

# Re-Constructing the Colour Line

In 1899, W.E.B. Du Bois, in his famous book, [The Philadelphia Negro](#), wrote this sentence:

*'In all walks of life the Negro is liable to meet some objection to his presence or some discourteous treatment; and the ties of friendship or memory seldom are strong enough to hold across the color line'.* A few years later, in his essay [Of the Dawn of Freedom](#), he wrote this:

*"The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea".*

As we have learnt in recent years, this was not just a problem of the "Racial Century", as Dirk Moses has called the time between 1850 and 1950. Black Lives Matter, this is a problem of our time, on a transcontinental scale. At the present moment, Europe is, again, spearheading what we propose here to be described as a re-construction of a Transsaharan Colour Line. The times when borders could be described "[as a methode, or, the multiplication of labour](#)", seem to be over. Rather, since the beginning of this decennium, we must speak of borders as zones of necropolitics.

This survey is a spotlight on a dynamic development, at a time when the sea crossings are decreasing. However, as [MMR states](#),

*The recent decline in numbers is likely indicative of a short-term fluctuation, rather than the beginning of the end of irregular sea movements to the EU. The push to attempt the Mediterranean or Atlantic crossing to the EU is likely to remain constant – if not grow. [...] Hardline policies have not prevented irregular migration and only heightened risks for migrants.*

New migration routes are opening, from [East Libya to Crete](#), for example. The Europe-Egypt Memorandum of Understanding [is built on desert sand](#). Also Tunisia is not safe, and Saied will not last forever.

Nevertheless, what has happened during the last 2 years is calling for new conclusions.

From a German perspective, we must not only talk about colonial and post-colonial policies and crimes, but also about the historical phase in which the annihilation and valorisation of populations and territories reached an incredible climax. The Colonial expansion of Germany has been towards the East of Europe since medieval times, and we must refer to the Ostpolitik of National Socialist Germany (see [Empire, Colony, Genocide](#) (2008), 372). The "[Catechism of the Germans](#)" sometimes proves to be more of a stumbling block here. The "[Generalplan Ost](#)" was about subsumption of territories to an economy of war, and the displacement of the Jewish and Slavic population. It came with a [theory of "overpopulation" and rationalization](#). With regard to the ongoing subsumption of territories in many African regions, without any consideration of existing Lives there, this should, however, not be seen as a blueprint, but rather as a background of memes and ideologies for what is happening there. And not only in Africa: we cannot remove the terrible news from Gaza and the West Bank from this context.

In this text we propose to describe the "routes of torture", and the push-backs, as the construction of a new Transafrican Colour Line. It is the Southern zone of the European Cordon, which is a staggering of different zones, being erected in order to contain Black Lives in areas of war and displacement. We are not proposing here that there is a master plan or blueprint for what is happening, like the "Generalplan Ost". Many single interests and opportunities, as well as theories and misunderstandings and the cancellation of humanitarian obligations and human rights provisions, are working together in the direction of a horrific development. Capitalism, and New Nationalisms, and unstrained regional Imperialisms are the main forces behind all this, but it is also Racism, in it's most stupid form, as Racism of Colour.

At this place we want to remind you of the [words of Aimé Césaire](#), in his Discourse on Colonialism, that the greatest criminal was *not the ideological fanatic, but the European bourgeois, the ‘decent fellow across the way’*, because he tolerated colonial abuses for over a century: the wars, the torture, and mass death, approving the hard line measures of politicians.

## The Belt of Wars

We have recently described the context of displacement, extractive economy, land-grabbing, and war in our blog entry on [Sudan War and the Emirates](#). We have described how the Emirates make profits by fuelling this war, not only in the gold trade, but also by getting hold of the land where the population is being displaced. We think that we must extend this analysis, in reference to the recent developments in the Sahel region, but also to vast areas of the Horn of Africa, to Kivu, the North of Mozambique, and many more regions.

ACLED has [recently published a map](#) which convincingly shows that belt of wars running across Africa in red dots. As we well know, the concentration of armed conflicts in this area cannot be explained by one reason only. Among the main causes of conflict, there are:

- climate change and the constriction of pastoralist economies,
- the rise of regional imperialist actors, like UAE, KSA, Turkey, but also China and Russia,
- the spread of mineral- and land-grabbing as an economy of “real value” assets, after the financial crisis of 2007,
- the increasing focus of big investors on the African resources,
- the European hunger for “clean” energy,
- the protection of nature in a “[Green War](#)”,
- failing postcolonial states, and the rise of warlordism, also in the guise of military, and
- the greed of many members of the political classes,
- the role of transnational Jihadism.

Europeans often blame the increase of population as the first factor of poverty and war. They should talk about the blockade of demographic transition instead. Big capital and entrepreneurs of war, regional powers and national military regimes are turning landscapes into “Frontiers”, in a Global Run for resources, in our times of Peak Oil, and Peak Soil, Peak Water, and Peak Nature.

All forms of “primitive accumulation”, in the Belt of Wars, have one thing in common: defining populations as “superfluous” in a sort of new Malthusianism. Human populations are not perceived as a workforce for the future, but as an obstacle to investment. [Accumulation by dispossession](#) stands against Humanity, in terms of extinction, more than ever since since the crisis of 2007. Europe is a complicit bystander in this process, not only by taking opportunity profits and backing European stakeholders, but mainly by closing the borders, and containing the population in the war zones.



Map: [ACLED Febr. 2025](#)

We might well argue that the Belt of Wars has been caused by missing revolutions. The death of Lumumba 1960 in DRC, or Sankara in 1987 in Burkina Faso, can be mentioned in this context, but first of all we have to look at “[Africa Uprising](#)”, in the 2010s: *Widespread urban uprisings by youth, the unemployed, trade unions, activists, writers, artists, and religious groups are challenging injustice and inequality. They “spread across national borders and regions, even leaping across vast distances from Egypt to Uganda, Senegal to Malawi, South Africa to Nigeria.”* These uprisings were about self-liberation and the Right of Subsistence, and not about “development” or “Nations”. They were collective actions of “ordinary people”, against bribes and policy profiteers. It was an uprising of imaginative creators, and consumers. Perhaps it would be right to interpret these uprisings as “encroachment”, [as Asef Bayat did](#) in relation to the Arab situation of 2011. And perhaps the neighbourhood committees in Sudan could have become a “missing link” between uprising and revolution. Instead, military regimes took power, seeking to combine repression and national value creation.

We should also realize that the main movements of aspiration were not only uprisings, but also migration movements: into the cities, and into the metropolises, and back. As Mbembe and others have told us, one of the main abilities of many Africans is: Building diasporas. They move in order to escape violence and hunger, they move to see the world and find a better life, and they move in order to support their families. The “Cosmopolitanism of small migrants”<sup>1</sup> could be one of the main social forces of Change, in Europa and elsewhere. As we [wrote in 2019](#), *We are not Marxist essentialists who see coercion, labour, power and money as the driving forces of progress. Why not rather reproduction, association, migration, play and the search for happiness? Relating positively to African youthfulness could help us to break free from the misery of the West and rethink the canon of values.*

<sup>1</sup> Mbembe, Achille (2002), The New Africans Between Nativism & Cosmopolitanism, In: Geschiere, Peter et al., Readings in Modernity in Africa, London 2008

# The European Cordon

Since the [withdrawal of MINUSMA](#), Europe is no longer among the main traders of violence in the Belt of Wars. Europe's part in maintaining the Belt of War is sealing the borders.

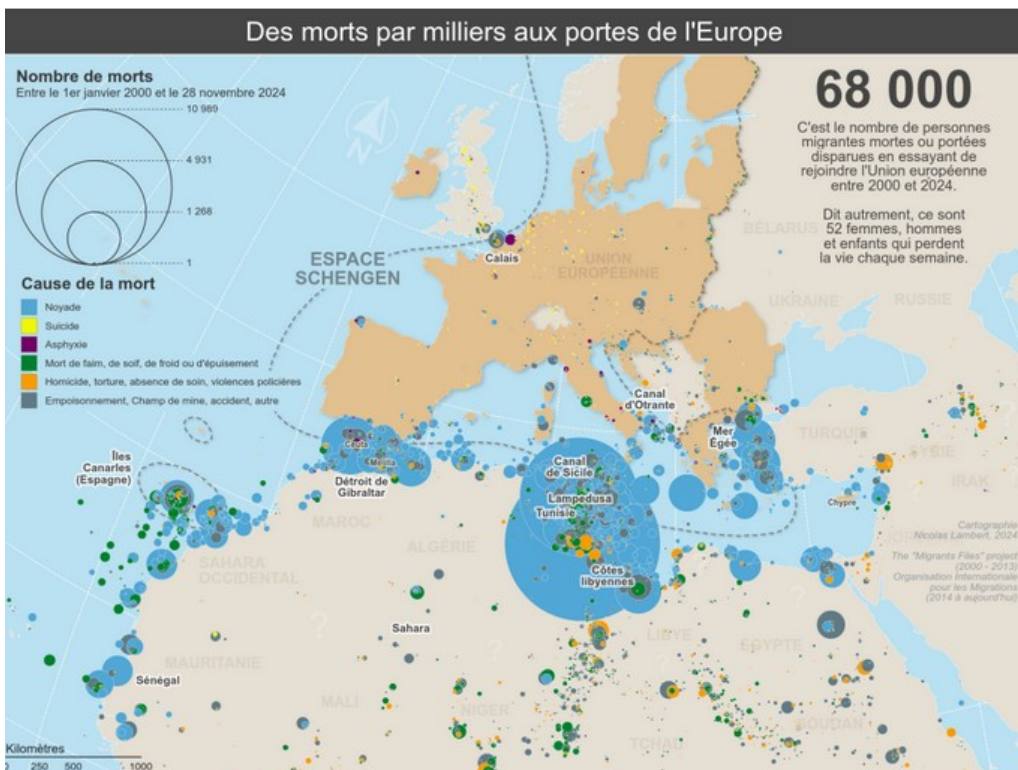
The primary impetus to seal the European borders had a racist background, but it was not following a racism of colour. The focus on reducing migrations has varied, since the crisis of the 1970s, from Turkey and North Africa to Eastern Europe (after the fall of the Iron Curtain), then to North Africa (since 1993), then to the "Near and Middle East" (when people fled from Iran, Syria and Afghanistan), and, since 2016, to wherever people on the move came from. Black Africa was in the focus of the Khartoum Process since 2014. Colour has always been a factor in the background of regulating immigration, but such a racism was hidden behind a veil of decency, except at the fringes of society.

EU Asylum policy has always worked well when it was about the negative things, like pushbacks, and deportations. The number of pushbacks recorded at the EU borders in 2024 was [higher than 120 000](#), including the Pull Backs by the Libyan Coast Guard. The number of asylum applications in the EU is decreasing, because there are "[Hardly any routes to Europe left](#)".

While the CEAS system of external hotspots and FRONTEX-lead deportations is a recent development, the **Zone of Drowning** has been maintained [since the beginning of the EU](#), in 1993, not without crocodile tears being shed. Nicolas Lambert has [mapped the 68 000 deaths](#) of people on their way to Europe, between 2000 and 2024.

## Des morts par milliers aux portes de l'Europe

Regard de cartographe, par Nicolas Lambert



map: [migreurop](#) Decembre 2024

The **Maghreb countries and Egypt** are the second zone of the Cordon. It has been well documented on [this site](#) that the EU has paid Billions to the Strongmen and military regimes in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. Recently, Mauritania has just recently joined the group of proxy border guards. Coast Guards have been financed and equipped in all these countries, except East Libya. And some big IGOs, like UNHCR, IOM, ICMPD, GIZ and others have helped to build border structures, and dispose of the persons on the move (POM).

The North African population has not benefited from the money from Europe. This money was invested in weapons or pocketed by the king in Morocco, the military aristocracy in Egypt, the heads of the militias in Libya or the presidential administration in Tunisia. The situation in the Rif, in the Tunisian hinterland or in the Nile Delta has deteriorated further in recent years and many harraga of the future are waiting for their chance.

## Interceptions

The number of sea-crossings Central Med has dropped dramatically in 2024, according to [data from Frontex](#): 66 766 crossings, -59% compared to 2023. Morocco claims to have [foiled 78 685 attempts](#) to reach Europe in 2024, with 58% of the migrants coming from West Africa, and there were [21 762 interceptions](#) counted off the coast off Libya. The number of interceptions by the Tunisian coastguard is [definitely even higher](#). Figures of interceptions by the Egyptian and East-Libyan coastguards are not available. While the Atlantic Route has gained significance during the last years, figures of interceptions by Mauritanian and Senegalese coastguards are not known.

Regarding Tunisia, a [UN expert stated in October](#) 2024, “We have received shocking reports detailing dangerous manoeuvres when intercepting migrants, refugees and asylum seekers at sea; physical violence, including beatings, threats of use of firearms; removal of engines and fuel; and capsizing of boats”.

## Racism and Routes of Torture

The situation of POM in North Africa has deteriorated to the amount that Europe has paid for stopping these persons. It must be said that the situation of all ordinary people in this region has also been hard during the last years, and nothing has improved after 2011. It is in this atmosphere that anti-Black racism is on the rise. Racism in the Maghreb has existed subliminally since hundreds of years, and now it is blooming again, in Morocco, in Egypt, in Libya, but most of all in Tunisia. As we [wrote in September 2024](#),

*Europe, which actually needs new people, is closing its borders to the south against all reason. The European racism of border closures is paving the way for Tunisian racism to flourish. Across the Mediterranean, Europeans are inducing a racism of competition for the ticket. Whether Arab or Black is almost irrelevant in Europe. This competition reinforces the racism of Tunisian youths.*

The situation in Tunisia has been documented [on this site](#), and in a [Cartographie des Violations](#) by OMCT, ongoing. [Refugees in Libya](#), in an [interview in September 2024](#), explained: *According to the migrants living in this makeshift camps, more than 80,000 migrants are stranded in these camps (known as Kilometers) from km19 - km38, and about 1,500 stranded at the Libya-Tunisia borders daily, and about 2,000 more to the Algerian border with many facing dire conditions, including a lack of food, water, and medical care. At least 300 have died this year after being dumped in desert or due to medical negligence in the makeshift camps.*

While many persons still travel to Libya [in search for a job](#), the security situation is deteriorating

and racist encounters are frequent, which fosters the decision to board a boat to Europe. The hell begins, when the boat is intercepted, and the POM are detained. The families in the Southern war zones are increasingly impoverished and cannot pay the ransom. Refugees have been sold for work or shot dead and [buried in mass graves](#). Also POM who are pushed or state-trafficked [from Tunisia to Libya](#) are in great danger. Just recently, Libyan militias have started deporting Black migrants [on a bis scale](#).

The situation for Black Africans in Egypt has [become very grave](#), especially since the war in Sudan began. This primarily concerns the impoverished part of the refugees: "[Those who are not deported remain in detention](#)". Also in Morocco, less Black Africans are visible in the streets in the recent months.

## Pushbacks into the Zone of Wars

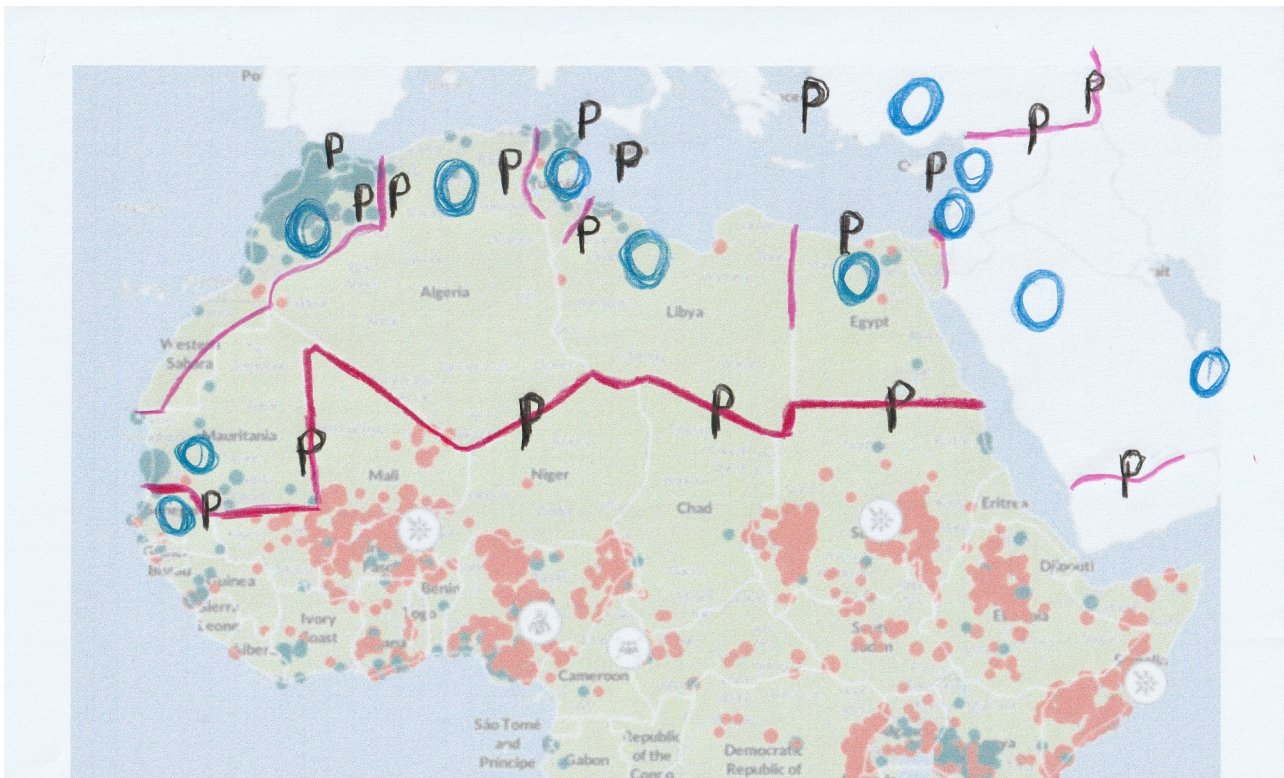
At the Southern borders of the Maghreb states and of Egypt, running across the Sahara with the exception of the Nile valley), an increasing number of Push-backs is taking place, dumping POM in the desert. This Southern Borders is what we call the Transafrican Colour Line. Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Black Africans had to cross this line as slaves. They were part of a lively trade between Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world. Since the 1980s, this line has become blurred as more and more Black migrants have crossed this border in search of work in Libya or on their way to Europe. Recently, these borders have been sharply drawn again due to push-backs.

When we speak of this Colour Line, however, we should bear in mind that we are not actually speaking about a "line", but a space, albeit sparsely inhabited, permeated by mobility and connectivity, of "villages and crossroads" ([Saharan Frontiers, 131](#)). The relations between the desert peoples and the Black migrants would be a separate topic that we cannot take up here. There were slave traders, transporters and militias, some of whom were bribed by the EU.

In January this year, NYT has published a summarizing article with this title: '[Living Through Hell: How North Africa Keeps Migrants From Europe](#)'. It says, *Libya deported more than 600 men from Niger last month as North African countries — financed by the European Union to tackle migration — have ramped up expulsions of sub-Saharan Africans. As anti-migrant sentiment rises across Europe, from France to Germany to Hungary, the citizens of sub-Saharan Africa trying to reach the continent are being pushed back by North African governments in proportions unseen in years. The E.U. has signed bilateral agreements with Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Mauritania, that include financial support to curb migrant flows. The strategy appears to be working: illegal border crossings dropped sharply in 2024, according to recent [data](#) from the European Union's border agency, Frontex.*

Algeria has pushed [31 000 POM to Niger in the last year](#). While such deportations have been reported by Alarmphone Sahara since several years (including POMs who had been pushed from Morocco to Algeria), the expulsions from Libya, amounting more than [600 men in December](#) 2024, and [400 in July](#), are a recent development. During the last days, militias [have started to evict thousands](#). Chad, in July 2024, [repatriated 157 nationals](#) in "partnership with IOM". Tunisia is [dumping POM in the desert](#), be it in Algeria, or Libya. Mauritania has [just recently started to deport](#) hundreds of Malians across the Senegal River.

Egypt is also of major concern, as a [report by Sara Creta and Nour Khail](#) (April 2024) has documented. Thousands of refugees from Sudan are currently being held captive by Egypt's military and police at secret military bases in order to be deported to Sudan, where war is currently raging.



Colour Line through Africa

The map is a modification of the [ACLEL map](#).

Blue circles: Weapons from EU, Armament for coast guards

Black Ps: Push Backs or Pull Backs

Small Red lines: Fortified borders

## Beyond the Colour Line

Closing the borders, letting POM drown, arming the Coastguards, paying militias or governments for push-backs and deportations, all this is a direct consequence of EU policies. On the other side of the Colour Line, Europe is on the retreat.

We used to criticize the French military presence in the Sahel, and MINUSMA, as a European involvement meant to stabilize dubious regimes and European commodity interests, and fortifying the borders. The military coups in the Sahel (with the exception of Senegal), starting in 2020 in Mali, have been welcomed by many people there, especially in the capital. And when in 2023 the new military regime in Niger lifted the travel restrictions in Agadez, all this looked like a great turn. There was a new peak of POM crossing the Med, but Europe swiftly reacted though their proxies in Libya and Tunisia. The [dis-integration of ECOWAS](#) could lead to [more food insecurity](#), and the [border restrictions](#) between the coup states and ECOWAS has brought new obstacles to migration.

Behind the "anti-colonial" nationalism of the military regimes seems to lie a concept of seizure and valorisation of the territory, which is being radicalized in times of a [New Debt Crisis](#). Does this development amount to a "Generalplan Sahel"?

France and MINUSMA have been replaced with [Russian mercenaries](#), [Turkish drones](#), and [Chinese businessmen](#), but also [Chinese military ambitions](#). While the European military engagement had been under some critical scrutiny by the media and parliaments, the armies and mercenaries can now act without any scrutiny. Even more areas of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have been turned into war zones. The Washington Post speaks of "[Crossroads of Conflict](#)": *Across the breadth of*

*Africa, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, stretches a belt of turmoil. Nowhere else have Islamist extremists recorded such stunning gains since the defeat of the Islamic State in the Middle East, with this swath emerging as the new epicenter of jihadist activity.*

The pastoralists, cornered between the advancing desert from the north and the land grab in the south, are more susceptible to jihadist ideologies than the peasants. Their economy, which is [benefitting more than 20 million people](#), is heavily damaged. The population of the villages is torn between the actors of violence. They are forced by the army to dig trenches, and then massacred by the Jihadists, or they take the side of the Jihadists, and are killed by the army, Wagner and the Turkish drones. The survivors are being displaced, either at the cost of urban relatives, or in refugee camps, with aid deliveries decreasing.

Achille Mbembe has recently published an article in *Internazionale*, [Il sovranismo africano che cancella la libertà](#), in which he insists that liberation is based on rebellious youth, and *coalitions supported by feminist organisations, civic associations, urban movements and collectives of young people, artists, intellectuals and scientists in search of alternatives.*

*Favoured by demographic change, the younger generations are now at the centre of public interest: in the face of ageing power systems, they want to have a say in the development of the continent.. They are convinced that without democracy and commitment to the community there will be neither full sovereignty nor full decolonization.*

Also, he denounces the current of nationalism and militarism:

*[This] current is based on an illusory pan-Africanism and presents itself as an answer to the challenges of a world that is still largely determined by the interests of the great powers. In reality, it is primarily concerned with the logic of power and internal struggles for national resources. Convinced that the balance of power determines the laws, the supporters of this current do not hesitate to support coups and military regimes as long as they are seen as effective bulwarks against neo-colonial and imperialist encroachments. [...] This mixture of coup d'état and sovereignty is taking shape and becoming institutionalised, especially in West Africa and the Sahel. More than in other parts of the continent, the increase in the terrorist threat goes hand in hand with the rise of militarism. The regimes in Mali, Burkina, Faso, Guinea and Niger dream, to varying degrees, of establishing "barracks states" in which political, social and economic life is determined by the requirements of a threefold war: against terrorism, imperialism and internal enemies.*

All over the Sahel, but especially in Mali, Gold is definitely the [main source of greed](#). Over the past five years, the price of gold has risen by 75 per cent. This week it stood at 2750 euros. In Africa, this is fuelling the gold boom, with millions of people often digging in illegal mines without safety standards. The main beneficiaries are smugglers, China, Dubai and jihadists. In West Africa and the Sahel region in particular, there is a gold rush, as there once was in the Wild West of the USA.

All men with coffers of gold are welcome to the Emirates. Also [Lithium is on the rise](#).

While the industrial investments are highly militarized ([with Chinese Companies running their own drone stations to protect their investment](#)), up to 2 million men work in artisanal mining, in Mali alone. In a way, this is a compensation for blocked migration, be it to the [Southern countries of ECOWAS](#), or be it to the North. The second alternative for the young men, in times of blocked migration, is military or Jihadism. Many of them would like to migrate to other destinations, but Jihadism offers them some money, some loot, and a motor bike.

The third alternative is not much different: armed with a motorbike and a water canister, the uprooted youths roam across the Sahara in search of prey. They fight in northern Nigeria, on Lake



Chad, in Libya, and currently in Sudan on the side of the RSF. They often receive no pay, but are paid directly with the spoils of war. [Like the jihadists](#), these young men often come from the Fulani people, who are, on the other hand, increasingly becoming the [victims of military attacks](#). The example of the Fulani could be used to discuss how the expropriation of livelihoods does not lead to an uprising, but to looting gangs. In some respects, this is reminiscent of the "war labourers" in early modern Europe. (Peter Way in [Beyond Marx](#) (2009)).

In his [interesting book](#), Olaf Bernau (2022, 89 ff.) has written a chapter on the significance of mobility and migration in West Africa. He emphasizes that (rotational) migration is indispensable for entertaining a life in the villages, and for entertaining families in an environment of extreme poverty. Two Thirds of the Sahel population live in the countryside, and migration guarantees their subsistence, and their connection to the cities. By cutting important migration routes for some thousands, Europe is cutting roads for survival for hundreds of thousands.

In doing this, Europe drives even more young men not only into the artisanal gold mines, but also into the RSF in Sudan, and into Jihadist militias. Indeed, sometimes it might seem that factions of the Jihadists lead a rebellion against the dispossession of the people, following the Fulani Jihadists of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. But they also stand against emancipation, and you can only approve their reign if you are not a woman. The composition of the actors who stand for an Africa Uprising looks completely different.