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ZUWARA'S CIVIL SOCIETY FIGHT AGAINST ORGANIZED CRIME

SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF
LOCAL COMMUNITY EFFORTS



**RESILIENCE
FUND**



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Cover: A Libyan Coastguard member patrols the sea in the vicinity of
Zuwara, September 2015. © *Lorenzo Tugnoli/The Washington Post*
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SUMMARY

In 2015, civil society actors in the Amazigh town of Zuwara, Libya, took an unprecedented stand against human smugglers after a series of shipwrecks occurred along the city's coast, leaving hundreds of migrants dead. Zuwara's civil society groups denounced human smuggling networks and created unique political momentum against organized crime, and smuggling activity in the town declined. However, this momentum has not been sustained, in part due to the controversial approach of the local vigilante group, the Masked Men, and also because of lack of political will and international support. Zuwara's civil society has the potential to reignite its stance against criminal governance in an ever-evolving environment, but CSO efforts need to be recognized and nurtured by Libya's international partners.

Key points

- Over the last decade, Zuwara's CSOs landscape has grown significantly, mobilizing communities in the public sphere to preserve the city's safety and reputation with some great successes – and notable failures.
- Some of the city's CSOs took a stand against human smuggling, providing assistance to migrants, raising awareness of the impact and dangers of smuggling, and leveraging elites to strengthen local taboos against human smuggling.
- Although Zuwara's civil society faces political, security and economic challenges, it continues to mobilize against criminal governance through awareness-raising and education campaigns through the media, religious discourse and university campuses.
- Zuwara's CSOs know that any action against smuggling must consider how it may harm the community's interests. They recognize that there is a fine line between what hurts and what does good to the community.
- Zuwara's civil society has the means to reinvigorate its stand against criminal governance. To do so, it needs more political recognition, more assistance from international stakeholders and better cooperation between local stakeholders, with clearer boundaries between law enforcement and CSOs.



INTRODUCTION

Located on the north-west coast of Libya, Zuwara ('Tamurt n Wat Willul', in Tamazight) is an Amazigh (Berber) city of over 60 000 inhabitants and is broadly considered Libya's Amazigh capital.¹ The city is located 60 kilometres east of the Tunisian border, 100 kilometres west of the capital Tripoli and about 450 kilometres south of the Italian island of Lampedusa. The location has made Zuwara a key node for cross-border licit and illicit activities both on land and at sea.

As with other Libyan border towns, smuggling and contraband have long provided an economic lifeline for the city. Over decades, Zuwaran smugglers became highly adept at diverting fuel, appliances, electronics and subsidized food to neighbouring Tunisia, primarily via the Ras Ajadir border crossing between the two countries, and the trafficking of migrants to Europe.² Zuwara is one of the primary departure hubs for thousands of migrants hoping to cross the Mediterranean and reach southern Italy and Malta.

Involvement in illicit economic activity grew in a symbiotic relationship with the systematic economic and political marginalization of Amazighs under former dictator Muammar Qaddafi's Arabization policy.³ In this context, various forms of smuggling were seen by many citizens not only as an economic resource, but also as a way of defying the Qaddafi regime and demonstrating the self-reliance of the Amazigh community. According to a former smuggler, 'Before 2011, we had no means to challenge the authority of the regime, except by being self-reliant. Human smuggling was a way to disrupt Qaddafi's migration deal with Italy [signed in 2007].'⁴

▲ Citizens protesting in Zuwara against human smuggling and trafficking networks, August 2014. © Source: Zuwara Media Center



FIGURE 1 Zuwara's location makes it a key node for illicit activities, by land and sea.

After the ousting of Qaddafi in late 2011, maritime fuel and human smuggling rapidly expanded in Zuwara – a growth that had a profound effect on the city's reputation. In the months following Qaddafi's fall, civil society organizations (CSOs) started to mobilize against criminal networks.⁵ 'Tackling corruption and human smuggling networks were our priorities from day one. We tried to build a common response against organized crime by leveraging the revolution momentum,' reported a former journalist who worked for the Zuwara Media Center.⁶

Over subsequent years, the role of civil society in countering the harmful impact of criminal governance in Zuwara developed, especially in the wake of 2015, when three accidents in the space of a month saw more than 650 sub-Saharan and Syrian migrants drown. In response, an anti-human-smuggling advocacy campaign was launched by CSOs and supported by local authorities. This campaign – referred to locally as the '2015 Hirak' (2015 movement) – is perceived locally as marking the revival of civil society's role in countering criminal governance in the city.

By 2021, the momentum generated by this campaign had been lost due to various factors, including internal decisions on arrested smugglers and lack of support for community efforts. However, the dynamism of the CSO landscape in Zuwara continues to hold the potential to open up new avenues for an anti-crime governance agenda.

Outline of this brief

This policy brief assesses the role and impact of civil society actors in lessening the harmful consequences of criminal governance in Zuwara. It evaluates the successes and failures of the local community's efforts in tackling criminal networks and aims to find new ways to reinvigorate the capacity of civil society.



The first section gives an overview of the efforts taken by civil society in countering organized crime before the 2015 campaign (including by the ‘Muqanein,’ or Masked Men, an armed vigilante group composed of and supported by some CSOs), and the rise in human smuggling activities in Zuwara.

The second section covers the 2015 tragic maritime incidents that forged a sense of common purpose among CSOs in Zuwara to tackle human smuggling networks. This section describes the advocacy and awareness campaigns put forward by CSOs to curb the influence of criminal actors in the city, and the roles played by the municipality of Zuwara and the Masked Men.

The third section looks at the evolution of the criminal landscape in the aftermath of the 2015 incidents, assessing the factors that led to the loss of the 2015 campaign momentum. The brief ends with a set of recommendations for bolstering civil society’s impact on local criminal governance.

This research is based on semi-structured phone interviews with activists, journalists, humanitarian workers and citizens from Zuwara conducted between March 2020 and September 2021. It also draws on a workshop on resilience to organized crime held by the Migrant Network and the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) in November 2020, which convened several civil society activists from Zuwara. During this event, many CSOs from Zuwara shared their thoughts on how best to tackle criminal governance in the town. Finally, the brief draws on media articles, research reports and academic work.

Zuwara’s beaches have been a key embarkation point for migrants seeking to reach Europe. *Source: Zuwara Media Center*



▲
Rome, August 2010:
Official visit of the Libyan
leader Muammar Qaddafi
to Italy for talks with Prime
Minister Silvio Berlusconi,
marking the second
anniversary of a friendship
treaty between Italy and
Libya. © Ernesto Ruscio via
Getty Images)

STEEP OBSTACLES: ZUWARAN CIVIL SOCIETY BEFORE 2015

Before the 2011 revolution, genuine civil society voices were suppressed in Libya under the authoritarian administration of former dictator Qaddafi, who came to power in 1969. Only a few organizations controlled by the regime, such as the Muslim Scout Club, were allowed to work in the country. Opportunities for civil society organizations to access gathering spaces and organize themselves independently were almost non-existent, with the regime fearing that these could foster dissent.⁷

In Zuwara, this oppression produced a counter-effect, with several small independent organizations set up clandestinely to circumvent restrictions. 'We were deprived of rights to assembly and treated as second-class Libyans. But this made us stronger, as it was a source of motivation to continue our undercover work,' said a former student from the University of Zuwara, now active in civil society.⁸ Spaces such as the University of Zuwara and the Youth Hostel of Zuwara doubled up as places of assembly for activists who wanted to pursue political rights and democratic change in Libya.⁹ These spaces, along with the particularly strong cultural cohesiveness of the city – attributable to Zuwarans' rich Amazigh culture as well as to the common cause of resisting the regime's oppression and Arabization policy – helped nurture a civil society awakening within the city.

After the 2011 revolution, a nucleus of activists began dynamically lobbying for political and cultural rights for Libya's Amazigh community. The first initiatives to take shape, such as the Zuwara Association for Identity and Heritage, campaigned for the constitutional recognition of the Amazigh language, Tamazight.¹⁰ Other organizations,

such as the 'At-Wellol Movement' (the 'Amazigh Earth' youth), pushed for greater inclusion of Amazigh youth in political affairs and local governance.¹¹ Critically, civil society also helped organize the first elections for local councils in September 2011 – an enduring democratic point of reference that has weathered the country's turbulent post-revolution crises.

Yet, even though the revolution opened up space for civil society, it also led to collapse of the state's capacity to maintain law and order – a development that opened the floodgates for criminality. With the country awash with weapons, there was a rapid increase in criminal activity, including the radical expansion of seaborne fuel smuggling, arms trafficking, human smuggling and trafficking, as well as kidnap for ransom and muggings. Existing professional criminals seized on unprecedented opportunities and new players entered the criminal arena.

Militias that had formed part of the resistance during the war and other armed groups that were established after 2011 replaced Qaddafi-era law enforcement and security forces, which had been delegitimized through their association with the regime. Many of these militias and armed groups started funding themselves directly or indirectly through the black economy, furthering the expansion of criminality, which found fertile ground with the breakdown of state law enforcement bodies.¹²

Local CSOs in the early post-revolution days were concerned about this expansion of organized criminal activity.¹³ 'We felt a sense of freedom and responsibility as smugglers started to expand their business in the post-revolution euphoria. No one was able to control them at that time. In the time of Qaddafi, it was another game, but everything changed after 2011,' one activist noted.¹⁴ At the time, Zuwara's civil society did not have sufficient support to counteract the growth of criminal governance.¹⁵ Instead, the first notable civic resistance to Zuwara's rising tide of criminality came in the form of a vigilante militia known as the Masked Men.



Elders joining the protest movement against smugglers, 2015. Source: Zuwara Media Center

The rise of the Masked Men and Zuwaran activism

In 2013, many young Zuwarans, some from youth civil society groups, were so frustrated by the rise in crime and insecurity in the town that they formed a militia to deliver vigilante-style law enforcement. Calling itself the ‘Muqanein’ (‘Immusten’ in Amazigh), but better known as the Masked Men, the group gathered resources and people, and lobbied the local political elites to break smugglers’ power in the name of improving security for ordinary citizens and protecting the reputation of the city.



Members of the Masked Men patrolling in Zuwara, September 2015.

© Lorenzo Tugnoli/The Washington Post via Getty Images

The Masked Men operated at first without any formal authorization from the Interior Ministry¹⁶ and quickly made an impact by arresting several actors involved in drug trafficking and petty crime. Despite the lack of a formal mandate, the group was openly assisted by members of the municipality, particularly when the Masked Men began to tackle human smuggling in 2013, when it started to increase dramatically. In 2014 alone, 219 000 migrants attempted to cross the Mediterranean, most of them leaving from Libya’s western coast, with Zuwara a key embarkation point.¹⁷ Many of the departures occurred on vessels that were overloaded or barely seaworthy, inevitably leading to sinking and the death of migrants. In 2014 alone, at least 3 000 people died that year, with bodies routinely washing ashore on western Libya’s beaches.¹⁸

Zuwaras CSOs felt a sense of heightened responsibility to act against human smuggling as the number of shipwrecks off the municipality’s coast increased and more and more bodies of men, women and children were recovered along its shoreline. ‘You can say that there was a consensus that human smuggling, more than any other



Migrants packed into a boat that departed from Libya headed for Lampedusa, Italy, 2013. © Tony Comiti/Corbis via Getty Images

smuggling activity, was harming the city. We needed to act promptly,' said a member of the Zuwara Crisis Committee, a community-led initiative with a mandate for finding solutions to the city's issues and returning authority to the municipality.¹⁹

In July 2014, young activists organized the first anti-migrant-smuggling protest in the middle of the city, displaying large banners that showed the bodies of migrants, some of them young children, who had drowned while trying to reach Europe. 'We realized that there was a need for a double response: law enforcement and awareness-raising, although many people considered us naive for doing such work,' said one of the young activists.²⁰

The At-Wellol Movement, the Azref (Rights) Association and the Zuwara Media Center all played a key role in organizing the protest, but according to several civil society actors, this first advocacy campaign against human smuggling also involved the Masked Men, especially those members who had previously formed part of civil society.²¹ This contributed to a blurring of lines between civil society and the armed group, which raised ethical questions regarding the independence of the advocacy campaign.

However, for most Zuwarans and even members of the civil society landscape, the involvement of the Masked Men was not initially seen as problematic, mainly because the city's reputation was in jeopardy. 'We wanted to raise awareness of a serious problem taking

place a few kilometres from the city centre and support what the Masked Men were trying to accomplish: the end of human smuggling,' reported an activist who participated in the first campaign.²²

Notably, the campaign was successful in mobilizing official engagement. For Hafed Bin Sassi, the mayor, the campaign's effectiveness in raising public awareness through public gatherings, radio broadcasts and youth mobilization work made it a project worth supporting.²³ In early 2015, the municipality began providing financial and moral support to civil society actors.²⁴ It also held several joint meetings with activists and journalists, including the Zuwara Media Center, the At-Wellol Movement, the Azref Association, the Apuleius Foundation (a think-and-do tank organization specializing in Zuwara's governance) and the Libyan Red Crescent (LRC) to coordinate and plan how it could help tackle human smuggling in town.

The municipality also helped print posters and offered spaces in its offices for activists to reflect on the campaign. 'At that time, the anger had paradoxically created a positive spirit, and everyone wanted to participate against the awfulness of such an event [the shipwrecks]. The municipality was one of the leading actors,' explained a CSO member.²⁵ And these efforts were the first signs of the renaissance of Zuwara's civil society that would emerge in full force in the aftermath of the 2015 shipwrecks.



▲
Libyan Red Crescent
personnel retrieve the
body of a migrant washed
up on Zuwara's beach on
2 June 2016. © *Stringer/*
AFP via Getty Images

AUGUST 2015: THE TRAGEDIES THAT CATALYZED A CITY'S OUTRAGE

In August 2015, three accidents took place off the coast of Zuwara in which more than 650 sub-Saharan and Syrian migrants died. The first occurred on 5 August, when a vessel carrying close to 600 people capsized, leaving 373 dead. The second accident, on 26 August, involved a vessel carrying 40 people, and resulted in the deaths of 12 people.²⁶

The third accident took place on 27 August, with some 250 people of the 450 originally on board believed to have perished. Bodies of victims started washing up on shore that same night, including several young children. By 7 September, the LRC had recovered 183 bodies from Zuwara's beaches.²⁷ In the following days, volunteers joined efforts to identify the victims. The LRC organized teams to remove the bodies, supported by fishermen, while the town's sole coastguard boat tried in vain to find more survivors.

Pictures of drowned children on the beach spread on Zuwaran news forums and social media, triggering moral outrage. The mayor called an emergency meeting with the city's tribal elders and law enforcement groups, and all agreed that the smugglers needed to be punished. The Zuwara Crisis Committee, an important body born from the necessities of the revolution, was also mobilized to advise how the municipality should act.

Aymen al-Gafaz, then commander of the Masked Men, ordered several raids in the city, arresting many smugglers and people working for their network. These efforts

were sustained over a period that lasted roughly between August 2015 and the end of 2016. During this period, some 120 smugglers were arrested. Most were Zuwarans.²⁸

In addition to the Masked Men's campaign against smugglers, a vibrant civil society movement emerged, building upon the 2014 campaign and the experience of civil society actors in raising awareness about smuggling and trafficking. The 2015 movement was made up of humanitarian organizations, cultural associations, political organizations, and religious groups that found a common cause in tackling human smuggling. Its responses focused on five areas: 1) assistance to vulnerable migrants; 2) general awareness-raising on the impact and dangers of smuggling; 3) leveraging elites to strengthen taboos against human smuggling; 4) public support for the punishment policy conducted by the Masked Men; 5) reaching out to and pressuring smugglers to persuade them to give up their criminal business.

The LRC provided substantial humanitarian support, including psychological assistance to migrants, especially shipwreck survivors, who also received food baskets from local Islamic charity associations. The crisis committee played a leading role across several fronts, helping the LRC with the management of the dead bodies and providing safe shelter to migrants, while mobilizing elders and local elites to rebrand human smuggling as taboo. Many, including those among the municipality, said that they took a vow, as a city, to take an unprecedented stand against human smuggling by providing support to law enforcement efforts (mainly those by the Masked Men) and raising awareness among the communities.

Building on this, civil society activists campaigned on Radio Kasas, through the Zuwara Media Center and in public to raise awareness of the dangers caused to the city by human smuggling.²⁹ 'We aimed to put citizens as witnesses and expose the dark side of human smuggling,' reported a member of the



An armed man monitors migrants rescued by the Libyan coastguard after their boat sank on 28 August 2015.
© Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images

Apuleius Foundation.³⁰ Using photos and flyers of dead bodies, activists organized several street protests in the town centre denouncing human smugglers as ‘vampires’ who thrived off people’s misery.

Some religious leaders added to the momentum, authorizing the distribution of leaflets outside mosques and collecting signatures for petitions.³¹ In summer 2015, several imams delivered fatwas (rulings on points of Islamic law) on the dangers and harms of smuggling, and called for resistance against the lure of criminal economies.³² The imams argued that human smuggling was contrary to the core values of Islam, and sowed death and hatred. They also actively defended the rights of the smuggling victims and urged more assistance to be allocated to vulnerable migrants.

Civil society also took the fight directly to the smugglers. Despite the activity by the Masked Men, there was widespread recognition that most people arrested were low- or middle-rung operators. There was not enough evidence to go after the leaders of most smuggling operations, although given that Zuwara was a small, tight-knit community, the identity of these masterminds was known to many. As a result, a practical route was chosen by members of the municipality and Zuwara’s elders to delegate several people who would tell the human smuggling kingpins in town that the community had come together to oppose human smuggling and that there would be serious consequences if this activity did not stop. ‘Many people considered that CSO efforts are limited if smugglers do not feel threatened by a security force, but more importantly if they are not socially stigmatized as harming the city,’ commented one Zuwaran activist.³³

The campaign had an unprecedented impact on the human smuggling industry. By 2016, departures of migrant boats from Zuwara had come to a complete stop, and things stayed that way until the last quarter of 2017. However, the progress made in Zuwara did not affect human smuggling activity more broadly in north-west Libya. A significant portion of the smuggling business previously based in Zuwara was simply displaced, with the neighbouring coastal town of Sabratha taking the lion’s share, as Zuwaran smugglers partnered with powerful local counterparts and militias.³⁴ (By the end of 2017, the Sabratha smuggling system had also collapsed due to factors unrelated to the actions of Zuwara’s CSOs).³⁵

In Libya’s violent post-revolution context – and with little goodwill between Zuwara and its neighbours – spreading Zuwara’s anti-smuggling campaign outside of the city’s borders was simply unthinkable. ‘Our priority was to lead a powerful campaign in our town. Smugglers knew who we [were] and we knew against whom we were “fighting”. However, our capacity to act beyond Zuwara was low. We never really envisaged expanding the movement beyond Zuwara,’ reported one of the organizers of the 2015 campaign.³⁶

Overall, the incidents of 2015 served to catalyze civil society in Zuwara and bring together many actors to work together with an unprecedented uniformity of purpose – and achieve tangible results. ‘We were all concerned with this tragedy ... We had as humans and citizens to react promptly,’ said a local journalist from Radio Kasas, who covered the devastating events.³⁷ ‘I saw how civil society mobilized during this period, and it was a real grassroots movement acting courageously for human rights,’ said a member of At-Wellol. ‘For me, this is the second date of birth of civil society.’³⁸



The fall of the Masked Men

During the peak period of anti-crime action between August 2015 and the end of 2016, Zuwaran civil society members supported ‘policing’ efforts conducted by the Masked Men. ‘They [the Masked Men] were doing an excellent job, and we had an excellent connection. There was a sort of division of labour between them as a law enforcement force and us [CSOs],’ said a member of a civil society group active in 2015.³⁹ Indeed, many Zuwarans felt that a tougher reaction was required, and this popular support allowed the Masked Men to increase their strength to 132 members from less than 50 when they first started, according to a former member.⁴⁰

Amid a fractured post-revolution judicial system, attempting to bring smugglers to justice through official channels was perceived as problematic, and even counter-productive. A former member of the Masked Men interviewed by the GI-TOC said that ‘at the beginning of our mission, we tried to work with state agencies, including the Security Directorate, but after a while, we found issues within their structures. At that time, there were among the Security Directorate people who did not want Zuwara’s stability.’⁴¹

To overcome such issues, the municipality and the crisis committee set up an ad hoc committee to judge human smugglers. The Masked Men had a representative on the committee, and they set up a prison where sentenced individuals were held.

Outside the Libyan context, it is hard to comprehend why a community would need to work so far outside of the national legal framework to sustain what should be basic law enforcement and justice. However, to varying degrees, the revolution had undermined

Members of the Masked Men patrolling in the streets of Zuwara, September 2015.

© Lorenzo Tugnoli/The Washington Post via Getty Images

The union between CSOs and the Masked Men was in many ways morally and politically problematic.

law and order at the policing, prosecution and judicial structures, to the extent that there was (and still is) little trust in the state system.⁴² It also created institutional fragmentation and dysfunction in the application of laws, through which criminals could easily solve their problems with money. 'We had handed over smugglers to the Attorney General's Office [before the 2015 campaign], and weeks later, they were suddenly free, paying for their release. We wanted to end such practices,' said a former member of the committee, who is also a CSO member.⁴³

At first, Zuwarans were overwhelmingly supportive of this initiative,⁴⁴ and the effect on smuggling activity in the city was immediate. In the weeks after the first raids, departures from the city dwindled, virtually coming to a halt by the beginning of 2016. But as the number of smugglers arrested in town increased, the smugglers' friends and family became increasingly vocal in their opposition to the strategy. In spring 2016, the mothers of some of the arrested smugglers gathered in the centre of town to protest against the detention of their sons and friends, which they argued was unlawful. Mothers and friends of smugglers also expressed deep frustration that many smugglers were obliged to pay very high fines (up to LYD100 000, roughly €15 000 at unofficial rates) to secure their release from detention.

Families of smugglers brought a formal challenge against the legitimacy of the arrests before the Attorney General in 2016. Although the judicial procedure did not go far, it was primarily intended to frighten people, including the members of the Masked Men and civil society actors who supported the arrests carried out by the group. People from civil society also received direct threats from family and friends of the arrested smugglers because of their involvement in the campaign. These threats did not bring any reaction from the authorities, and this official inertia took the wind out of the CSOs' efforts.

The legal action by the relatives of the arrested smugglers was the most visible sign of discomfort with the Masked Men. However, this small, vocal and self-interested group was also tapping into real concerns that were being privately expressed by other members of the community who did not have any stake in the arrest of human smugglers. These concerns can be distilled into three categories:

1. The Masked Men were seen as a radical and unpractical body that ultimately undermined Zuwara's security in the contemporary Libyan context. People who espoused this view argued that in a context where there was virtually no state security apparatus and where the funding of militias bridging this gap depended on financial relationships with the criminal industry, taking a hard-line approach towards human smuggling would deprive Zuwaran armed groups of a financial lifeline. Eventually, this could translate into a military disadvantage regarding rival towns along the west coast of Libya. This argument was reinforced by the fact that, as mentioned, militias in Sabratha gained heavily from the criminal activity displaced from Zuwara in 2015 and 2016.
2. There was also growing concern over the extra-judicial approach of the group, which included conducting arbitrary arrests and committing human rights abuses such as physical and psychological violence. Adam Abza, the Masked Men spokesman, denied these accusations in late 2015, arguing that his group dealt with smugglers as any other official law enforcement body would do, although

a member of the Masked Men admitted during an interview with local media that 'some mistakes were committed by the group'.⁴⁵ No CSO publicly expressed an opinion on potential human rights abuses during the arrest and detention of smugglers.

3. Lastly, concern was also expressed about the disproportionate number of Salafists who were members of the Masked Men. The concern here hinged on the belief that this group ultimately harboured a hidden agenda to establish a strong base for Salafist ideology in Zuwara – an ultra-conservative religious reform movement within Sunni Islam, which in Libya is very closely linked with militias that have taken on a law enforcement role.⁴⁶

The tensions in the community over the approach of the Masked Men really came to a head on 28 August 2017, when the group arrested the most important fuel smuggler in town, Fahmi Slim Ben Khalifa, aka 'King Slim' (see below),⁴⁷ and handed him over to the Rada Special Deterrence Force in Tripoli, a Salafist militia close to the Masked Men and led by Abd al-Raouf Kara.⁴⁸

'King Slim' of Zuwara

Fahmi Slim Ben Khalifa, nicknamed 'King Slim,' is reportedly a trafficker who escaped from prison during the 2011 turmoil and played a major role in the expansion of criminal enterprise in Zuwara and across the west coast of Libya more generally.⁴⁹

The UN panel of experts on Libya identified Fahmi Slim in 2016 as the head of one of the most active fuel smuggling networks in Libya, and he was sanctioned by the United States in 2018.⁵⁰

Fahmi Slim cooperated with the al-Nasr Battalion, which controls the Zawiya oil refinery, and other militias in Sabratha, to divert thousands of tons of oil from the refinery to tankers docked off Zuwara's coast destined for Malta and Italy. His business generated massive corruption in the region, giving rise to strong competition between fuel smuggling networks over profit-sharing.⁵¹

Slim's powerful position in the town was cemented with his funding of rebel groups from Zuwara fighting to defend the city against Qaddafi's loyalist forces. He donated money to treat wounded fighters, supported their families and transported weapons and supplies to the rebels during battles critical for the survival of the city and the region during the revolution. After the putsch, with his growing wealth, Slim extended his patronage by contributing directly to the building of local infrastructure and sponsoring Zuwara's football club, among others. As will be discussed further on, however, Slim was dramatically dethroned when a local militia collaborated with a Tripoli-based counterpart to have him arrested, an event that profoundly impacted and divided Zuwaran public opinion in respect to the fight against organized crime in the town.



Fahmi Slim Ben Khalifa. © Maltatoday.com

Unlike the action against human smugglers, the arrest of Fahmi Slim was a unilateral decision on the part of the Masked Men, and the lack of popular support for such a move quickly turned it into a major calamity for the group. Fahmi Slim was seen as a supporter of the security forces and militias that kept the city safe, while fuel smuggling, unlike human smuggling, was not only a victim-less crime but also an economic lifeline for thousands of Zuwarans. Critically, in a post-revolution context where virtually every town in Libya depended on tainted money for its security, the move was deemed wrong-headed and a betrayal of the city's interest.

The blowback over the arrest was swift. The arrest precipitated a crisis within the town's security apparatus, undermining Zuwara's solidarity and leading to the Masked Men becoming pariahs.

Impact on CSOs

Due to the close working relationship that had developed with the Masked Men, their fall from grace also harmed the standing of CSOs more broadly. The event gave rise to divergent assessments among CSOs of the vigilante group's value in the fight against human smuggling. Fahmi Slim's arrest came when the CSOs' anti-smuggling campaign had already lost a lot of traction, in part due to the Masked Men's approach. 'We've lost the dynamic created in 2015, partly because of the way by which human smugglers were fought in town,' reported an activist from Zuwara, referring to the hard stance taken by the Masked Men and how their law enforcement approach was unsustainable due to its failure to change attitudes and because smugglers had found opportunities in nearby cities like Sabratha.⁵²

The Masked Men's activities had also overshadowed all grassroots efforts to limit the impact of criminal networks, reducing the profile and capacity of civil society actors, although this was an understandable situation for many activists interviewed for this research. 'We were relegated to the second rank, especially from 2016, when security forces [Masked Men] began raids and arrested smugglers. Zuwarans and local authorities were proud of our work. Still, for many of them, ultimately, the situation required a more pragmatic law enforcement response,' stated a member of an organization that participated in the 2015 campaign against smugglers.⁵³

Other activists concurred: 'Realistically, our actions would not have had the same impact if we excluded the presence and support of Masked Men. Also, most citizens saw anti-smuggling actions as more appropriate and effective than our advocacy activities. We have to take that into consideration for the future,' noted one activist who participated in the 2015 campaign.⁵⁴

Ultimately, the organic development of the relationship between CSOs and the Masked Men, as well as its later complications, were well captured by one activist, who said that 'joining our effort with the Masked Men was inevitable at that time, as many of them were friends and brothers. But in the end, this union between CSOs and the Masked Men was in many ways morally and politically problematic.'⁵⁵

The Security Directorate takes control

After the Fahmi Slim debacle, the Zuwara Security Directorate (the local police under the Ministry of the Interior of the Government of National Accord (GNA) which had been rather inactive up to this point), took full control of security in the town. At that time, the relationship between the Masked Men and the head of the Zuwara Security Directorate was fraught. Emad Abza, the head of the Security Directorate, criticized the Masked Men as being a militia that obstructed state law enforcement bodies. By mid-2018, the role of the Masked Men in Zuwara's security landscape had been drastically reduced, and the vigilante group was confined to a checkpoint on the outer area of the Ras Ajadir crossing.

Aware of the risks of coming down hard on a pervasive economic activity such as people smuggling, the Security Directorate adopted a pragmatic strategy, intercepting migrants on the coast or in safe houses, while avoiding the direct targeting of human smugglers themselves. It opted to put its crime-fighting emphasis on 'consensual crimes' such as petty crimes, hashish trafficking, illegal alcohol sales and sex work. This policy continued in 2018 and 2019, striking a balance between fighting criminality and ensuring stability in a fragile context without threatening community members' interests.

With the Security Directorate now in charge of anti-smuggling activities in town, many Zuwarans felt that their campaigns against smugglers as well as the humanitarian activities provided to migrants were gradually sidelined.⁵⁶ This was however less a direct consequence of the directorate's efforts to limit the role of CSOs than the legacy of the Masked Men's controversial campaign.



Migrants arrested by the Zuwara Security Directorate, August 2019. Source: Zuwara Media Center



▲
Residents of Zuwara
bearing the Amazigh flag.
*Source: Zuwara Media
Center*

NEW MISSION IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

In the aftermath of the fall of the Masked Men, many Zuwaran smugglers who had relocated to Sabratha after the 2015 campaign returned to Zuwara, operating mostly from a 20-kilometre stretch of coast between the city and the border settlement of Abu Kammash. Since 2018, Zuwara has re-emerged as a human smuggling hot spot on the west coast, with smugglers often diversifying their strategies and prices, and playing cat-and-mouse games with law enforcement in town.

And where human smuggling has resumed, tragedy has not been far behind. On 16 July 2018, a Zuwara Security Directorate patrol found a refrigerated truck abandoned close to the town. 98 migrants were locked inside with jerrycans of fuel, some life jackets and wooden cut-outs for rubber boats; 11 people had suffocated to death due to toxic fumes released by the fuel. The vehicle is believed to have been abandoned while the migrants were being transported overnight to an embarkation point west of the city.⁵⁷

In a sign of how much times had changed, this tragic event did not trigger an anti-smuggling campaign like the one launched in 2015. According to CSOs at the GI-TOC workshop, their inaction was due to a clear lack of leadership and coordination and no support from local authorities. Youth from the CSOs noted that they had not gotten support from the more experienced CSOs, with one activist stating that 'we did not manage to organize a proper campaign in the public fora as in 2015, simply because some of those who mobilized in that time [had] retreated.'⁵⁸ The few responses of young activists came from Radio Kasas and Zuwara Media Center, who reported on this incident during their broadcast programmes, but did not coordinate with other actors.

There was also a much less engaged response from the municipality and other leading organizations in Zuwara. For instance, many CSOs reported that despite the overall good work done by the Zuwara Crisis Committee, the municipality failed to provide sustainable support to awareness raising and other activities led by CSOs, except for search and rescue and food assistance for vulnerable migrants in town. Other activists reported that there was a lack of understanding among officials over the role of civil society and their responses to organized crime.

That said, the political situation left little space for Zuwaran civil society to work. The conflict between Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) and pro-GNA militias that began in Tripoli in April 2019 raised deep concerns among Zuwarans. 'When there are existential threats on your community, it is difficult for activists to create a new drive among the people,' explained a journalist.⁵⁹

The conflict reshaped priorities at the local political and civil society levels, dropping crime down the agenda. The prospect of an attack on Zuwara pushed local security forces to support anti-Haftar armed groups to counter the potential progress of LAAF towards western Libya, and Zuwara's civil society efforts were primarily oriented towards assisting the families of people who took part in the war. However, CSOs working closely with migrants, such as the LRC, maintained their humanitarian activities towards vulnerable migrants through this period.

To some extent, tackling smuggling became taboo. As noted by several activists, the fact that the Zuwaran militias engaged in the war effort (which was widely viewed as a defence of the city's interests) were, to a certain degree, linked to various smuggling networks rendered any anti-smuggling action undertaken by the CSOs extremely problematic and badly seen by the community. This limited the number of activities directly related to countering criminal networks in the war period (April 2019–June 2020).

Red Crescent Society team workshop on vulnerable people, December 2021.

Source: Red Crescent Society, Zuwara branch



*Civil society in
Zuwara continues
to mobilize
against criminal
governance.*

Other social factors undermined the ability of the CSOs to raise awareness on risks of criminal governance and migrants' rights. The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and perceived risk of transmission created a fear of migrants (many of whom came to Zuwara at the end of the war to find a safer space), diverting attention towards victims of human smuggling and away from the perpetrators. Other concerns in Zuwara limited the ability of CSOs to have a unified voice regarding the status and conditions of migrants, such as the site where the burial of non-Muslim migrants would take place.⁶⁰

An important factor in the declining ability of CSOs to tackle human smuggling was the lack of international attention. Despite the tragic nature of the events in 2015 and Zuwara's struggle to mobilize public opinion, there was virtually no recognition or support internationally. Very few CSOs received assistance, even though international media and policy interest in human smuggling and trafficking in Libya, specifically on the impact on migrants and communities, was at the top of the international agenda.⁶¹ 'We were received by a European delegation in Tunis in 2016 to talk about the role of civil society in combating human smuggling. We have been made promises to support what civil society organizations are doing, but those promises have not been kept,' reported an activist.⁶²

The prevailing view among activists is that with international recognition and concrete support, the anti-smuggling movement might have been able to sustain its stand in the face of pushback from people militating for the status quo. 'I am convinced that we would have maintained the momentum of the years 2015–2016 if we had been supported concretely, and that is to say with technical and financial means to put our action in the long term,' said one activist.⁶³

More broadly, timely interventions aimed at building capacity and best practice sustainably among Zuwara's CSOs might have helped develop the distance that needed to be created and maintained between civil society and the Masked Men, which ended up contributing to undermining the entire campaign against smuggling networks.

Pragmatism shapes CSO efforts

Despite the fact that civil society has lost momentum and faces political, security and economic challenges, it continues to mobilize against criminal governance through awareness-raising and education campaigns via media, religious discourse and on the university campus, although results have been mixed.

In January 2020, Radio Kasas broadcast a series of programmes on the harmful impact of criminality in Zuwara and how law enforcement, civil society and religious leaders can join forces to counter it.⁶⁴ Among the people invited by the radio were Hafed Mamer, a member of the Zuwara Security Directorate, Abdulaziz Al-Qarawi, a local preacher, and professor Khairi Al-Hamisi, a civil society member and human rights advocate. After the debate, which focused on assessing the crime landscape and the effectiveness of law enforcement efforts, Radio Kasas opened the line to citizens, and the feedback was positive.⁶⁵ Citizens demanded severe action against criminal groups, especially those involved in drug trafficking and prostitution. Many stated that they were more preoccupied with reducing the level of petty crime in town than with



networks diverting Libya's oil, and very few participants referred to activities carried out by civil society in recent years or the 2015 campaign against smugglers.

Imams mobilized again in 2020, issuing fatwas that condemned trafficking activities. For most religious people, the imams' stand is crucial to the fight to isolate criminal networks, as it can shape the attitudes of local communities. However, this religious discourse has little impact on youth.⁶⁶

In November 2020, young activists from the University of Zuwara and members of the At-Wellol Movement launched an awareness campaign on the university campus regarding the increasing hashish consumption in town. They set up information tents with banners and flyers and approached youth on the street to make them aware of the negative impact of hashish consumption and how the business funds criminal groups. This initiative was funded by the students and the At-Wellol Movement, and was well-received by the community.⁶⁷ 'Everyone agrees that sensitizing youngsters on drug consumption is positive ... However, fighting against drug traffickers is another game, and this goes beyond our scope,' reported a member of a youth organization.⁶⁸

Based on the lessons learned from previous campaigns, activists are aware that their expectations need to be realistic. Civil society actors acknowledged to the GI-TOC that they could not wage a conflict against top-tier smugglers. 'We learned from the case of "Fahmi Slim" that we cannot directly confront these traffickers. This is a suicidal mission. Our actions must be on preventing and protecting young people from joining such criminal networks. But that's not easy,' reported an activist.⁶⁹

Activists, local journalists and religious leaders are also conscious that any public debate on or action against smuggling must take into account how such debate and action may harm the community's interests and create further division. There is a broad understanding that the fight against crime must be cognizant of the complex

Youth from across Libya gather in Zuwara during a peace forum to build bridges and youth-led spaces that better represent their experiences and needs, April 2020. Source: Peacefulchange.org

local context of limited economic opportunities in the formal economy, the high cost of living and the impact of the COVID-19 crisis – all of which entrench the role of the black market as a major source of income for many members of the community.

Mindful of this reliance on illicit employment, activists reported being less comfortable engaging in any effort that targets small- and medium-scale fuel smuggling, while Zuwaran CSOs stressed for the need to distinguish between people who smuggle a vehicle full of fuel once a week from large-scale sea-bound oil smuggling conducted by organized networks. 'This question [standing against fuel smuggling] still divides the community. At our level [CSOs], it is tough to act against it or to build a narrative that denounces it. People do not see small players crossing the border to Tunisia as smugglers, but only as transporters who provide revenue for their families,' reported a journalist from Zuwara.⁷⁰



Members of the Security Directorate, 2020. Photo: Social media

As of late 2021, there were no CSO activities aimed at countering fuel smuggling – in large part because of strong opposition to such moves within the community. However, there have been official interventions, with regular fuel shortages in Zuwara since 2019 pushing the Security Directorate and border units to carry out law enforcement activities against fuel smugglers despite their limited capacity. And in early 2021, as the queues of cars waiting in front of petrol stations grew longer, the Zuwara municipality formed the Fuel and Gas Crisis Committee.⁷¹ Even though CSOs were not consulted, many approved of the stance taken by the municipality. However, the establishment of this committee happened to come amid the closure of the Ras Ajadir border crossing in October 2020, which shut off an economic lifeline for thousands of Zuwarans. As a result, many who depended on making money off contraband smuggled across the border with Tunisia turned their focus to illicit activities within Libya and Zuwara itself, raising considerably the challenge ahead of the committee, before it had even started its work.

Few avenues for official cooperation

After the experience of the Masked Men, activists are now clear on the importance of implementing a human-centred security approach backed by official institutions and transparent procedures. 'The 2015–2017 law enforcement style was not bearable. Zuwara is so small, and there is a fine line between what harms and what does good to the community. So, what is the best approach to counter criminal networks? A security approach that isolates top smugglers from the community, not small- and medium-size players,' explained a journalist.⁷²

However, although CSOs consider that the Security Directorate is vital in countering smuggling networks, they reported very few avenues for collaboration, with CSOs not involved in the migrant-smuggler arrest and judgment process. For its part,



the Security Directorate's policy of targeting migrants instead of smugglers has not been effective in tackling human smuggling. On the rare occasion that smugglers are arrested, the directorate has been unwilling to arrest and transfer them to the authorities in Tripoli because of the lack of due process and resources. The few smugglers arrested are presented to the local district attorney based in Ajelat and have to pay fines to be released under the conditions of Law 19 – 2010 on combatting illegal migration.⁷³

A member of the Libyan Coastguard patrolling off Zuwara, September 2015.
© Lorenzo Tugnoli/The Washington Post via Getty Images.

Bolstering civil society's role in opposing criminal governance

Zuwara's civil society has the potential to strengthen its actions and reinvigorate the momentum of 2015 to limit the harmful effects of criminal networks in the city. To do this, Zuwara's civil society needs recognition, more support from international stakeholders and better cooperation between all the local stakeholders. The following are policy recommendations on how Zuwara's CSOs could improve their work, based on the discussions held during the GI-TOC workshop.

Recognize and support CSOs work against criminal governance

Zuwaran CSOs consider that the international community's interest in their efforts has been weak, despite the fact that fuel and human smuggling are at the top of the Mediterranean security agenda. There is a need to both publicize the courageous work accomplished by CSOs and support their work on the ground, and such support has to respect CSO's specific needs. Zuwara's CSOs require financial and technical resources to support community responses to organized crime. They also require more opportunities and mechanisms to empower key civil society actors and build their operational capacity with the aim of improving the community's engagement through awareness-raising activities, primarily targeting youth.

Provide capacity building to Zuwaran CSOs

One of the most important conclusions from the 2015 anti-smuggling campaign was that Zuwara's efforts were not recognized in Libya or internationally, despite the magnifying lens under which irregular migration from North Africa is placed in Europe. Civil society needs more capacity to be able to lobby international actors for recognition of achievements and greater support. Despite its undeniable strengths, Zuwara's CSOs ecosystem remains very fragile and vulnerable to threats. CSO actors would greatly benefit from management, funding and communications capacity-building programmes to improve the results of a dynamic network of actors that embraces positive change.

Offer protection-training programmes for activists and journalists

Conducting reporting and advocacy campaigns on illicit economies in Libya is risky, and many civil society actors pointed to the need to lessen such risks, in particular for journalists and activists. Activists need cutting-edge training on how to mitigate vulnerabilities and protect themselves and their families. These pieces of training should focus primarily on online and physical protection best practices for the Libyan context.

Set clear boundaries for civil society actors and law enforcement

The relationship between CSO actors and law enforcement on tackling criminal networks should be clear. One of the lessons learned from the 2015 campaign is that the union between CSOs and the Masked Men ultimately harmed CSOs' engagement, but setting clear boundaries between CSOs and law enforcement does not mean preventing cooperation. Such cooperation could take the form of an ad-hoc anti-crime commission under the municipality with a publicly known agenda on how to counter criminal governance.

Put impunity and corruption at the heart of an agile local anti-crime agenda

Strong political will is a prerequisite for tackling criminal governance in Zuwara. Combating impunity and corruption is key, and there must be transparency over the verdicts imposed on traffickers. Civil society groups need to speak with one voice to implement an innovative agenda that finds a balance between respecting the community's interests and holding Zuwara's criminal networks to account.

NOTES

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