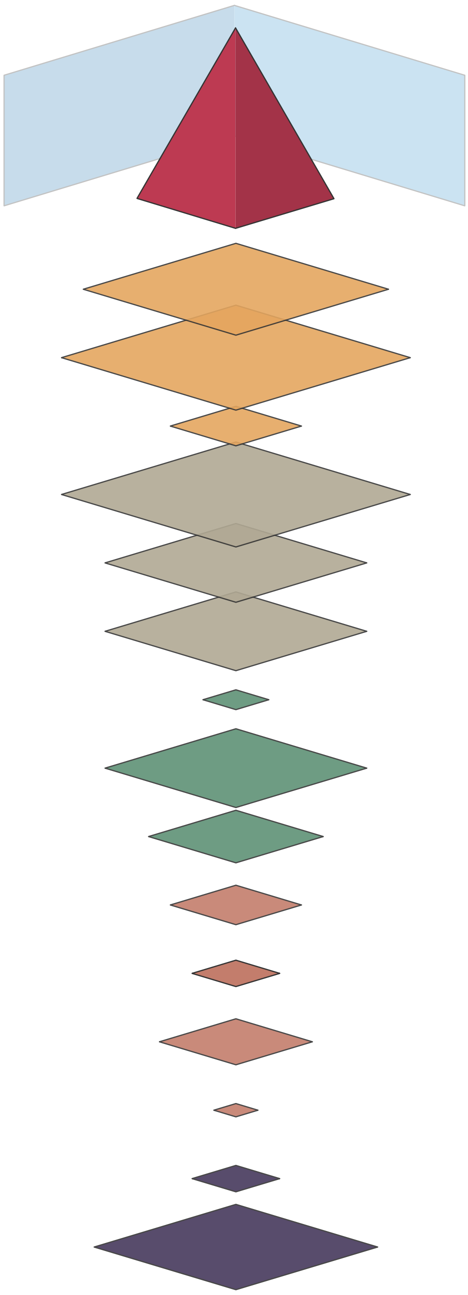
GLOBAL ORGANIZED CRIME INDEX

GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

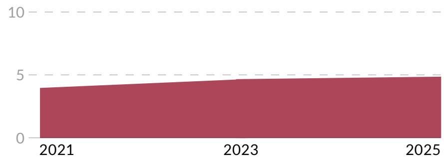
DJIBOUTI



4.85 ↗0.20

CRIMINALITY SCORE

112th of 193 countries ↗8
35th of 54 African countries ↗2
8th of 9 East African countries -



CRIMINAL MARKETS — 4.50 ↗0.20

HUMAN TRAFFICKING	7.00	↗0.50
HUMAN SMUGGLING	8.00	↗0.50
EXTORTION & PROTECTION RACKETEERING	3.00	↘0.50
ARMS TRAFFICKING	8.00	↗0.50
TRADE IN COUNTERFEIT GOODS	6.00	↗0.50
ILLICIT TRADE IN EXCISABLE GOODS	6.00	↘0.50
FLORA CRIMES	1.50	↘0.50
FAUNA CRIMES	6.00	↗1.00
NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE CRIMES	4.00	↗1.00
HEROIN TRADE	3.00	↗0.50
COCAINE TRADE	2.00	0.00
CANNABIS TRADE	3.50	0.00
SYNTHETIC DRUG TRADE	1.00	↘0.50
CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES	2.00	↗0.50
FINANCIAL CRIMES	6.50	0.00

CRIMINAL ACTORS — 5.20 ↗0.20

MAFIA-STYLE GROUPS	1.00	↘0.50
CRIMINAL NETWORKS	6.00	↗1.00
STATE-EMBEDDED ACTORS	6.00	↗0.50
FOREIGN ACTORS	7.00	0.00
PRIVATE SECTOR ACTORS	6.00	0.00

This project was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State.

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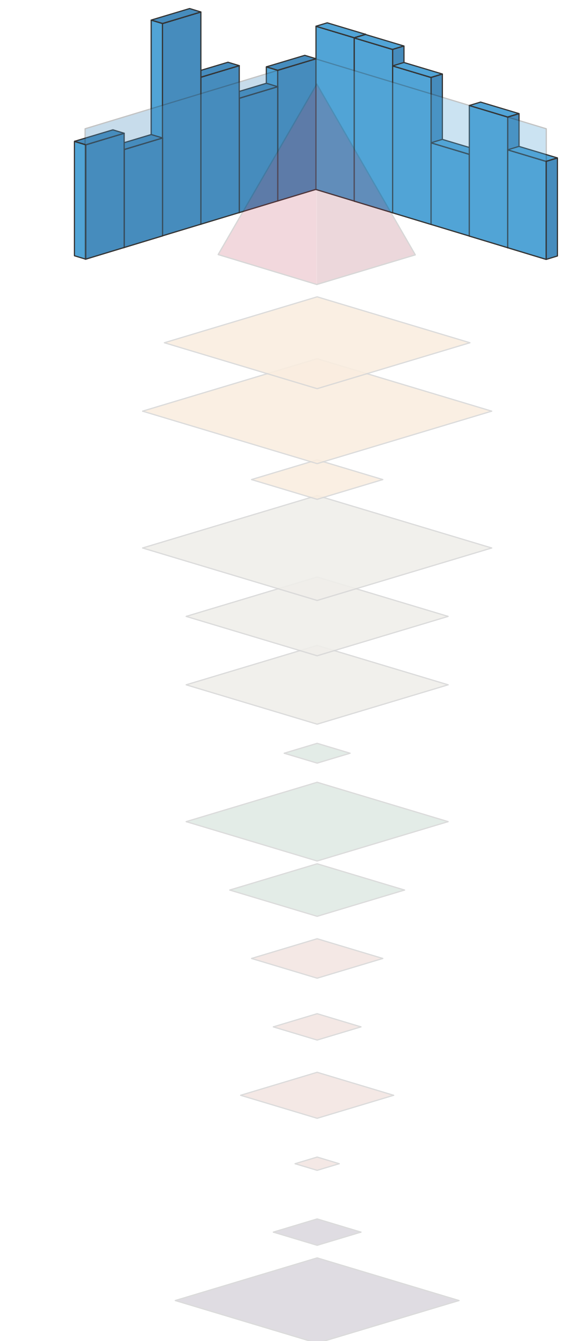
Funded by the European Union

ENACT is funded by the European Union and implemented by the Institute for Security Studies and INTERPOL, in affiliation with the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

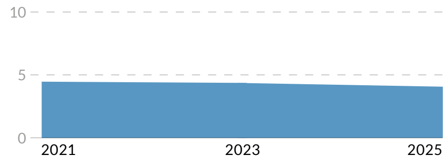
DJIBOUTI



4.08 ↘0.29

RESILIENCE SCORE

126th of 193 countries ↘7
24th of 54 African countries ↘2
4th of 9 East African countries ↘1



POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE	3.50	↘0.50
GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY	3.00	0.00
INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION	6.50	0.00
NATIONAL POLICIES AND LAWS	4.50	0.00
JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND DETENTION	3.50	↘0.50
LAW ENFORCEMENT	4.00	0.00
TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY	5.00	↘0.50
ANTI-MONEY LAUNDERING	5.00	0.00
ECONOMIC REGULATORY CAPACITY	4.50	↘1.00
VICTIM AND WITNESS SUPPORT	2.50	↘0.50
PREVENTION	4.00	0.00
NON-STATE ACTORS	3.00	↘0.50

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CRIMINALITY

CRIMINAL MARKETS

PEOPLE

Djibouti is a source, transit and destination country for human trafficking, primarily affecting individuals from Ethiopia and Somalia. Vulnerable groups are recruited into forced labour in sectors such as domestic work, construction, agriculture, livestock and sex work. In addition, there has been a significant increase in trafficking caused by the influx of Oromo, Afar and Somali fleeing conflict zones. Labour recruiters, often linked to foreign actors from Gulf countries, contribute to trafficking networks. Chinese actors are increasingly implicated in labour trafficking, exploiting undocumented migrants with impunity owing to economic influence. Economic hardship and corruption exacerbate vulnerabilities. Trafficking victims frequently transit Djibouti en route to Yemen, Saudi Arabia and other countries of the region, with severe abuses seen. Experts suggest trafficking numbers may be in the thousands each year, increasing in recent years given rising conflict and fragility across the region.

Djibouti also serves as a key transit hub for Ethiopian migrants, including unaccompanied children, travelling along the Eastern Route to the Arabian Peninsula. The volume of smuggling has risen sharply, driven by conflict in Ethiopia and the civil war in Sudan, diverting migrants from the Sudan–Libya corridor towards the Bab-el-Mandeb crossing. Migrants, in particular women and girls, face exploitation in Djibouti's informal economy, including in hospitality venues. Smuggling networks are linked to arms and drug trafficking, with increased activity amid Red Sea instability. Smugglers frequently extort migrants and contribute to regional insecurity by supplying weapons to armed groups. Despite heightened enforcement efforts, smuggling and associated abuses persist at high levels.

Extortion and protection racketeering in Djibouti has decreased slightly, with limited organized criminal activity compared with what is seen in neighbouring countries. Al-Shabaab engages in some extortion to fund operations, but experts contend its influence is overstated and that systematic racketeering is minimal. Most incidents are attributed to the action of isolated individuals rather than organized networks. Offshore, the threat of kidnapping persists owing to piracy in the Gulf of Aden.

TRADE

Djibouti serves as a key hub for arms trafficking in the Horn of Africa, with illicit flows driven by non-state actors, terrorist groups, individual traffickers and complicit officials. Arms trafficking has surged amid increased instability in the Red Sea, particularly since the onset of Houthi hostilities. Djibouti functions as a major transit point for weapons moving towards Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia, with traffickers operating from small coastal islands and Yemeni ports such as Mokha. The porous borders with neighbouring countries further facilitate these flows. The arms trade is also influenced by local and regional conflicts, notably the Afar–Issa tensions in Ethiopia, with reported involvement from actors within Djibouti.

Djibouti is also both a source and a transit point for counterfeit and pirated goods, including cosmetics, electronics and electrical equipment, largely owing to the country being located on a critical maritime trade route connecting Asia and Africa. The country serves as a key entry point for goods destined for African markets, particularly from China. The counterfeit trade is deeply embedded in local commerce, complicating the distinction between genuine and illicit products. Despite improved national reporting and monitoring mechanisms that have heightened awareness of this issue, Djibouti continues to fulfil a key role in transnational counterfeit supply chains.

Illicit trade in excise goods, including cigarettes, khat, alcohol, cosmetics and food products, is widespread in Djibouti, impacting tax revenues and local industries. The country acts as both a transit hub and a destination for these goods, with trafficking linked to broader regional instability and interconnected illicit markets such as arms and counterfeit goods. Seizures of khat and contraband alcohol have been reported, with notable interceptions recorded at border regions and coastal points. Cigarette smuggling to Yemen has intensified over the past decade. Although enhanced customs enforcement and cross-border cooperation have contributed to reducing maritime smuggling, the absence of robust traceability systems for tobacco and alcohol continues to heighten risks.

ENVIRONMENT

Djibouti does not exhibit a market for flora-related crimes such as illegal logging or trafficking of plant products. Despite its role as a transit hub for various illicit trades given its strategic location, the militarized and heavily monitored port infrastructure likely limits the use of Djibouti as a key route for flora-related trafficking. However, Djibouti functions as both a source and a transit country for wildlife crime, with illicit trade in wild animal skins and live animals expanding, especially along the northern coast and Obock area. Corruption is a significant enabler of the country's wildlife trafficking market. The country is a key conduit for smuggling live big cats, particularly cheetahs, to Gulf nations, Asia and Europe, with notable activity via the Dewele border post with Ethiopia. Gazelles, seabirds and sea turtles are also poached for consumption. Djibouti's growing role as Ethiopia's maritime outlet has amplified its position in wildlife trafficking networks. Illegal fishing is limited.

In addition, Djibouti functions as a transit point for illicit gold and other high-value commodities such as diamonds, coloured gemstones and oil, with the Ethiopia–Djibouti border experiencing heightened smuggling activities. Although the trade is relatively limited, the country is increasingly being used as a corridor for smuggling gold from Ethiopia to Gulf states, influenced by regional conflicts and criminal networks, including actors from Yemen. Chinese actors are reported to have a notable presence in these operations. Furthermore, there are growing allegations that the country is emerging as a flag of convenience for nations such as Iran and Venezuela, enabling them to evade sanctions by smuggling oil.

DRUGS

Djibouti serves as a transit point for heroin and other drugs trafficked from India and Pakistan via Western Asian countries to broader African markets. The maritime route through the Red Sea, Suez Canal and Indian Ocean is a key corridor for these flows. Experts indicate that heroin trafficking may have increased alongside heightened Houthi activity in the Red Sea, given the group's involvement in the regional drug trade. Although exact volumes of trafficked drugs are unclear, the country's role as a conduit is reinforced by its strategic location. Corruption, particularly among border and airport officials, is reported to contribute to the persistence and expansion of illicit drug flows.

Djibouti functions as a minor transit point for cocaine, with recent interceptions primarily occurring in port areas, where shipments arriving from Western Asia have been seized and traffickers apprehended. However, the effectiveness of enforcement efforts is significantly undermined by widespread corruption and bribery among port officials, facilitating the continued development of this trafficking route. In addition, the country functions as a maritime transit point for cannabis trafficked from India and Pakistan to East African markets, although domestic cultivation is limited owing to arid conditions. Recent observations indicate a rise in cannabis consumption among local youth, suggesting a growing domestic demand alongside Djibouti's established role as a transit country. Regional trafficking dynamics, combined with weak institutional controls, have allowed the cannabis trade to persist. Djibouti is not a source of synthetic drugs and there does not appear to be a notable market in the country.

CYBER-DEPENDENT CRIMES

Cyber-dependent crimes in Djibouti are limited, although recent incidents highlight growing risks. Hackers have targeted internet services, with reports suggesting an uptick in cybercrime incidents; however, the motivations behind such attacks are ambiguous. In addition to hacking incidents, cryptocurrency scams have been on the rise in the country, with recent police investigations uncovering fraudulent investment schemes involving both local and foreign perpetrators.

FINANCIAL CRIMES

Corruption and embezzlement are present issues in Djibouti, particularly among political figures linked to the executive branch, with severe consequences for poverty rates, employment opportunities and foreign investment. Investigations into misuse of public funds and bribery involving senior government officials and their affiliates have been reported, alongside growing concerns about the role of foreign actors in financial crimes. Experts warn that Djibouti's exposure to financial crime may increase owing to its strategic role as a transit hub for trafficking and smuggling activities in the Horn of Africa. Recent enhancements to its submarine cable network, port infrastructure, monetary stability aimed at attracting private investment, expanding digital banking and efforts to establishing itself as a regional fintech and financial hub may further heighten its exposure to financial crime, compounded by limited risk assessment practices.

CRIMINAL ACTORS

There is no substantial evidence of mafia-style groups in Djibouti. However, the country does serve as a key transit hub for human trafficking and smuggling networks operating between Ethiopia, Somalia, Yemen and Persian Gulf countries, and both existing and emerging criminal groups involved in these activities have notably expanded. Djiboutian actors, along with Ethiopian and Yemeni counterparts, collaborate within cross-border networks, detaining migrants in remote areas, especially Dikhil. In addition to human trafficking, these networks are also engaged in arms trafficking between Yemen, Türkiye and other parts of East Africa. Widespread corruption and border vulnerabilities exacerbate these illicit activities, contributing to Djibouti's growing role in regional and transnational organized crime dynamics.

State-affiliated actors in Djibouti, including military leaders, government officials and executives of state-owned enterprises, have been implicated in facilitating arms trafficking across the Horn of Africa, supplying armed groups such as clan militias and al-Shabaab. Corruption within the secret police and security forces enables human trafficking networks, with officials reportedly accepting bribes to allow operations to continue unchecked. In addition, some members of the political and security apparatus are involved in money laundering and financial crimes, including the misuse of public funds.

Foreign criminal networks have a significant role in Djibouti's organized crime landscape, particularly in drug trafficking, arms smuggling, money laundering and human trafficking. Drug routes are linked to East African networks, notably from Kenya and Tanzania, while arms trafficking involves Iranian and Yemeni actors supplying weapons to non-state armed groups in Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan and Ethiopia. Djibouti's ports have reportedly been used as logistical hubs for arms trafficking linked to Chinese actors who facilitate shipments to conflict zones in Sudan and South Sudan. The entrenchment of foreign criminal networks appears to be enabled by systemic corruption, with many actors allegedly maintaining close ties to senior government officials and politically influential families.

Private-sector actors in Djibouti contribute to organized crime particularly through their involvement in money laundering and financial crimes linked to the banking sector. Their involvement is often facilitated by connections to senior government officials. The absence of transparency in investment procedures and licensing, coupled with weak oversight of informal remittance and value transfer systems, creates vulnerabilities that obscure the true scope of financial crime in the private sector. Certain recruitment and labour-placement companies have come under scrutiny for suspected links to human trafficking, smuggling and the trade in counterfeit goods.

RESILIENCE

LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

Djibouti faces significant governance challenges, marked by restricted political freedoms, systemic corruption and weak institutional oversight. The president has been in office since 1999, without a term limit. Despite a formal multi-party system, political repression, including harassment and arrests of dissenters, remains prevalent. Despite the country being perceived as relatively stable within the region, internal tensions between ethnic groups increasingly threaten Djibouti's stability, raising questions about the government's ability to manage internal security.

The political environment fosters public distrust and pushes low-paid civil servants towards corrupt practices, weakening efforts against organized crime. Government processes are widely regarded as opaque, with restricted access to official information, which is constitutionally protected. The country has established a 2020–2030 national anti-corruption strategy, developed with the support of the United Nations. Despite legal frameworks aimed at addressing organized crime and corruption, enforcement is weak and institutional independence is compromised. Authorities have taken steps to improve anti-corruption mechanisms, including the establishment of a dedicated anti-corruption commission and an asset declaration system, although transparency and politically motivated prosecutions remain concerns.

Djibouti maintains active engagement with international and regional initiatives including the Djibouti Code of Conduct to address organized crime, including partnerships on migration, piracy and anti-trafficking efforts. The country has signed multiple international conventions targeting organized crime, drug trafficking, arms smuggling and corruption, although limited political will and systemic corruption appear to hinder implementation. Regional dialogues in 2024, including with Ethiopia and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, focused on strengthening cooperation against transnational crimes, wildlife trafficking and human smuggling.

Internally, Djibouti's legal framework includes legislation criminalizing sex and labour trafficking, with prison sentences of five to ten years, and laws against the possession and movement of small arms. However, enforcement is limited. In fact, many cases are treated as migrant smuggling, resulting in weaker deterrence. Cybersecurity reforms were launched to strengthen national information systems, support Djibouti's ambitions as a financial hub, and align systems against financial crimes with international standards under the Financial Action Task Force review.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND SECURITY

Djibouti's judiciary is heavily influenced by the executive, with Supreme Court and Constitutional Council appointments controlled by the president and the ruling majority. This tends to undermine judicial independence. Corruption affects the judiciary, limiting its ability to address organized crime effectively. Although the country has legislation that criminalizes human trafficking, authorities often fail to prosecute or convict traffickers and prosecutors downgrade trafficking cases to lesser offences, resulting in lenient sentences, despite having had anti-trafficking training. Judges frequently apply outdated legal provisions, disregarding updates in the national anti-trafficking framework, which further weakens enforcement and contributes to a pattern of impunity for trafficking-related crimes. The country's prison conditions are severe, characterized by overcrowding, failure to separate violent and non-violent offenders (including detained migrants), and numerous reports of mistreatment in prisons.

The country lacks specialized law enforcement units dedicated to combating organized crime, relying instead on generalist agencies such as the National Police Force, immigration unit, coast guard and the Gendarmerie (of which the latter has broader powers and military status). Coordination challenges, including limited cooperation and competition between these entities, hinder efforts to effectively address organized crime. Despite these structural limitations, authorities conduct regular anti-narcotics operations, in particular to target drug transporters. Detection capabilities at main airports have been improved with the deployment of X-ray machines. Djibouti Coast Guard officers have also received training to improve their skills in navigation, search and rescue and maritime law enforcement, with the aim of strengthening their ability to interdict illicit drug and arms shipments and disrupt trafficking routes through Djibouti's waters in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. However, institutional fragmentation and resource limitations continue to constrain broader law enforcement responses.

Djibouti's border-security operations face serious challenges owing to limited resources and corruption within the police and military ranks. Although national police, immigration and coastguard forces are responsible for border protection, they lack adequate equipment – including electronic scanners at key crossing points – and instead rely heavily on intelligence gathering and periodic raids. To help mitigate these weaknesses, training workshops were held during the reporting period to enhance customs officers' ability to detect illicit trade, including counterfeit goods. Regional tensions persist, particularly over a longstanding border dispute with Eritrea. Security efforts have often been diverted towards countering armed opposition groups, such as the Afar rebellion, rather than tackling transnational organized crime. The northern regions, where most organized criminal activity occurs, are particularly insecure owing to degraded border infrastructure and under-resourced patrol units. Despite these challenges, Djibouti's strategic location has prompted the government to collaborate with international partners to patrol its maritime borders against piracy and other criminal threats.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL ENVIRONMENT

Djibouti is not currently listed as a jurisdiction with strategic anti-money laundering (AML) deficiencies and has not yet undergone a mutual evaluation of its AML and counter-terrorism financing (CFT) regime. Four key laws are aligned with international AML/CFT standards. Despite this legal framework, money laundering, primarily involving members of the political elite, remains a concern. Although the legislative structure appears robust, the prevalence of such practices suggests a gap between the existence of regulations and their effective enforcement, particularly with controlling illicit financial transactions and the hawala system.

Djibouti's economy is characterized by weak economic freedom and constrained by a politicized business environment, monopolistic practices and favouritism towards regime affiliates. Although the economy benefits from regional advantages, it faces challenges such as high unemployment, uneven development and rising debt linked to foreign-financed infrastructure and food imports. The country has laws supporting property rights and anti-corruption, but enforcement is limited and the judiciary is politically influenced. Regulatory opacity and burdensome labour laws deter private-sector growth, with women mainly participating in the informal economy. Despite a national strategy aiming for economic liberalization, reforms are inconsistent and governance continues to be centralized and authoritarian.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Djibouti lacks effective victim protection strategies. During the reporting period, Djibouti's child protection framework, supported by external actors, highlighted gaps in services for unaccompanied children vulnerable to forced begging in urban areas. A hotline to report gender-based violence and trafficking, operated by a national women's organization, is limited to Djibouti city, and most calls are related to domestic violence rather than organized crime or trafficking. Although national law mandates legal, medical, psychological and social support for victims, implementation is inconsistent owing to limited resources and dependency on in-person testimony. Victim assistance, particularly outside the capital, is hindered by logistical constraints and resource shortages.

Efforts against human trafficking are limited, with the government failing to allocate funding for prevention or implement a comprehensive strategy. Although a national coordinating committee was mandated during the reporting period, it has yet to become operational. Law enforcement officers are often not familiar with updated anti-trafficking provisions, and efforts to activate the National Referral Mechanism have stalled. International partners, particularly the EU, have provided support, but tangible action beyond training for officials has been minimal. Authorities frame trafficking mainly as a migration issue.

The media environment in Djibouti is significantly constrained, with civil society organizations, especially those addressing politically sensitive issues, facing registration barriers and government harassment. Activists are often detained, and state efforts to engage civil society in addressing organized crime are minimal. Freedom of expression is undermined despite constitutional guarantees, leading to widespread self-censorship. The state controls major media outlets and printing infrastructure, while independent journalists, particularly those linked to opposition media abroad, are subjected to harassment and arbitrary detention. The government intermittently blocks opposition websites and slows internet access to restrict social media use. Journalists face persistent threats, surveillance and arrests, which reinforces a climate of fear.

This summary was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.