libya

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This article deals with smuggling among the Awlad ‘Ali Bedouin in the borderland of Egypt and Libya.<sup>1</sup> Smuggling is understood here as a transgressive economic practice that is embedded in the wider social, political and cultural connectivity. This connectivity transgresses state borders, colliding with state sovereignty and territorial integrity. In fact, it has a greater historical depth than either of the post-colonial states, and is in many respects more vital than these.<sup>2</sup> However, smuggling in North Africa and the Middle East is nowadays often discussed as an aspect of the illegal trafficking of people across borders, the transnational drug trade or the illicit trading of arms in the context of civil wars. In addition, smuggling is debated in relation to what is called global jihadist terrorism and has thus become a major object of the securitization policies conducted by states and secret services.<sup>3</sup> This is true of its occurrence in the borderland of Egypt and Libya, in a context characterized by the current disintegration of Libya and the increasing prevalence of various transgressive practices in its borderlands. However, in this article the practice and culture of smuggling are presented in a perspective that sees smuggling not as a criminal exception to normal conduct *per se*, but as a type of economic, political and cultural action that is connected to and embedded in a wider setting of practices. It will become clear that smuggling is the economic aspect of a more general phenomenon which I call shared sovereignty between (trans-)local populations and states. In accordance with the general approach of this guest-edited issue of *International Affairs*,<sup>4</sup> the article seeks to deliver an empirical insight into the emerging complexities in the North African borderlands.

<sup>1</sup> The Awlad ‘Ali are a tribal society that consists of five subtribes and 64 clans. The subtribes are the Abiad (subdivided into Kharuf and Sanaqra), the Ahmar, the Sinina, the Qutu’an and the Gimi’at. See Thomas Hüskén and Olin Roenpage, *Jenseits von Traditionalismus und Stagnation. Analyse einer beduinischen Ökonomie in der Westlichen Wüste Ägyptens* (Münster: LIT, 1998), p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> James MacDougall and Judith Scheele, *Saharan frontiers: space and mobility in northwest Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Amar, *The security archipelago: human-security states, sexuality politics, and the end of neoliberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> See Raffaella A. Del Sarto’s article in this special issue, ‘Contentious borders in the Middle East and North Africa: context and concepts’, *International Affairs* 93: 4, July 2017, pp. 767–87.

## Smuggling

Writing about cultural habits and practices that are labelled as illicit is difficult, particularly when those who practise them are your hosts, conversation partners and friends.<sup>5</sup> The *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* tells us that smuggling is 'the crime of taking, sending or bringing goods secretly and illegally into or out of a country'.<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia defines smuggling as 'the illegal transportation of objects, substances, information or people, such as out of a house or buildings, into a prison, or across an international border, in violation of applicable laws or other regulations'.<sup>7</sup> Etymologically, the word has its roots in the Low German *schmuggeln*, which means 'to lurk'.<sup>8</sup> Thus a smuggler is not only a person involved in the clandestine transport of goods and people, but also someone who lurks (behind bushes) and is potentially dangerous as well as morally ambivalent. On the other hand, smuggling has often been a topic of romantic discourses that portray smugglers as social rebels, or situate smuggling in the context of political resistance against state authorities and their territorial regimes.<sup>9</sup> What smuggling is and what it is not seems to depend on the position of the person defining it. States label forms of trade and exchange as smuggling when these activities collide with border regimes, taxation laws or other legal regulations. History reveals how these regulations change over time and thus turn practices that were once legal into something illegal.<sup>10</sup> Smugglers themselves also have varying perceptions of their conduct. They may see (or present) themselves as part of a moral economy of the underprivileged,<sup>11</sup> or just follow a rational logic of profit maximization. Even ordinary people judge and deal with smuggling in quite different ways. At times, they are the customers of smugglers and purchase goods on black markets without a sense of guilt; at others, they consider smugglers as criminals who endanger law and order. Seminal studies such as Nugent's *Smugglers, secessionists and loyal citizens* have shown that clear distinctions between the good and the bad are often misleading or part of self-

<sup>5</sup> Names of individuals who appear in this article have been changed to preserve their anonymity. Only public figures appear with their real name. The article is based on four field studies, each of which was carried out over a period of four months between 2009 and 2013, and a short visit in 2017. The principal methodologies I applied were participant observation, including participation in four smuggling operations and living with smugglers, and regular (often daily) visits to the Libyan market in Marsa Matrouh, shops in Musaid, and the meeting points of young smugglers in the cities of Marsa Matrouh, Salloum and Tobruk. I conducted narrative interviews with 26 informants and 20 semi-structured interviews with smugglers, military officials and police representatives. I also organized three group discussions with local Bedouin politicians in Marsa Matrouh and Tobruk on the issue of smuggling and politics in 2009, 2010 and 2012. I collected eleven smuggling videos in Marsa Matrouh, Salloum and Tobruk, and in addition, for a one-week period in the early phase of the Libyan revolution in 2011, I accompanied a group of smugglers who supplied the Libyan rebels with ammunition and medication.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/smuggling>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 6 June 2017.)

<sup>7</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smuggling>.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/schmuggeln>.

<sup>9</sup> Roland Girtler, *Abenteuer Grenze. Von Schmugglern und Schmugglerinnen, Ritualen und heiligen Räumen* (Vienna: LIT, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> This is, for instance, true of the prohibition of the production, sale and transportation of alcoholic beverages in the United States in the years between 1920 and 1933.

<sup>11</sup> Mathias Wagner, 'Die moralische Ökonomie des Schmuggels', in Mathias Wagner and Wojciech Lukowski, eds, *Alltag im Grenzland. Schmuggel als ökonomische Strategie im Osten Europas* (Wiesbaden: VS, 2012), pp. 73–89.

legitimizing narratives.<sup>12</sup> This applies, for example, to the distinction between the smuggler as a criminal on the one hand, and the morally superior ordinary citizen, or state authorities as representatives of law, order and justice, on the other. In practice—as this article will show—smugglers, soldiers, customs officers, police officers and ordinary citizens are closely intertwined actors for whom smuggling is a field of economic cooperation, social relationships and political strategies.

The people of the Awlad ‘Ali tribes in the borderland of Egypt and Libya use different words for the activities and notions concerned in this field. The transborder trade is sometimes labelled as *tigara* (trade) and sometimes as *tahrib* (smuggling), according to the context, situation, agents and products involved. The phrase *huwwa fi Libya* (‘he is in Libya’) is frequently used of male family and household members who are trading, working or otherwise busy across the border, whether as visitors and guests, politicians or conflict mediators. As elsewhere in the world, smuggling is a part of a wider range of transgressive practices that occur where state borders impose definitions of legal and illegal, formal and informal, on people who may have other conceptions and experiences of connectivity and division.

The structure of this article is as follows. I will begin with a short introduction outlining the people and the history of the borderland. Then I will discuss how smuggling is socially embedded in and regulated by kinship associations of the borderland. Here I will also refer to normative discourses and moral judgements about smuggling that are at stake in the borderland. After this, I will describe the practicalities and forms of smuggling. Because the actual conduct (not the general management) of smuggling is the domain of young men (aged between 17 and 40 years), a portrait of the *shabab min ghir khuf* (‘youth without fear’) and some aspects of their social, political and cultural practices will follow. I will then analyse the political dimension of smuggling. This refers primarily to the longstanding connection between the field of smuggling and the field of politics, but I will also deal with the politicization of smuggling that became apparent in the course of the Arab revolutions of 2011. To conclude, I will situate smuggling as a transgressive economic practice that is embedded in the wider social, political and cultural connectivity of the borderland.

## **People, borderland and a bit of history**

Over the past 20 years, African borderlands have attracted growing academic attention, with a change of focus. Works such as that by Paul Nugent and Tony Asiwaju began to go beyond the classical notion of the ‘African frontier’ as peripheral or marginal.<sup>13</sup> Recent studies have demonstrated that African borderlands are particular zones in which transnational realities challenge state conceptions of sovereignty, territoriality and citizenship and generate specific interconnected

<sup>12</sup> Paul Nugent, *Smugglers, secessionists and loyal citizens of the Ghana–Togo frontier: the lie of the borderlands since 1914* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Paul Nugent and Antony I. Asiwaju, eds, *African boundaries: barriers, conduits and opportunities* (London: Pinter, 1996); Igor Kopytoff, *The African frontier: the reproduction of traditional African societies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

political settings.<sup>14</sup> Following the arguments of Judith Scheele and James McDougall with respect to north-western Africa,<sup>15</sup> I perceive the borderland of Egypt and Libya as a space shaped by particular forms of social, political, cultural and economic connectivity based on tribal organization.

The *watan* (territory) of the Awlad 'Ali tribes in Egypt as it is today stretches along the Mediterranean coast for around 500 kilometres from al-Hamam to Salloum. Inland it extends as far as the Oasis of Siwa in the Qattara depression. The port city of Marsa Matrouh, with a population of around 150,000 (80 per cent of them Bedouin), is the capital of Matrouh governorate and the seat of the governor, his administration and the *al-maglis al-mahalli* (governorate council). Between half a million and one million fully sedentary Awlad 'Ali live in the governorate and represent the majority (85 per cent) of its population.<sup>16</sup> In the past 20 years Matrouh has turned into a centre of domestic Egyptian tourism, with numerous hotels and resorts—as well as the ruins of failed investments—all along the coast.<sup>17</sup> In the summer season between June and August millions of Egyptian tourists come to the region,<sup>18</sup> including the city of Marsa Matrouh. Tourism has changed the shape of the landscape and influenced the regional economy. It has caused severe and continuing conflicts over land between investors and the Awlad 'Ali population and also among the Bedouin themselves. But in the years between 2005 and 2011 it also began—albeit slowly—to generate new job opportunities for young urban Bedouin in hotels and restaurants.<sup>19</sup> Egyptian tourists have been particularly relevant as customers for smuggled goods in the so-called *suq Libya* (the Libyan market) in Marsa Matrouh. At the Egyptian border town of Salloum the *watan* of the Awlad 'Ali crosses into Libya. Its nucleus is the port city of Tobruk, with a population of roughly 100,000 people, in the very east of Cyrenaica. Altogether, around 15,000 Awlad 'Ali reside in Libya.<sup>20</sup>

It is certainly true that the demarcation of the international border between Egypt and Libya under colonial rule by the Italians in Libya from 1911 to 1943 and

<sup>14</sup> Markus Hoehne and Dereje Feyissa, eds, *Borders and borderlands as resources in the Horn of Africa* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2010); Benedikt Korf and Timothy Raeymaekers, 'Introduction: border, frontier and the geography of rule at the margins of the state', in Benedikt Korf and Timothy Raeymaekers, eds, *Violence on the margins: states, conflict, and borderlands* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 3–28; Thomas Hüskén and Georg Klute, 'Emerging forms of power in two African borderlands', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 25: 2, 2010, special issue, 'From empiricism to theory in African border studies', ed. David Coplan, pp. 28–42.

<sup>15</sup> Judith Scheele, *Smugglers and saints of the Sahara: regional connectivity in the twentieth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); MacDougall and Scheele, *Saharan frontiers*.

<sup>16</sup> These numbers are rough estimates given by my key informants and the governorate administration in Marsa Matrouh in 2011. The official numbers of the Egyptian census speak of 400,000 inhabitants in the entire governorate of Matrouh: see <http://www.capmas.gov.eg>.

<sup>17</sup> Donald P. Cole and Soraya Altorki, *Bedouin, settlers, and holiday-makers: Egypt's changing northwest coast* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Rady gives a figure of 500,000 nights per season and has counted 48 hotels and resorts in the governorate: Adel Rady, *Profile of sustainability in some Mediterranean tourism destinations. Case studies in Egypt: Marsa Matrouh, Al Alamein, Siwa Oasis (Matrouh governorate), final report* (Luxembourg: European Investment Bank FEMIP Trust Fund, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> The revolution in Egypt and the subsequent political turmoil during the presidency of Mohamed Morsi between 2012 and 2013 severely affected domestic tourism in Egypt. When I personally spoke to the managers of the three most prominent hotels in Marsa Matrouh in 2012, they estimated a fall in occupancy of over 70%.

<sup>20</sup> As in the case of Egypt, these numbers are only rough estimates based on information given by key informants and local politicians.

the British protectorate in Egypt from 1914 until the end of the Second World War collided with Awlad 'Ali perceptions and practices of territory and mobility. However, it did not create a no-man's-land populated by deprived Bedouin. Despite the borders erected by states, Bedouin mobility and connectivity never ceased to exist, even under the severe pressure of armed conflict during the Second World War. These practices persisted under the subsequent post-colonial regimes and proved their tested agency in the days of the Arab Spring in 2011. This 'art of not being governed',<sup>21</sup> or 'the art of ensuring trans-local sovereignty' as I would like to put it, is part of the collective political memory in the borderland.

In the post-colonial era, Egypt and Libya went in quite different political directions. Whereas the monarchy in Egypt was toppled by the revolution of the free officers in 1952, Libya became a monarchy under King Idris (1951–69), the heir of the Sanusiya order. Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime in Egypt brought new ideas and new rules of the game to the Awlad 'Ali. An Egyptian national identity was intensively promoted and also brought to the Bedouin. The concept of the territorial integrity of the nation-state consolidated the demarcated and protected borders introduced by the colonial powers. The centralized Egyptian state claimed and implemented its monopoly on violence and political power. However, this did not mean that spaces for Bedouin activity in the borderland disappeared. Although Awlad 'Ali politicians frequently criticize the dominance of the Egyptians and sometimes claim to live under conditions of *isti'mar* (colonial rule), they do not perceive themselves as an essentially deprived minority. There are several reasons for this. Since the end of the Second World War the Awlad 'Ali have not been involved in severe international conflicts or wars, as the Sinai Bedouin have.<sup>22</sup> Nor have they been the object of severe military action or harsh security and secret service measures within the context of the so-called 'war on terror'. Although some groups of Awlad 'Ali are involved in human trafficking and the arms and drug trades, the tribe as such has never appeared in the context of the debate. Furthermore, the Awlad 'Ali gained some benefits through Nasser's desert development initiatives, including economic measures as well as improvements in education and public health. However, the alleged failure of the Egyptian state to implement comprehensive economic policies (and the lack of adequate political representation) is an ongoing issue in local political debates, and one which was certainly nurtured during the turmoil of the revolution and the subsequent interregnum of the elected president Mohamed Morsi.

In Libya, on the other hand, the tribes enjoyed a great deal of political autonomy. Libya was and is a country whose population is affiliated to tribal social organization and culture. The monarchy relied on tribal notables and tribal councils, and King Idris had a particular affinity with Cyrenaica owing to its Sanusiya legacy and the tribal culture of the region. The discovery of oil in 1959 deeply transformed the former Bedouin economy of herders and pastoral nomads.<sup>23</sup> It led

<sup>21</sup> James Scott, *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> A brief exception to this was the Libyan–Egyptian war in 1977.

<sup>23</sup> Dirk Vandewalle, *A history of modern Libya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 139.

to sedentarization, significant urbanization (almost 90 per cent of Cyrenaica's population now live in or near cities), and the emergence of new or transformed social, political and economic actors. But these transitions never dissolved tribes as meaningful forms of social and cultural organization. After the revolution in 1969 the Gaddafi regime decreed the abolition of the tribe as a legal unit and reorganized local administrative structures according to the leader's interests, explicitly replacing 'tribal politicians' with followers of the revolution. However, this plan collided significantly with the political, social and cultural realities of the country, and Gaddafi failed in his attempts to co-opt the younger generation as forces of the revolution in order to turn them against the local sovereign power of the conservative tribal establishment.<sup>24</sup> Instead, local tribal politicians bypassed and even appropriated Gaddafi's system of basic congresses and committees. In his later years Gaddafi himself turned towards tribal affiliation and alliances as an overarching principle of politics.<sup>25</sup> He developed skilful strategies to involve the tribes in his regime and contrived to co-opt some tribal elites as his accomplices and partners. On the other hand, the various tribal elites also used Gaddafi's efforts for their own purposes. This was true for, among others, some Awlad 'Ali lineages of the immediate borderland. In order to gain influence over the tribes on the Egyptian side of the border, Gaddafi's regime supported particular families and lineages financially, or enabled transborder smuggling and trade through loose control or cooperation at the border checkpoints.

One of the most important economic incentives for smuggling between Libya and Egypt were the free trade ports across Libya. The difference in price between tax-free or low-tax products of all kinds—from petrol to Tunisian harissa (chilli paste) and Chinese consumer electronics—in Libya and those subject to high import taxation laws in Egypt opened the way for very profitable ventures for smugglers in the borderland. In general, it can be said that, with the exception of the Libyan revolution against Gaddafi, when arms and equipment were smuggled into the country from Egypt, and the current smuggling of people, almost all smuggling activity between the two countries is Egypt-bound. The formal and informal labour migration simply followed job opportunities that were available in Libya. In the political field the situation is more balanced, with Bedouin politicians and conflict mediators from Egypt regularly busy in Libya too. However, the financing of election campaigns in Egypt with money from Libya again proves the asymmetry in the relationship. This asymmetry is shaped by states and their economic policies, and thus is out of the hands of the Awlad 'Ali. However, the assets of cross-border kinship connectivity enabled the Egyptian Awlad 'Ali to benefit from Libyan oil wealth. Among other tribes of Cyrenaica, the Awlad 'Ali became known as Sad Shin, an acronym which stands for *al-Sahara' al-Sharqiya* (Eastern Desert). The use of the term Sad Shin by the Libyans is a signifier for smuggling and other (illicit) transborder activities that are attributed to the Awlad

<sup>24</sup> John Davis, *Libyan politics: tribe and revolution* (London: Tauris, 1987).

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Hüskén, 'Tribes, revolution, and political culture in the Cyrenaica region of Libya', in Malika Bouzi-ane, Cilja Harders and Anja Hoffmann, eds, *Local politics and contemporary transformations in the Arab world* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 214–31 at p. 217.

'Ali. It is used in an ironic but also in a morally pejorative way. Thus it is not surprising that the Awlad 'Ali reject the term as dishonourable and discriminatory.

The economic opportunities of the borderland are accompanied by certain political advantages. In the past, the existence of two radically different state systems increased the number of political settings and opened chances of appropriation (of state structures and budgets) the Bedouin could use to pursue their ends. Thus the will to subordinate oneself to one state system and to become an obedient citizen was replaced by the opportunity of choice. Claims on the part of the states could be rejected by crossing the border. Political problems or conflicts with state authorities were anticipated by disappearing into the tribal context on the other side of the border. Thus the Leviathan lost a significant amount of its domination over the citizen. Contrary to other tribal groups such as the Bedouin of the Sinai Peninsula, who confront two explicitly non-tribal societies in Egypt and Israel, the Awlad 'Ali could and do experience themselves as part of a transnational social and cultural continuum.

## **Embedded smuggling**

The transborder social and cultural connectivity of tribal society is a vital notion among the Awlad 'Ali that is not only practised but also openly expressed even in the face of authoritarian power.<sup>26</sup> The integrating force of *qaraba* (kinship) and the solidarity among *qaribiyin* (relatives) is a key element of the connectivity in the borderland, and it is also imperative for the embedding and regulation of smuggling. However, *qaraba* does not stand in opposition to national identity but rather offers a deeper bond that goes beyond being part of a nation.

This becomes clear in the case of the relationship between some 'a'ilat (sing. 'ila) (families, extended families, lineages) of the Qutu'an subtribe and their counterparts in the Quinishat clan. The Qutu'an represent the largest faction of the Awlad 'Ali in and around Tobruk. The connectivity of social relations embedded in tribal traditions and kinship ties serves as a platform on which individuals and families seek to build a prosperous future. This is particularly true for the longlasting kinship alliance between the 'Ilat al-Bayda, a lineage of the Quinishat in Egypt, and the 'Ilat al-Khadra of the Qutu'an in Tobruk.

For more than 60 years these two family groups have cemented their relationship through intermarriage, with daughters of the 'Ilat al-Bayda marrying men of the 'Ilat al-Khadra, through economic cooperation and through political alliance. This kinship alliance is based on values and normative orientations rooted in the tribal society. It is also based on the emotional ties between individuals created within the context of *qaraba* and the lived experience of daily cooperation. The two lineages have created a fabric of mutual obligations and benefits that delivers a form of certainty, in which even illegal and potentially dangerous activities like smuggling can be embedded. Besides agnatic kin, both family groups also

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Hüsken, 'Tribal political culture and the revolution in the Cyrenaica of Libya', *Orient: German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture of the Middle East*, 1/2012, pp. 26–31.

integrate partners and friends. In these cases *qaraba* stands for closeness, relatedness and affiliation among associated individuals and groups, and the principle of kinship is adapted to incorporate different groups and interests. We could therefore call the overall tribal group a kinship association.

As a result of the benefits of Gaddafi's oil rents and entrepreneurial success in the gold trade, the former client group turned into the economically superior group. Since 1994, five men of the 'Ilat al-Bayda have been seasonally employed on the farmland of their Libyan relatives, and thus contributing to the cash income of their families. Their agricultural skills, on the other hand, have enabled the 'Ilat al-Khadra to develop their land into a flourishing farm. For the Libyan side of the association, the kinship connectivity into Egypt is also an important social asset, because it increases the number of men ready to stand by in times of conflict and crisis. The 'Ilat al-Bayda on the Egyptian side can claim to have a renowned and very successful tribal politician in their ranks. Sheikh Abdallah is a politician with experience in tribal politics, party politics and the world of international development. He is also a conflict mediator (*mardi*) on the basis of Bedouin customary law (*'urf*) and is frequently engaged in this regard on both the Egyptian and Libyan sides of the border. Abdallah's contribution to the kinship alliance is the management of political and social relations (within kin and beyond), the moderation of conflict and the juridical regulation of transborder economic transactions including labour migration, trade and smuggling. Thus Abdallah (and others like him) establishes a frame of order for the economic relations of a population that is settled on the territories of two states. The regulation of smuggling is situated in this setting and is thus embedded in a wider social, juridical and political framework. The kinship association of the two lineages makes them attractive business and trade partners (within and beyond that kinship), not because of their criminal energy as smugglers but because of the reliability of their social, political and juridical assets. In addition, most of Abdallah's activities are legal, tolerated by state officials or at least beyond law enforcement. In the case of conflict mediation between Egyptian economic migrants and their employers in Libya, Abdallah deals predominantly with cases that have nothing to do with smuggling and are even beyond the concerns of the two families, but are essential for his positive reputation in the borderland. These social and moral assets are also important for the regulation of smuggling. In other words, successful smuggling requires close and reliable kinship ties across the border and skilled men with political, social and cultural assets.

Both families have been involved in the smuggling of beauty products, clothes and electronic devices such as digital cameras and mobile phones. Some of these products are marketed at the *suq Libya* in Marsa Matrouh, where the 'Ilat al-Bayda have a number of shops. Other products go to Alexandria and Cairo and are marketed by business partners in a tribal association from the Sinai Peninsula. This connection is first and foremost about business, but it also represents a successful intertribal connectivity grounded on common habitual social and cultural features and customary law as a shared legal frame. Within the association, smuggling is



only one element in a broader income diversification strategy.<sup>27</sup> It is a professionally and socially regulated business process with a division of labour that differentiates between those who organize, those who conduct the smuggling, and those who market and sell the products. The senior men represent the broader social, political, juridical and cultural framework in which smuggling and many other activities are embedded. The actual practice of smuggling is the domain of the younger men (between 17 and 40 years old). In this way, senior men are protected from the potential threats of law enforcement, ensuring that they can represent the kinship association in social relations, politics and business without any air of illegality around them. For the young men, smuggling is not only an attractive source of additional cash income alongside the limited opportunities offered by farming, animal husbandry or wage labour, but is also a means of proving oneself, coming of age, and gaining status (I shall return to this point below). I have mentioned above that the terms *tigara* (trade) and *tahrib* (smuggling) are used differently depending on the people, products and contexts involved. One could be tempted to argue that people with nomadic traditions have particular cultural understandings of mobility and space that simply contradict the territorial regimes of states and the related definitions of legality and illegality. Emanuel Marx argues that the Bedouin of Mount Sinai consider the smuggling of hashish and other drugs to be a legitimate economic enterprise, and that the state and its laws are more noticed than respected.<sup>28</sup> However, the Awlad 'Ali are well acquainted with these global frames through a long history of interaction with different states and state definitions of the legal and the illegal. These definitions have become part of the emic juridical and moral world of the people in the borderland. Nevertheless, the local moral considerations and the ideas of just (or unjust) conduct among the Awlad 'Ali (as well as quite pragmatic aspects of the borderland economy) are paramount.

For the 'Ilat al-Bayda and the 'Ilat al-Khadra every cross-border activity that is embedded in and conducted by the kinship association is labelled as *tigara*. No one in the association considers himself a criminal because no one is solely a professional smuggler; each individual is also a farmer, a wage labourer or a politician. The issue of *tahrib* is never mentioned in front of strangers, but it is also avoided among relatives and friends in the privacy of the *marbu'a*.<sup>29</sup>

Instead, people speak of *tigara*, or about 'going to Libya'. Nevertheless, the unsaid reappears as an object of irony, humour and gossip, as for example in using the phrase *tigara bidun gumruk* (trade without customs) instead of *tahrib* (smuggling). Only among the younger men does a certain habitualization of illegality play a role in their adolescent subculture.

*Tahrib* is mostly attributed to the large-scale smuggling of hard drugs and weapons and the trafficking of people. These activities are conducted by transnational organized crime networks, which go beyond the tribal society and are less locally embedded in contexts such as the kinship association I am describing

<sup>27</sup> Hüsken and Roenpage, *Jenseits von Traditionalismus und Stagnation*.

<sup>28</sup> Emanuel Marx, *Bedouin of Mount Sinai: an anthropological study of their political economy* (New York: Berghahn, 2014), p. 101.

<sup>29</sup> The *marbu'a* (pl. *marabi'*) is the men's space and the room where guests are received in the Bedouin house.

in this article.<sup>30</sup> For most of my informants this form of *tahrib* therefore refers to socially uncontrollable and excessive conduct. The groups and networks behind it and their practices are considered illegal in the sense of the codified state law but also unjust and unacceptable in the sense of Awlad 'Ali morality and juridical understanding. However, within the context of political or social rivalry between different kinship associations,<sup>31</sup> people do not hesitate to accuse others of being *muharrabin* (smugglers). The inherent contradictions in the definitions of smuggling and trade are certainly acknowledged, but are downplayed, given the weight of the self-interest of the kinship associations.

All this said, smuggling is a widespread practice that contributes at least one-third of incomes in the borderland.<sup>32</sup> Even though it involves dangers in activities that are labelled as criminal, the smugglers in the borderland do not seem to suffer from a sense of guilt or remorse. There are two reasons for this. First of all, the sense of guilt is avoided by the integrative power of the kinship associations. The smuggler experiences the affirmation of the kinship association as a we-group instead of moral pressure: he is doing the right thing for the economic sake of his people.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, successful smuggling advances the individual's position—both materially and in terms of status—in the internal power relations among the men of a kinship association. A successful smuggler is considered a good organizer who does not hesitate in the face of obstacles and is thus a man to be listened to. The second reason is more pragmatic. The legal borderland economy suffers from various structural deficits: a weak labour market with a high rate of youth unemployment; the limited potential of desert agriculture; tourism that is predominantly in the hands of Egyptian investors (private and state-owned) from the Nile valley, and often operates with non-Bedouin employees or is, in the case of Libya's east, literally non-existent; and a construction sector that basically employs cheap seasonal workers from upper Egypt. Both states have lacked (or left it to international development agencies to enact) comprehensive measures in education and vocational training of the Bedouin population, and there is almost total ignorance of initiatives to develop the local and regional cross-border economy. In a setting of this kind, smuggling becomes a primary economic alternative that is accompanied by practical, or let us say pragmatic, norms and morals.<sup>34</sup> These pragmatic norms legitimize smuggling by labelling it as necessary and unavoidable and in this sense as normal. Within the experience of being

<sup>30</sup> None of the kinship associations I dealt with was actively involved in these transactions. However, they do take place, and people know about the networks that are involved in this field.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Hüskén, 'The neoliberal competitive order in the borderland of Egypt and Libya', in Ulf Engel and Paul Nugent, eds, *Reshaping Africa* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2009), pp. 169–209.

<sup>32</sup> This estimate is based on my own studies from 1994 to the present (Hüskén and Roenpage, *Jenseits von Traditionalismus und Stagnation*) and is supported by the estimates of local informants.

<sup>33</sup> The German sociologist Heinrich Popitz has elaborated on the importance for the individual of experiencing recognition and appreciation by the social group to which they belong: see Heinrich Popitz, *Phänomene der Macht. Autorität—Herrschaft—Gewalt—Technik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> I borrow the term 'practical norms' from Olivier de Sardan. He uses it to describe 'real forms of African governance' in which the Weberian bureaucratic rationale is modified by the practical needs of African political arenas. See Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, 'The bureaucratic mode of governance and practical norms in West Africa and beyond', in Bouziane et al., eds, *Local politics and contemporary transformations in the Arab world*, pp. 43–64.

peripheral or neglected, smuggling becomes a form of active economic self-help rather than a romantic projection of the Bedouin as a roving outlaw. None of the involved leading men evoked such an image or claimed that smuggling was the *haq*, the right of the Awlad 'Ali. What separates *tigara* from *tahrib* is a matter of scale and has to do with the sort of product involved and the way in which, and by whom, smuggling is organized. The smuggling of most of the kinship associations I worked with is accompanied by a certain modesty, and the *awaqil* (elders, wise senior men) of the families make the moral claim that excessive conduct is avoided.

## **Practicalities and forms of smuggling**

The vast deserts of Matrouh governorate and the two international borders with Sudan and Libya make the region quite difficult to control. Despite official statements by the Egyptian government, the majority of the military and police forces in these borderlands are ill-equipped and not well trained. Most of the young soldiers in the border posts or garrisons are doing their military service and have very little money (often below five Egyptian pounds or less than one euro per day). They usually come from the Nile valley and are unacquainted with the desert territory and people. Military service in remote border posts and along the Mediterranean coast or in the desert is harsh and full of deprivation, and has also recently become quite dangerous.<sup>35</sup> Soldiers rely on support from the Bedouin population and are regularly able to obtain free water and cheap food. Soldiers and customs officials are often themselves involved in smuggling activities, either by turning a blind eye to what is happening around them or as active participants. In the Gaddafi era, the Libyan borderland was controlled by the army. However, military control over the border territory was weak, particularly because of the poor equipment and training of the troops. In addition, the Libyan soldiers themselves belong to the tribes and kinship associations of the region, enabling the traders and smugglers to make use of these social connections in the military and police apparatus. Soldiers and officers were simply part of the smuggling operations. Some kinship associations from Tobruk and the Egyptian border town of Salloum worked directly with the customs officers at the Libyan checkpoint, who were close relatives or at least members of the same tribe. According to leading members of the Egyptian side of the association, even Gaddafi himself was involved in loosening the border controls for them: 'He [Gaddafi] wanted us as his allies in Egypt, that is why we could trade across the official checkpoint without any problems.'<sup>36</sup> Thus the distinction between the smuggler as a criminal and the state servant as the representative of law and order was meaningless in practice. On the other hand, in the past ten years the official border regime between Libya and Egypt has shifted between extremes, from restrictive visa and transit regulations and temporary shutdowns of the border to times of loose control and permissive practices. What

<sup>35</sup> In the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution and the ongoing violence in Libya in 2014 and 2015, border posts in the Western Desert were even attacked and destroyed by heavily armed smugglers (<http://www.dailynews-egypt.com/2014/07/20/egypt-mourns-death-22-soldiers-following-militant-attack/>).

<sup>36</sup> Salah Sakran, local politician, Salloum, 20 Oct. 2009.

kind of policy is applied varies according to political relations between the two states, measures against smuggling, Libyan attempts to regulate labour migration and, lately, initiatives against transnational jihadist groups. Depending on the situation, the Awlad 'Ali could cross the border without a visa on a daily or weekly basis, needed a visa if under 60 years of age, could transport goods across the border or not, and were allowed to work in Libya or not. The arbitrariness of these policies turned the checkpoint into an obstacle to rather than an incentive for the legal regional transborder economy, and made smuggling seem an attractive, self-controlled economic alternative.

There are four principal forms of smuggling in the borderland, that go under different names and involve different practices. The first one is called *tigarat al-shanta*: trading by bag. *Tigarat al-shanta*—never *tahrib al-shanta* (smuggling by bag)—is the most common and accepted form of smuggling in the daily border traffic at the official coastal checkpoint located between Salloum (Egypt) and Amsaad (Libya).<sup>37</sup> *Tigarat al-shanta* is a form of petty trade and smuggling that is practised by individual male members of the Awlad 'Ali who travel to Libya for a couple of days and return to Egypt with a bag filled with tea, clothes, harissa, cigarettes, Chinese mobile phones and other such goods. The customs officers know these traders well. Depending on the products traded, their 'fees' vary between 10 and 20 per cent of the market value. *Tigarat al-shanta* is a good means of obtaining cash income and is mostly practised by nuclear households and families. However, effective trading and securing good prices require reliable connections with traders in Amsaad and Tobruk. The marketing of the products in Egypt is conducted via the *suq Libya* in Marsa Matrouh or other shops in the city and across the region. The individual nature of 'trading by bag' renders its practitioners vulnerable to arbitrary demands on the part of the customs officers. Often, poor traders are exposed to humiliating practices meted out by the border personnel, which include arbitrary violence, such as kicking and hitting with sticks, or random arrest for several hours. Thus *tigarat al-shanta* is also conducted in collective ways (individual porters work for traders) that offer more security and a better bargaining position in relation to the customs officials.

The second form of smuggling is *tahrib/tigara bil-leyl* (night smuggling/night trading). In these night-time operations the border checkpoint in Salloum/Amsaad is circumvented by using small footpaths in the desert. *Tahrib/tigara bil-leyl* is always conducted by groups of young men between 17 and 25 years old, who carry the bags with the goods. They usually receive the bags from a pickup or truck in Libya and deliver them to another transporter on the Egyptian side of the border. In the cases I studied, the young men belonged to a kinship association in the immediate borderland. If extra porters are needed, relatives and friends are hired. Smuggling at night is quite dangerous, partly because of the military border patrols but much more because of the Second World War landmines in the area.

<sup>37</sup> The checkpoint is quite a big area, around 4km long and 1km wide, divided by the Egyptian *bab Saloum* (Salloum Gate) and the Libyan *bab Amsaad* (Amsaad Gate) and a connecting fenced road about 1km long between them. The border is guarded by military forces. On the Egyptian side this contains surveillance and radar installations.

Every year young men lose limbs or their lives through stepping on mines at night. In the absence of medical care, many of them die in the desert. If the smugglers make it to the nearest hospital, the victim will be reported to the police and the *mukhabarat* (secret service), which leads to interrogation and the threat of potential law enforcement or the necessity of providing bribes. Those who survive remain physically disabled for the rest of their lives.

The third form of smuggling is *tahrib bahri* (smuggling by sea). This, carried out on fishing boats, is a larger-scale operation. Each Egyptian or Libyan fishing boat can carry the equivalent of three pickup loads. Smuggling by boat is risky, since the smugglers have to hide from the coastguard or make deals with them. It is also dangerous to unload the boats under cover of darkness, because navigation is more difficult at night-time. The boats start in Libya and head towards a number of small coves along the Egyptian coast. In the operation I witnessed in 2010, the load contained mobile phones, beauty products, clothes, cigarettes and hashish. It was a big operation, which took place in the early morning and was handled by more than 20 men.

The fourth form is *tahrib sahari* (desert smuggling), which involves transporting goods through the deep desert by pickup. In the borderland, this form of smuggling is almost solely in the hands of international networks based in Libya, Egypt, Chad, Sudan and other countries and regions. *Tahrib sahari* deals with the smuggling of drugs, cigarettes and arms and the trafficking of people. Tribesmen are certainly involved, but they do not dominate these networks, nor is kinship the paramount principle of their social organization. In the course of the Libyan revolution against Gaddafi and the post-revolutionary conflicts in the country, the smuggling networks have equipped themselves with arms such as heavy machine-guns, bazookas and rocket launchers. In the absence of central authority in Libya, the networks operate freely and only have to come to terms with local authorities and the militias. In Egypt they were even able to attack and destroy a border army post. However, my empirical knowledge of these networks and their practices is limited and I will therefore not go into detail here about this kind of smuggling.

Communication in all forms of smuggling takes place by *mahmul*—mobile phone—the indispensable and seemingly ubiquitous communication technology in the borderland. Mobile phones, introduced in the early years of the new millennium, have created new and quicker options for social and communicative connectivity of people in the region in general, and in particular for the management of smuggling. The technology has enormously facilitated cooperation between smugglers of the Awlad ‘Ali and their partners in other borderlands, namely the Bedouin of the Sinai Peninsula and tribal associations in the borderlands of Libya, Tunisia and Algeria. In addition, mobile phones have enabled partners in the free trade ports of Libya to give the smugglers timely news of incoming commodities.

The marketing of the smuggled goods and products involves several channels: a local and regional one in Marsa Matrouh, two metropolitan ones in Cairo and Alexandria, and an international channel via the Sinai Peninsula into markets in Israel. The local/regional one is the *suq Libya*, which is located at the eastern end

of the city of Marsa Matrouh. The market consists of more than 50 different shops.<sup>38</sup> Every summer, hundreds of thousands of Egyptian tourists, who spend their holidays in the cooler climate of the Mediterranean coast, benefit from the offers in the market with its low-priced electronic devices and mobile phones, jeans and other clothes, and beauty products.<sup>39</sup> In the shops, the smuggled goods are presented alongside other commodities. Since state employees and members of the police and security forces shop here too, law enforcement is not really a threat. The arbitrary taxation policy is the only hindrance to the shop owners; and in most cases bribing the public servants solves the problem. In the shops younger men work as shop assistants and vendors, while the senior men sit, supervise and chat with customers. Besides the *suq Libya* there are also numerous shops in the city of Marsa Matrouh where smuggled products can be purchased. Marketing in Cairo and Alexandria is conducted by Awlad ‘Ali traders or their partners. In the case of our association, marketing is done by a tribal association from the Sinai Peninsula. In a small shop, not far from Midan al-‘Ataba (‘Ataba Square) in Cairo, customers can even order particular products, for example digital cameras. The orders are communicated to the smugglers in Marsa Matrouh by mobile phone and the products are usually available within one month. Hashish is also sold in Cairo and Alexandria by various traders (tribal and non-tribal), but it is also directly smuggled into Israel by Sinai tribes and kinship associations. Here my knowledge is too limited to permit detailed comment.

### ***Shabab min ghir khuf: the young and the fearless***

Smuggling activities themselves are usually conducted by the young men of an association aged between 17 and 40 years, whereas the elders stay in the background. The young men establish a subculture of smugglers that is recognizable by certain habits and a distinctive performative practice. Bravery and a readiness to assume risk belong to this subculture, as does the demonstration of wealth, with expensive clothes, several mobile phones of the latest fashion and, in the case of very successful smugglers, big four-by-four vehicles. If they can afford it, the young men also carry pistols under their *sidriya* (the Bedouin waistcoat). In the course and aftermath of the Libyan revolution in 2011, weapons became easily available. Since then, smugglers have started to equip themselves with AK-47 assault rifles, which they also sell across the borderland. All together, this creates a certain habitualization of illegality,<sup>40</sup> which is an identity marker for the young smugglers and contributes to their self-given and partly attributed (by older men) title *shabab min ghir khuf* (youth without fear). The young men have their meeting points in coffee shops or Bedouin restaurants, or simply congregate in front of a shop that belongs to a relative in a side street of Marsa Matrouh. Here, they converse and

<sup>38</sup> A fire destroyed large parts of the market in 2012. The market was rebuilt in 2013–14.

<sup>39</sup> The prices are 30–40% below those in Alexandria or Cairo owing to the avoidance of import taxes.

<sup>40</sup> Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, vol. 1: *Wandlungen des Verhaltens in den weltlichen Oberschichten des Abendlandes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997; first publ. 1969); Pierre Bourdieu, *Entwurf einer Theorie der Praxis* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

spend their leisure time with tea, cigarettes and gossip. In a society that is still very much shaped by the authority of senior men, being part of a band of smugglers creates a social space for the young men where they can act independently of their fathers, grandfathers and uncles. Taking the risks smuggling entails is also a means to prove oneself, and represents a sort of coming of age and a gain in status. The successful young smuggler advances in the internal power relations of families and kinship associations. Furthermore, smuggling opens the door to the world of glittering global commodities such as smartphones, tablets and fancy clothes so much desired by Bedouin youth in the borderland. Displaying these items is an experience of superiority and distinction much appreciated by the young smugglers.

A very interesting aspect of this adolescent culture is represented by short movies or video clips made by the smugglers with the video devices on their mobile phones. The central issue of these movies is the act of smuggling and the illegal crossing of borders. Some clips have titles and are accompanied by Bedouin music, while others are just recorded scenes. The video clips are exchanged (via Bluetooth) and circulated among the smugglers, but they are also popular among young people who themselves have no connection to smuggling. The more spectacular and illegal the content, the more desirable the clip becomes. In recent years, two videos in particular have become quite famous in the region: *Markib al-'ar* ('Ship of disgrace'), about a smuggling operation by boat; and *Jarard al-Awlad 'Ali* ('The locusts of the Awlad 'Ali'), which shows a seemingly endless line of men carrying bags and boxes across the border. There are also a number of videos titled *Tahrib sahari* ('Desert smuggling'), which basically show fast-moving pickup trucks on their way through the desert. The videos and the use of the mobile phone to record them represent a cultural practice that goes beyond the management of smuggling. It is an iconographical discourse that is part of what one could call the 'culture of smuggling' in the borderland.

Besides the cultural dimension, smuggling is an attractive, albeit risky, source of cash income for the young men alongside their otherwise limited opportunities in farming, animal husbandry or wage labour. Indeed, many of the young smugglers are quite entrepreneurial characters and would probably be successful in other economic activities if there were more opportunities in the legal economy. In addition, the boundaries between the world of smuggling and the world of legal business are fluid, and the two fields are frequently intertwined. In 2012 one very successful smuggler, who had also been an excellent campaigner for a local politician, opened up an office for legal import–export business. For Hussein, aged 38, the time had come to take a step back from illegality and become more formally established. Nevertheless, he took his knowledge of the networks and experiences of smuggling into the new business, where they helped him to become successful. Today, his office is a realm where legal trade and smuggling come together. Smuggling and legal economic activities do not oppose one another but are arranged in a complementary manner, and the economy of the borderland is thus not in the throes of a process of 'criminalization'.

## Smuggling, politics and the Arab revolutions

The political economy of the borderland is strongly shaped by competition among the different kinship associations. This competition requires participants to mobilize a maximum of economic resources to gain wealth and turn it into political influence. Smuggling, embedded in the connectivity of a transborder kinship association, provides significant economic advantages. It is therefore not surprising that some of the politically dominant kinship associations in the borderland have been involved in smuggling. Gaddafi's regime systematically favoured and supported a number of kinship associations in Egypt for strategic and political reasons. This included the facilitation of smuggling but also the financing of election campaigns. Campaigning in the Egyptian part of the borderland is quite costly particularly because it involves the need to buy votes, which is a well-established practice. But the financing of election campaigns through smuggling is also criticized by Bedouin politicians who seek legal ways to finance political careers. Their critique focuses on the distortion of political competition through smuggling. And indeed, the rising uneven distribution of wealth and power among the Awlad 'Ali creates resentment among those who feel underprivileged and those who seek a more just political order. A lot of this resentment is present among poorer urban Bedouin with few resources, and it has contributed to the rise of the Islamist camp that explicitly positions itself against political corruption and criminal conduct.<sup>41</sup> It is noteworthy that none of the individual smugglers and the kinship associations with whom I have been working has ever become involved with the Islamist groups of the borderland. Pragmatism, profit orientation and self-interest, rather than ideology and politicized Islam, are the typical markers of the smugglers.

In the course of the revolution in Libya in 2011, smuggling became highly politicized. The poorly equipped fighting revolutionary brigades, the *kata'ib*, were desperately in need of virtually anything that could be used as a weapon. In Tobruk, the arsenal of the army was blown up by a general of the Libyan air force before he escaped to Tripoli, thereby literally disarming the defected general Suleiman Mahmud Obeidi, military leader of the rebel Libyan army.<sup>42</sup> This was the moment for the smugglers of the borderland. In the first few months of the Libyan revolution the smugglers supplied the fighting rebels with AK-47 assault rifles, ammunition, medical supplies and food. The transactions were financed by wealthy associations, local politicians and businessmen from Tobruk. The smugglers actually bought and transported the weapons—mostly of Sudanese origin—and supplies without taking money for themselves. During the fighting, orders were regularly placed by mobile phone and the smugglers reacted quite swiftly. This was an immediate demonstration of political and social solidarity of the Awlad 'Ali, both non-smugglers and smugglers, long before international actors appeared. Thus the smugglers turned into supporters of the Libyan revolution (even those who had previously benefited from Gaddafi) and at this time making money was

<sup>41</sup> At the same time, these radical Islamist groups have few reservations when it comes to carrying out illegal activities (such as the smuggling of arms) for their fellows in Libya.

<sup>42</sup> I visited General Obeidi in February 2011 at his command post in Tobruk.



not their predominant rationale. However, from 2012 on the smugglers went back to business and started to trade arms from Libya back to Egypt. Some tribal associations bought arms as a response to the unclear political situation of the Egyptian state during the period of revolutionary transition and the growing insecurity and collapse of state security under the government of President Morsi. Others simply wanted to make a profit by meeting the demand and cultural preference for carrying arms among Bedouin men. In Tobruk, associations and individuals felt the need to arm themselves in self-protection against the violence of radical jihadist groups and militias. Today, the continuing civil war in Libya is driving the continued smuggling of arms, and many politicians and leading men of the Awlad 'Ali are looking at this development with a very critical eye. They know that these developments may be beyond the regulatory force of embedded smuggling and relate to wider political developments in North Africa.

Recent publications take a rather grim perspective on the borderlands of Libya and Egypt.<sup>43</sup> In the absence of a strong central state, Libya's borderlands are seen as open fields for various local, regional, national and even global transgressive practices promoted by smugglers, illicit arms traders, networks of organized crime (including trafficking of people) and radical transnational Islamism. Egypt, for its part, is confronted with an ongoing war against jihadist groups in northern Sinai and the massive trafficking of people across the western desert into Libya. Despite the notion of borderland chaos, we can also observe ethno-political mobilization movements of the Tubu, Tuareg and Amazighen in Libya. These mobilization movements are part of the ongoing renegotiation of the political and territorial order in Libya and its neighbouring countries. They relate to historical connectivities and are harbingers of future dispositions that may compromise the integrity of the post-colonial states. If we identify these movements solely as political chaos (just because they operate outside state structures) we will overlook their creativity and legitimacy. It is also problematic to portray the transgressive economic practices in these borderlands as criminal in the first place. The case of the Awlad 'Ali offers a perspective that is less dramatic and demonstrates the stabilizing effects of transgressive borderland economies.<sup>44</sup> During the regimes of Gaddafi and Mubarak the political stability and economic productivity of the borderland was based on a shared sovereignty between local politicians of the Awlad 'Ali and the Egyptian and Libyan states. Shared sovereignty is an essential part of what the German anthropologist Georg Klute has called heterarchy or heterarchical political orders.<sup>45</sup> Heterarchy (as opposed to hierarchy) describes the fluctuating, entangled or separated tribal, state-like, Islamist and jihadist, youth, civil, organized crime and militia-like forms of political organization that have become significant in North Africa and more widely. In a heterarchical configu-

<sup>43</sup> Peter Cole, *Borderland chaos? Stabilizing Libya's periphery*, Carnegie Papers, Middle East (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012).

<sup>44</sup> Recent contributions that deal with trading networks in the northern and southern borderlands of Tunisia and Libya offer a similar perspective. See e.g. Max Gallien, 'Unpacking informality: towards a political economy of illegal trade', unpublished draft, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Hüsken and Georg Klute, 'Political orders in the making: emerging forms of political organization from Libya to northern Mali', *African Security* 8: 4, 2015, pp. 320–37.

ration, the state loses its predominant position and becomes one player (albeit often first among equals) among a number of political actors who negotiate the political order on a horizontal plane. The state loses parts of its sovereignty (such as control over its borders and borderland economies) and has to share it with others. For some authors, these processes stand for a decline of statehood and political disintegration. For others, they mark a political reality that is shaped by the dissolving of clear demarcations between the state and non-state actors.<sup>46</sup> Shared sovereignty between the state and non-state formations, between centres and peripheries, between the national and the local level, becomes a central feature of the 'real practice of African governance'.<sup>47</sup>

Within this shared sovereignty the politicians of the Awlad 'Ali have been the de facto producers of trans-local order. Transgressive economic practices are the economic aspect of this setting. Under the presidency of Abdel Fatah El-Sisi in Egypt, the shared sovereignty between the central state and the Awlad 'Ali has been renewed. In 2016 the President visited Marsa Matrouh and was received with great respect by the tribal politicians and entrepreneurs of the borderland. El-Sisi undertook not to interfere in the transborder economic activities of the Awlad 'Ali as long as the Bedouin would guarantee their regulation. In return, he demanded political loyalty to his regime. Without using the term 'smuggling', the President of Egypt declared the de facto toleration of (embedded) smuggling in the borderland. For their part, the local politicians reasserted their political loyalty and undertook to keep smuggling within certain limits. Both sides benefit from this arrangement. The Awlad 'Ali gain (local and trans-local) sovereignty, and the Egyptian state is relieved of the threat of unbounded insecurity on its border with Libya. In 2017 the economic and political situation of the borderland (on both sides of the border) is significantly different from the rest of Egypt and Libya.<sup>48</sup> As a result of the combination of re-emerging domestic tourism (in Egypt), agriculture and the transborder economy, the 'periphery' has turned into a comparatively prosperous zone. This economic success has stabilized the political situation and has also contributed to making Tobruk one of the safest places in contemporary Libya.

## Conclusion

Hoehne and Feyissa have pointed out that the successful use of a border environment requires certain preconditions.<sup>49</sup> In the case of the Awlad 'Ali, these precon-

<sup>46</sup> The debate about west Africa uses terms like 'polycephaly' or 'twilight institutions' to refer to similar processes. Owing to academic traditions that perceive North Africa as a part of the Arab Middle East while situating the Sahel and west Africa within African Studies, these insights have not been exchanged much. As a result, many similarities and interconnections between the regions have been overlooked. For the literature, see Thomas Bierschenk, 'Herrschaft, Verhandlung und Gewalt in einer afrikanischen Mittelstadt (Parakou, Benin)', *Africa Spectrum* 34: 3, 1999, pp. 321–48; Christian Lund, ed., *Twilight institutions: public authority and local politics in Africa* (Oxford and Malden, CT: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006); Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, 'Powers in the village: rural Benin between democratization and decentralization', *Africa* 73: 2, 2003, pp. 145–73.

<sup>47</sup> de Sardan, 'The bureaucratic mode of governance'.

<sup>48</sup> The devaluation of the Egyptian pound has contributed to a massive increase in prices. In Libya, the division of the country into post-revolutionary camps is hindering economic activity.

<sup>49</sup> Hoehne and Feyissa, *Borders and borderlands*.

ditions are met by vital kinship relations and a common tribal identity, which serves as the basis for economic exchange across the border and a comprehensive transborder system of conflict resolution on the basis of customary law. Despite the constraints of a border that was erected by states, the Awlad 'Ali continue to dominate the borderland between Egypt and Libya. Smuggling is a transgressive economic practice that is embedded in the wider social, political and cultural connectivity of the tribal society of the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin. It is therefore socially, judicially and morally regulated, and not part of a general criminalization of the borderland economy. This does not mean that smuggling revenues cannot be used in the distortion of equal opportunities in politics and in the economy; but this is also true of the revenues that are generated in the legal economy (all over the world). Smuggling is a factor in the economic productivity of the borderland: it generates income and jobs, and its revenues can be transferred to other fields such as politics, status and wealth. It is partly a pragmatic response to the lack of economic alternatives and the failure of state policies, but it is first and foremost driven by the entrepreneurial spirit of Bedouin traders, who not only make use of their traditional social assets but also integrate innovative technologies such as the mobile phone in their activities. The practices of smuggling in the borderland collide with state conceptions of sovereignty, territoriality and legality, but this does not alter the fact that they make sense for the people of the borderland. The historical continuity and the present relevance of Awlad 'Ali connectivity underline the need to relocate non-state forms of social, economic and political organization from the periphery into the centre of (academic) attention. This is particularly true if we want to understand the current renegotiation of the post-colonial order in north-west Africa. This is a process characterized by the rise of local and regional political orders as well as revitalized connectivities across state borders and beyond state sovereignties.<sup>50</sup> This evolution does not necessarily stand in opposition to the idea or practice of statehood, but it may develop towards heterarchy and shared sovereignty (in which trans-local populations take over authority from the state). The case of the Awlad 'Ali shows that shared sovereignty between local populations and states can produce regional economic integration and political stability rather than political chaos. However, the prevailing focus on the rehabilitation of state governance in borderlands, combined with western notions of securitization and policing, overlooks the potential of transborder populations and their practices. We have to accept that future questions concerning nation, territory and borders will be predominantly answered by trans-local actors rather than by central governments, international interventions or development programmes. To understand these processes we need to direct our attention to an economic and political evolution that occurs beyond the paradigms of modernization theory.

<sup>50</sup> Hüsken and Klute, 'Political orders in the making'.

