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**GLOBAL  
INITIATIVE**  
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME

# ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND PEACE AND SECURITY IN LIBYA

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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<b>DCIM</b>	Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration
<b>GNU</b>	Government of National Unity
<b>GNS</b>	Government of National Stability
<b>LAAF</b>	Libyan Arab Armed Forces
<b>LCG</b>	Libyan Coast Guard
<b>RSF</b>	Rapid Support Forces
<b>SAF</b>	Sudan Armed Forces
<b>SSA</b>	Stabilization Support Apparatus
<b>UNSC</b>	United Nations Security Council
<b>UNSMIL</b>	United Nations Support Mission in Libya



# INTRODUCTION

Libya has been a key focus of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) since the country's 2011 revolution. A June 2023 UNSC meeting on Libya focused on the country's political process, the need to hold elections and support work around the reunification of security and defence forces.<sup>1</sup> That same month, the Council re-authorized its arms embargo on the country<sup>2</sup> and in late 2023 it is set to renew the UN mission in Libya.

The UNSC has sought to advance an effective political process, reunify the country's divided institutions and address threats to peace and security, and human rights abuses. To effect this change, the UNSC authorized and draws on the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), a sanctions committee and linked Panel of Experts, and the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean Operations Sophia and IRINI.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these efforts, Libya remains a highly fragile country. Although large-scale violence has ebbed since the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF)'s loss in the 2019–2020 war for Tripoli, the country remains divided. The Government of National Unity (GNU) – the internationally recognized government in Tripoli led by Abd al-Hamid Dabaiba – exerts direct influence over limited areas of the country's territory, mainly in Tripolitania. Most territory, including Cyrenaica and the Fezzan, is held by the LAAF, led by Khalifa Haftar.

Attempts to bridge these divides, hold elections and forge a broadly legitimate government have repeatedly failed, most recently in December 2021.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, UNSC efforts in this regard continue, reflecting an international consensus that the way out of Libya's protracted instability is likely to be found in the political track, through the establishment of a government capable of superseding the current divides and exercising sovereign control over the country.<sup>5</sup>

However, the distribution of power within Libya challenges efforts to stabilize the country through the political track alone. Belying the simple narrative of national bifurcation, the GNU and LAAF have limited and contingent control over their respective areas. Instead, armed groups rooted in municipal or tribal groupings dominate local power. Governance and security often hinge on deals and agreements continually being renegotiated between these groups and the GNU or the LAAF.

Libya's thriving illicit economies, and their links to armed groups and political actors throughout the country, compound the challenges to the UNSC's efforts to promote a stable peace and the rule of law.<sup>6</sup> Profits from these markets provide a crucial funding source for armed groups, enabling and incentivizing pushback against state efforts to assert control, and drive conflicts between groups over control of key markets and routes.<sup>7</sup> They also fuel petty and large-scale corruption, stymying efforts to rebuild rule of law and security-force effectiveness in the country.<sup>8</sup>

Efforts to prevent criminal penetration of the Libyan state have failed. Actors linked to illicit economies have increasingly become embedded within the security forces, while others seek opportunities for high-level positions and political influence. This raises the risk that criminal interests, predation and corruption will be fused into the state. Equally problematically, it risks poisoning citizen trust in and possible acceptance of future governance and security structures involving compromised actors.

For these reasons, understanding how illicit economies function in Libya and their impacts, and how they are changing, is essential for the UNSC as it seeks to promote political solutions and stability in the country. This brief provides the UN and member states with a snapshot of how Libya's illicit economies have developed over the last three years and the impact those shifts have had. In the interest of length, the brief does not detail all changes or offer a full description of the structural elements in all markets. Rather, it focuses on the most salient aspects for policymakers assessing the challenge of illicit markets.

The brief begins by detailing the impact illicit economies have on armed groups and political dynamics. Next, it assesses the state of play of the main illicit markets in the country: fuel smuggling, drug trafficking, mercenaries, arms and ammunition smuggling, and migrant smuggling and trafficking. It ends with a brief set of recommendations.

## **Methodology**

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. Between 2020 and mid-2023 – the reporting period for this study – field researchers in the region collected data through semi-structured interviews with a variety of actors on the ground. This data was coupled with secondary sources, including UN reports, media articles and relevant social media posts.



The military up security in Tripoli following a clash between two armed groups, July 2022.

© Hazem Turkia/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

# THE INTERSECTION OF CRIME, CONFLICT AND POLITICS

Illicit markets have become more deeply entrenched in Libya since 2011 than they were at any point before the revolution. Proceeds from crime – particularly smuggling and the embezzlement of state funds – have been critical to the emergence and consolidation of armed groups that have gone on to play a dominant role in politics at the local and national levels. Competition over these resources has also been a repeated source of conflict between groups. Finally, the politics and practice of law enforcement have drawn in armed groups previously complicit in organized crime, seeking legitimacy and alternative sources of patronage and funding. This has created an ambiguous and compromised law enforcement ecosystem in which it is not possible to disentangle legitimate from illegitimate actors as a basis of reform or external engagement.

## Organized crime and armed-group dynamics

Organized crime as a funder and enabler of armed groups dates to the revolution, when many groups gained control over nodes key to illicit economies – such as trafficking routes, ports and migrant detention facilities. The nature of different armed groups' involvement in illicit economies has often been heavily influenced by the local political economy of an illicit market, the power of the armed group and the risks faced for involvement in a given activity.

Such involvement has also shifted over time, particularly as the chaotic and highly fragmented security situation in the mid-2010s slowly consolidated, with a narrower set of larger and more sophisticated armed groups assimilating or destroying their smaller rivals. This process was punctuated by conflicts that often shaped the landscape, killing off certain players while others emerged stronger. The latest major purge through conflict occurred with the war for Tripoli. The victors and survivors from this period now constitute the elite groups who control illicit economies across the country.

Since 2020, the biggest expansion of profiteering from illicit economies has reportedly been driven by the LAAF in Cyrenaica and the Fezzan. This can be traced to its defeat in the war for Tripoli.

### Types of armed group involvement in illicit economies:

- Direct organizational participation.
- Individual involvement by low-ranking members.
- Provision of protection to criminal enterprises.
- Extortion or taxation of illicit economies.



Although the group survived, maintaining territorial control in Libya's east and south, the loss eroded its ideological and financial foundations. This drove a pronounced shift towards the systematization and centralization of economic predation, which had previously operated more organically.<sup>9</sup>

Profiteering off illicit economies by elements of the LAAF has increased across nearly all illicit markets. Since 2020, industrial-scale fuel smuggling has evolved in Cyrenaica, according to interviewees, allegedly involving high-level officials within the LAAF able to secure fuel directly from state facilities, protect such shipments and arrange cross-border smuggling with foreign counterparts.<sup>10</sup> Less visibly, elements of the LAAF and affiliated businessmen allegedly control drug trafficking routes, both trans-Saharan and Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup> Profit sharing from these initiatives is a significant source of funding and support to subordinate armed groups affiliated with the LAAF in peripheral areas. Finally, over the last three years, there has been an uptick in the activity termed by the UN Panel of Experts as piracy,<sup>12</sup> involving an LAAF maritime unit in Cyrenaica impounding commercial vessels and demanding payments from their insurers.<sup>13</sup>

Some profiteering occurs at the level of senior commanders, who reportedly leverage their positions to organize illicit economic activity, mainly in fuel smuggling, and through the extraction of payments from criminal actors. However, involvement in criminal markets is also devolved, especially in remote areas of southern Cyrenaica and the Fezzan.<sup>14</sup> There, the LAAF largely rules with a light touch, having negotiated agreements with local armed groups to join it in a loose hierarchy.<sup>15</sup> These agreements leave local groups highly autonomous, able to police themselves and pursue their economic interests, including in illicit economies.<sup>16</sup> This has resulted in a highly ambiguous relationship between local armed groups and criminal actors. In some cases, exploitation of the illicit economies in these areas has taken on a quasi-legitimate veneer, with 'taxes' levied by armed groups and municipal authorities, and papers given to criminal actors to allow their movement.<sup>17</sup> In one case, in Kufra in southern Cyrenaica, such a taxation scheme was reported by an interviewee to generate around US\$200 000 (€181 290) per month from smuggled fuel alone.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note that there are elements of a political strategy in the LAAF's activities.<sup>19</sup> In addition to securing the loyalty of component groups by providing access to a livelihood, there are indications that the LAAF no longer wants to rely exclusively on repression and is instead funnelling some illicit profits into the local economy both to launder the money and to secure social support. This is the closest parallel to the governance of illicit economies exercised by the Gaddafi regime before the revolution, particularly in borderlands.

Examples of this also exist in western Libya, where armed groups continue to derive funding from criminal activity. However, this is more fragmented and anarchic – reflecting the heterogeneous political landscape in this part of Libya. For example, multiple groups of varying size and politico-military significance engage in cannabis resin and cocaine trafficking on the west coast, with al-Ajelat being a centre of this trade. Fuel smuggling also remains widespread and is an essential source of funding for groups in Zawiya, a crucial illicit economic node west of Tripoli.

Violent competition over illicit economies has diminished since the mid-2010s, as groups have established quasi-stable monopolies in various criminal sectors. Nonetheless, such violence continues and represents the main type of conflict at present. Elite factions in Zawiya – comprising tribal leaders and militiamen, some of whom have attained highly sensitive security and intelligence posts – frequently skirmish over control of illicit economies. These turf wars have contributed to Zawiya remaining one of the most unstable towns in Libya.

## Infiltration of criminally linked actors into politics

Protracted conflict in Libya has increasingly fused political and criminal power, creating a political–criminal nexus that has thrived on the weakness of state institutions. A number of armed group leaders known to be complicit in organized crime have advanced within the GNU and its rival, the Government of National Stability (GNS).<sup>20</sup>

One key example is the deputy head of counterterrorism in Libya’s intelligence service, who previously was a high-profile militiaman.<sup>21</sup> The GNU’s Interior Minister is also a former armed group commander whose units were accused of involvement in fuel smuggling by the UN in 2018.<sup>22</sup> The Interior Minister of the GNS, in turn, is a brother of the leaders of Zawiya’s Awlad Buhmeira network.<sup>23</sup>

As the above examples demonstrate, figures with past involvement in organized crime are no longer simply seeking the patronage of politicians – as was largely the case in the early post-revolution years– but are obtaining sensitive and senior posts, which come with access to intelligence as well as decision-making authority.

The advancement of such compromised figures through the state hierarchy is double-edged. On the one hand, it entrenches corrupt and criminal networks in positions of power, corroding the quality of law enforcement and expanding the realm of criminal enterprise. On the other hand, there is a dampening effect on crime and insecurity, as those who have gained status through illicit means need stability to build legitimacy and to make their advantage permanent. Their involvement can also augment the state’s coercive capacity, as they bring with them their own power bases and armed fighters. However, this comes at the cost of hierarchic control and accountability.

As they have become embedded in the state, many of these actors have reduced or sought to camouflage better their direct exposure to organized crime. Rather than profit off overt forms of organized crime, such as fuel smuggling, they profit off their ability to govern criminal markets using official instruments and state institutions, as well as to shape or control state budgets, payrolls and procurement contracts.

Ultimately, appointing corrupt figures for political expediency has led to stagnation in substantive governance. Support for reforming law enforcement and dismantling militias and armed groups as a route to legitimacy has declined since 2020. Cronyism and armed groups’ penetration of executive portfolios and state institutions are effectively normalized and no longer viewed as the taboo it once was. At the same time, revolutionary ideals have gradually waned, removing another restraint on criminal penetration of the state.

The impact of these dynamics on the UN’s political mandate in Libya is critical for policymakers to consider. The multiplicity of compromised actors with often diverging interests within government is not just a challenge to governance and law and order but also to the political process. The limited political progress seen through the UN track since 2020, coupled with growing state penetration, has diverted political momentum towards building systems that resemble a kleptocracy, with key power players’ personal interests at odds with democratic processes that pose a risk to the gains they have accrued. The entrenchment of these figures and their networks within political, economic and security institutions complicate future potential reform efforts.

## Anti-crime as a political tool

With the rise of an intricate political–criminal nexus in Libya, the mantle of ‘anti-crime’ has been developed into a political tool.<sup>24</sup> ‘Anti-crime’ positioning has evolved from approaches and communications around responses to security challenges, becoming instead a useful platform for gaining political clout and legitimacy. Various factions and actors, from political entrepreneurs to armed groups, are playing both sides of the fence. They portray themselves as champions of law and order to secure foreign funding and garner support. Anti-crime platforms have been used to attract international aid, gain popular support and legitimize political ambitions. However, these efforts often fall short of comprehensive solutions, as they tend to prioritize short-term gains and personal interests over long-term stability and institutional reform.

Using anti-crime approaches as a political tool can take several forms, including profiteering from the funds and immunity conferred by police status, reputation washing and as cover for political action.

### Profiteering and immunity

The most common use of anti-crime approaches, particularly by armed groups, involves gleaning direct benefits, either financial profits or legitimacy as state actors.<sup>25</sup> The latter rarely involves foregoing involvement in criminal activity, reflecting that even as they seek legitimacy, armed group leaders need to carefully balance intra-organizational and local interests around involvement in illicit markets with international desires for its cessation.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps the most powerful recent force to emerge in this fashion has been the west coast branch of the Stabilization Support Apparatus (SSA). This branch emerged from a coalition of the Awlad Buhmeira network in Zawiya and the 55 Brigade, led by Muammar al-Dhawi in Warshefana.<sup>27</sup> The west coast branch is one half of the SSA, with the other located in Tripoli and led by Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli, the head of the Abu Salim Central Security Force. The broader SSA was established in January 2021 by Fayez al-Sarraj, president under the then Government of National Accord. As the GI-TOC has previously argued, despite this legal basis, it operated in practice as a decentralized and largely unaccountable armed group coalition rather than a hierarchic, unitary entity. For the armed groups involved, the establishment of the SSA allowed for increased influence, a veneer of legitimacy and access to state resources that bypassed the Ministry of Interior.

Between 2021 and 2023, the west coast branch of the organization became one of the most dominant security and law enforcement actors in the coastal area between Zawiya and Tripoli, including in combatting human smuggling through maritime search and rescue of migrants and subsequent detention.<sup>28</sup> In this, it was closely allied with the Zawiya Refinery Branch of the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG), commanded by Abd al-Rahman Milad, who was sanctioned by the UN in 2018 for alleged profiteering from human smuggling.<sup>29</sup> Milad is himself a member of the Awlad Buhmeira network.

For the armed groups forming the West Coast SSA, the evolution of the organization shaped the nature of their involvement in illicit economies rather than leading to a complete cessation. The network remains deeply involved in fuel smuggling, even if it is not directly involved in human smuggling per se. Some network members reportedly ‘collude with smugglers’ as per UN reporting, while others remain involved in the protection or taxation of lower-level smugglers.<sup>30</sup> Further, interviews and public reports suggest that migrants continue to face abuse and extortion at facilities linked to the West Coast SSA and allies of the Zawiya LCG.<sup>31</sup>

The West Coast SSA has not only played a central role in security and law enforcement in the region but was also a key ally of the government of Fathi Bashagha and deeply involved in his efforts to gain a foothold in western Libya.<sup>32</sup> The footprint it built using the justification of combatting human smuggling was, in this way, inseparable from its political aspirations. This led al-Kikli, the overall head of the SSA and a Dabaiba supporter, to withdraw official sanction from the anti-smuggling activities of the west coast branch in February 2023.<sup>33</sup> The Awlad Buhmeira network and al-Dhawi reacted by having their maritime forces incorporated into the General Administration for Coastal Security, a component of the GNU's interior ministry, while the detention centre was placed under the interior ministry of the rival GNS.

### **Reputation laundering**

Involvement in law enforcement action is widely used to launder the reputation of those accused of criminality in the past. Perhaps the best example is Milad, who continues to command the Zawiya Refinery Branch of the LCG. After being sanctioned in 2018, Milad was arrested in 2020 under orders of Bashagha when he was Interior Minister. Milad has aggressively and successfully changed his reputation since his release from detention.<sup>34</sup> In part, this involved doubling down on a long-time strategy: counter-migration activities by the Zawiya LCG, an approach that led to a substantial rise in interceptions in 2021.<sup>35</sup> The refurbishment of the Naval Academy in Janzur is another centrepiece to his rebranding, one which has been highly effective in expanding his influence within the Libyan Navy, including among senior officers.

More recently, in Zawiya, a series of small ground operations targeted fuel smugglers. These were overseen by a member of the Awlad Saqr tribe, who is alleged by interviewees to be involved in fuel smuggling himself and appeared to be a PR effort at a time of heightened tensions.<sup>36</sup> This sort of practice remains ubiquitous in Libya.

### **Cover for political action**

'Anti-crime' campaigns may also involve actors using state authority to arrest political opponents or rivals. For example, in April 2023, the leader of the Awlad Saqr tribe in Zawiya was named as an arrest target in an official letter issued by the Zawiya Security Directorate, with pressure then put on the Attorney General to pursue him. Interviewees reported that this nominal law enforcement procedure was driven by local rivalries in Zawiya.<sup>37</sup>

In late May and early June 2023, the use of anti-criminal narratives as a political tool took a more violent turn when a series of drone strikes reportedly authorized by Dabaiba targeted facilities in Zuwara, Zawiya and Warshefana, including buildings linked to the West Coast SSA and fuel smuggling depots.<sup>38</sup> The GNU Ministry of Defence claimed that the strikes targeted criminals in these areas. Although airstrikes had a considerable impact on local fuel supplies, their initial focus within Libya was seen as political, with the targeting interpreted as messaging to the West Coast SSA on the risks it was running in its continued opposition to the GNU.

There is some evidence that, following the strikes, rival groups are allowing men under their protection who are wanted by the Attorney General to be arrested, but only as part of wider efforts that are negotiated to ensure the perception of political balance.<sup>39</sup>



A boat containing mostly Libyan migrants was rescued by Spanish NGO Open Arms in Malta's search and rescue zone, March 2021. © Carlos Gil Andreu/Getty Images.



# THE CURRENT STATE OF LIBYAN ILLICIT ECONOMIES

Since the end of the war for Tripoli, Libya's fragile, highly fractured political and security landscape has continued to enable high-profit illicit economies in the country, with the country scoring first in criminality in North Africa and 20th globally on the 2021 Global Organized Crime Index.<sup>40</sup> However, illicit economies have evolved and shifted over the last three years, in some instances substantially, while in others more subtly. These changes have impacted how illicit markets link to armed groups and politicians, and their effects on peace, security and human rights.

This section details the current dynamics of five illicit economies in Libya. It focuses on how these markets have shifted since 2020, with an eye on salient impacts for policymakers tasked with addressing fragility challenges in Libya and neighbouring countries.

## Fuel smuggling

Fuel smuggling from Libya is a challenge on several levels. First, armed groups have earned substantial profits from the trade. This profitability poses a stumbling block to attempts to demobilize the groups or fold them into the Libyan state, with key leaders unlikely to acquiesce to arrangements that are not as financially lucrative as what they now enjoy. Fuel smuggling too is of concern due to its societal impacts, as fuel siphoned from government refineries represents an ongoing loss of government funds. Although Libya's oil wealth is substantial, the diversion of these funds has ramifications on other government spending priorities, such as reconstruction. Further, the diversion of fuel to the contraband trade has practical impacts on the population, with fuel stations throughout the country routinely dry, creating popular frustration and forcing people to pay contraband prices for a nominally inexpensive and plentiful commodity.

The most significant structural shift over the last three years has been the steep decline in maritime fuel smuggling along Libya's west coast. The decline began in 2018 – prompted by heightened Libyan and international law enforcement pressure, maritime patrolling by Operations Sophia and IRINI, and payment issues between Turkish and Libyan actors – before falling further in 2020 due to a global, COVID-19-linked contraction in demand for fuel.<sup>41</sup> The presumption was that this decline was temporary, with maritime smuggling expected to rebound as the international price for fuel rose.<sup>42</sup> As of mid-2023, field reports point to a minor rebound, with relatively small quantities of fuel being moved offshore by diffuse networks, mainly using fishing trawlers.

There are also signs that coastal fuel smugglers are selling off their equipment – mainly the trawlers used to shuttle fuel – to human smuggling networks in eastern Libya. This partial dismantling of smuggling infrastructure increases the likelihood that maritime movement of contraband fuel will remain limited in the near to medium future.

In contrast to maritime smuggling, overland smuggling has grown since 2021 and emerged as a key source of funding for armed groups. There are indications that fuel smuggling through western Libya, primarily headed to Tunisia, has increasingly drawn current and former human smugglers into the trade. Networks connected to Ahmed al-Dabbashi, who was sanctioned by the UN for human smuggling, for example, are reported by interviewees to have increasingly engaged in protecting fuel trucks that transit areas he dominates.<sup>43</sup> Interviews indicate that human smugglers on the west coast have begun purchasing entire consignments destined for fuel stations from their owners and reselling them on the black market.<sup>44</sup> While this activity is simple profiteering off a lucrative market, it also reflects an attempt to engage in a market that is less high-profile and reputationally problematic than human smuggling.

The situation in Cyrenaica and the Fezzan has seen more substantial change. Fuel smuggling has been a key issue in these areas for several years.<sup>45</sup> In 2020, however, the drop in the global price of fuel led to a shift by smuggling networks from the foreign to domestic market. Contraband fuel in the Fezzan, for example, was sold at roadside by small networks, often at high prices.<sup>46</sup> Consumers

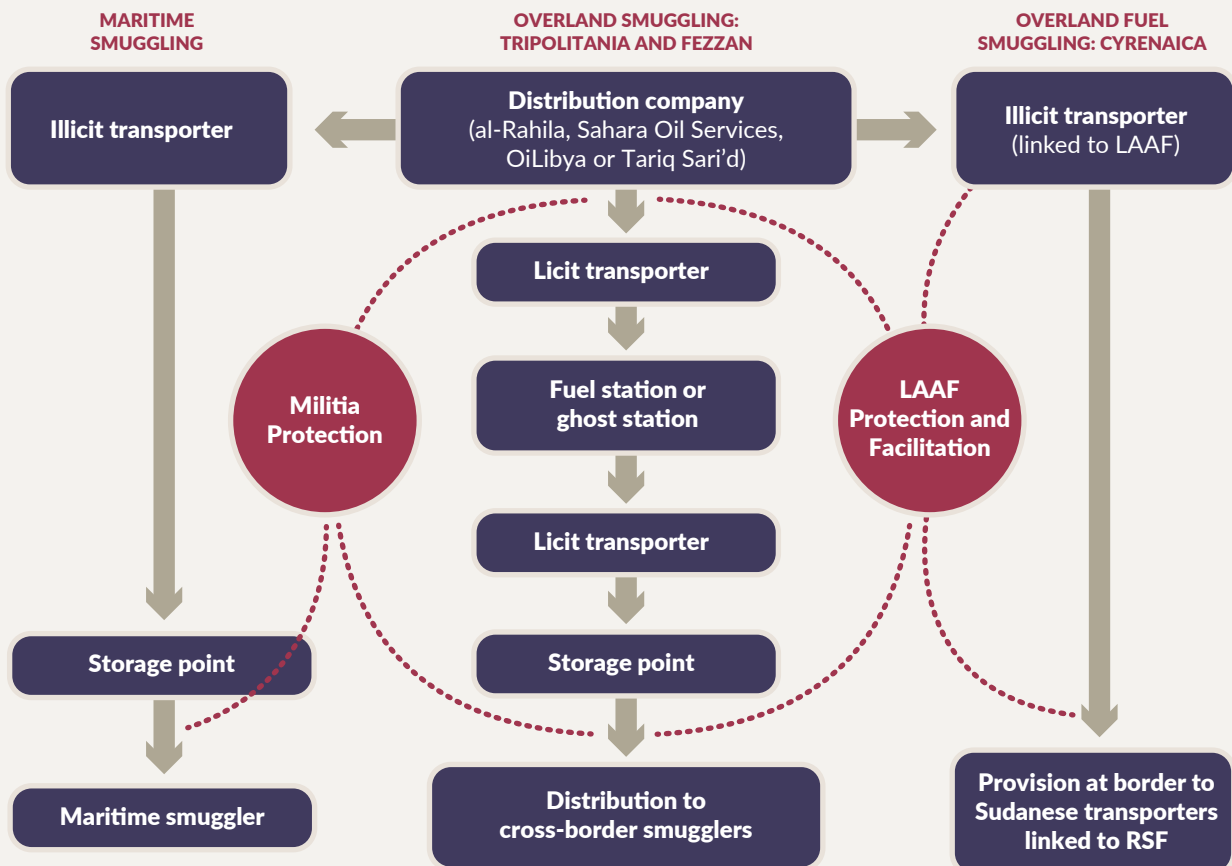


FIGURE 1 Fuel smuggling methods in Libya.

paid this premium, given the often lengthy lines at fuel stations and the frequent shortages many stations suffered.

In early 2022, however, fuel smuggling to Libya's southern neighbours reportedly surged. In part, this was due to a rebound in fuel prices. However, it also reflected direct efforts by the LAAF to structure and formalize the market to its advantage. This restructuring has been most overt in Cyrenaica, where key LAAF commanders have reportedly organized and provided protection for the movement of fuel convoys from storage depots along the coast to the south-east city of Kufra.<sup>47</sup> From Kufra, convoys, under the protection of the Subul al-Salam brigade, an LAAF-affiliated unit, are moved to the Sudan-Libya border, before being provided to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which protect the shipments and profit from them on the Sudanese side. In April 2023, in the initial weeks of Sudan's internal conflict, media reports of the LAAF providing fuel as a form of support to the RSF were likely to be a misunderstanding of this pre-existent fuel smuggling pathway.<sup>48</sup>

A less structured system exists in the Fezzan, but even there interviews suggest that elements of the LAAF have sought to assert more direct control over fuel depots and systematically profit off smuggling endeavours. Smuggling from the Fezzan may, however, be on the cusp of a sharp increase. Although information is limited, there are some indications that, since April 2023, the conflict in Sudan has led to a rise in fuel smuggling from southern Libyan cities to Darfur, Sudan, through northern Chad.<sup>49</sup> The convoys involved in the trade are reportedly large, with the volumes smuggled sizable enough to have impacted black market prices in Sebha and Um al-Aranib. One interviewee claimed the price of a litre of fuel in the latter had doubled since the beginning of the conflict.<sup>50</sup>

## Drug trafficking

The growth and diversification of drug trafficking to and through Libya pose a three-fold problem. First, they pose a challenge to stability within Libya. In part, this hinges on the risk of clashes between armed groups competing over trafficking protection payments. The risk is most acute on the west coast, though such violence could also become an issue in the Fezzan. Given the depth of LAAF control in Cyrenaica, clashes there are unlikely. Threats to stability also involve more basic predation, with the growing volumes of trafficking incentivizing armed groups to become involved in violent banditry. Incidents of convoys being targeted and shipments stolen have already occurred in the Fezzan and Cyrenaica, as well as northern Niger, in some cases by out-of-work mercenaries.<sup>51</sup>

Second, the growing value of the drugs transported through Libya risk deepening corruption. Senior commanders in some units linked to both the Tripoli and Benghazi governments are reportedly already deeply implicated in trafficking issues.<sup>52</sup> As the volume of trafficked drugs grows, particularly of high-per-kilo value drugs such as cocaine, there is a substantial risk that criminal actors will seek to strategically use corruption to shape the Libyan situation to their benefit, a dynamic seen in other countries such as Guinea-Bissau, Colombia and Mexico.<sup>53</sup>

Third, drug trafficking risks further deepening domestic drug consumption challenges in Libya.<sup>54</sup> Use has risen sharply since the revolution, mainly involving diverted pharmaceuticals and cannabis resin. Growing trafficking risks driving down local prices and potentially spurring increased use of hard drugs such as cocaine, whose popularity has been relatively limited. This poses a public health risk, with Libya facing acute capacity issues in addressing widespread addiction challenges.



Broadly, there are three distinct trafficking ecosystems in Libya, largely tracking to the geographic divisions of the country – Tripolitania, the Fezzan and Cyrenaica. Although connected, throughout the 2010s these systems operated largely independently of each other. While the war for Tripoli temporarily disrupted some trafficking activity, the conflict and the post-conflict settlements have shifted dynamics, altering access and power dynamics and leading to eased movement along overland routes between the three regions. The effect has been a greater connection between regions since 2020 and a substantial acceleration in trafficking activity throughout the country. Cannabis resin trafficking, for example, has accelerated as a result of eased movement between GNU-controlled areas of Tripolitania eastward into Cyrenaica, where it is then transported onwards to Egypt.

A more systemic effort by criminal actors and armed groups to profit from drug trafficking has emerged since 2020. Tripolitania, for instance, has seen increased involvement in drug trafficking by established networks previously involved in other illicit economies, including former human smugglers. Armed group actors, including some in official positions within the GNU and LAAF, have reportedly cooperated on drug trafficking, highlighting the flexibility of ideological enemies in the interest of profiteering.<sup>55</sup>

The connections held by these actors have concentrated trafficking, notably of cocaine, into a small number of networks. The result has been a noticeable increase in cocaine trafficking to Libya. Seizures in South America of large Libya-bound shipments suggest an even larger, undiscovered flow.

Moreover, rising trafficking of all drugs in Tripolitania has led to complex arrangements between nominally antagonistic actors. In these engagements, multiple actors agree to provide protection arrangements to different traffickers in a single general area. These deals are inherently unstable and risk clashes between armed groups over profiteering from trafficking operations.

In the Fezzan and southern Cyrenaica, armed groups have sought to profit more comprehensively off trafficking through the areas they control. High-level LAAF officials, working with affiliated armed groups, are reported by interviewees to have provided protection to and levied taxes on cannabis resin and cocaine trafficking convoys transiting through the region.<sup>56</sup> In some cases, the LAAF has sought to glean support from affiliated armed groups for its priorities – such as migration management – by offering some percentage of the proceeds paid by traffickers for moving shipments through the area.

A slightly different dynamic exists at ports in northern Cyrenaica, mainly Benghazi and Tobruk, with the key LAAF commanders and affiliated armed groups allowing for the import, storage and redistribution of substantial volumes of drugs – particularly cannabis resin – arriving from abroad.<sup>57</sup> At times, trafficking volumes have saturated the capacity of the ports – and networks operating there – to receive and store additional shipments, leading traffickers to route shipments of Levantine cannabis resin to West Africa and then overland to eastern Libya.<sup>58</sup> Trafficking also occurs through ports in western Libya, including Zuwara, al-Khoms, Sabratha and Misrata, though the volumes are reportedly more limited than those seen in eastern Libya.

A final significant shift in drug trafficking post-2020 has involved the rising volumes of diverted pharmaceuticals moved to and through Libya. This is not an entirely new challenge, with Tramadol trafficking through Libya to Sahelian states and Egypt, as well as domestic consumption, an ongoing challenge since the mid-2010s.<sup>59</sup> Tramadol is likely to be the main diverted pharmaceutical smuggled through the country, though interviews suggest that its importance has diminished since 2020.

However, there has been a sharp rise in the trafficking of pregabalin (an anti-convulsant medication used to treat pain, epilepsy and anxiety often sold under the brand name Lyrica) since 2018, with

the trend accelerating in the wake of the war for Tripoli. This links to a broader rise the GI-TOC has tracked in recreational abuse of pregabalin throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

Pregabalin smuggling has mainly been concentrated in western Libya, with interviewees indicating that maritime shipments of the drug arrive from Turkey and Montenegro. There is reportedly also some overland smuggling from Tunisia. Pregabalin is then sold onto the local market or smuggled to the west to Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

Although the pregabalin market is very opaque, it is a notable trafficking trend to watch. The profits gleaned are high, with just one high-level trafficker estimated by some interviewees to earn tens of millions of euros per year from the trade.<sup>60</sup> Further, armed groups profit off the trade by taxing shipments at ports, checkpoints and border posts under their influence.

## Mercenaries

Mercenaries in Libya are often mainly construed as conflict actors. Arguably, however, they constitute an illicit market, with such activity proscribed under Libyan law and mercenaries' movement across the country's borders a subversion of the UN arms embargo. Further, in some cases, underage youth – particularly from Sudan and Chad – are trafficked into Libya for mercenary activity.<sup>61</sup>

The mercenary business is the illicit economy most directly linked to peace and security challenges. Mercenaries contribute to national and regional conflicts, as well as intersect with other organized crime ecosystems. The presence of the Wagner Group in Libya, for example, has allowed for the development of a logistical airbridge to the group's deployments in the Sahel and central Africa, enabling both its combat-linked and illicit economic interests in those contexts.<sup>62</sup> Sudanese and Chadian mercenary groups, which leveraged employment in Libya to substantially increase their capacity, have gradually turned their focus to either involvement in criminal activity, conflict in neighbouring states, or both.

UNSC members have pressed directly for the withdrawal of such groups from Libya, in coordination with regional states and organizations, and through a well-designed disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process.<sup>63</sup> As the Kenyan representative on the Council flagged in 2022, such a comprehensive approach 'needs to be done to avoid cyclic conflict and fragility in the Sahel region, which is already facing the adverse cross-border effects of the conflict in Libya'.<sup>64</sup> Arguably, such a comprehensive approach has not emerged to date, leading to a limited withdrawal and a worrisome rise in mercenary linkages to transnational crime and insecurity in the Sahel.

The situation for mercenaries within Libya has become increasingly precarious since 2020, with payments and support drying up. This has had a limited impact on the Wagner Group and Syrian groups, which are supported by international actors. However, it has substantially impacted LAAF-affiliated Sudanese groups, such as the Sudan Liberation Army/Minni Minawi, Gathering of the Sudan Liberation Forces and the Sudan Liberation Army/Abdul Wahid. Reportedly, the groups have seen monthly payments – in some cases of over

### Major mercenary groups in Libya:

- Sudan Liberation Army/Minni Minawi
- Gathering of the Sudan Liberation Forces
- Sudan Liberation Army/Abdul Wahid
- Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad
- Wagner Group
- Syrian group affiliated with the Wagner Group
- Syrian group affiliated with the Government of National Unity/Turkey

€1 million – fall to nothing, with only supplies provided.<sup>65</sup> It is unclear whether a similar dynamic has impacted the Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad, but conflict between the group and LAAF units suggest that continued support is unlikely.

As a result, groups of Chadian and Sudanese fighters look to illicit economies as a means of making a profit. In some cases, this has entailed fuel or vehicle smuggling, or involvement in the artisanal gold trade.<sup>66</sup> It has also led to a rise in heavily armed banditry across a broad swath of southern Libya, the northern regions of Niger and Chad.<sup>67</sup> Since late 2020, former mercenaries – primarily from the Zaghawa ethnic group – have based themselves in and around the Kouri Bougoudi goldfield and used their combat experience, weaponry and vehicles to target high-value convoys (or those believed to be high-value) in the area.<sup>68</sup> This has led to clashes with drug traffickers, human smugglers and Nigerien soldiers. In one case, the mercenaries reportedly attacked a Nigerien National Guard convoy escorting a shipment of gold, escaping with roughly €4.5 million in ore.<sup>69</sup>

Some Chadian mercenary groups have also left Libya for Sudan to join the conflict there, largely on the side of the RSF. The number of departed mercenaries is unclear, although field reports suggest the number is relatively small, likely in the hundreds. However, other mercenaries are reportedly assessing a departure, viewing Sudan's conflict as an avenue for profit and access to equipment and weapons. For Chadians, joining the RSF is reportedly relatively easy. Many have contacts within the forces, a result of the RSF's recruitment of thousands of Chadians over the last decade. One interviewee noted that LAAF reportedly does not oppose mercenary departures, as the situation in the Fezzan is stable.<sup>70</sup>

The RSF's interest in incorporating these mercenaries into its ranks is unclear, given its limited manpower needs and the risk that such incorporations could further the Sudanese Armed Forces' claims that foreigners fill the RSF ranks, intended to paint the RSF as 'foreign' and so limit popular support.<sup>71</sup> If the conflict in Sudan continues, however, these numbers could grow. Mercenary movement from Libya to Sudan could also increase if violence or insecurity rise in north Darfur state. This could pressure Sudan's signatory armed groups to repatriate units currently based in Libya as mercenaries to protect their affiliated communities.

The mutiny of Wagner Group units in Russia in late June 2023 and the responses to the event by the Russian government are unlikely to substantially impact the group's presence and activities in Libya in the near term. Given the geopolitical benefits Russia gains from Wagner's presence there, it is doubtful that the 1 000–2 000 fighters based in the country will be ordered to withdraw due to the mutiny.<sup>72</sup> It is also improbable that the units in Libya will seek to assert autonomy from the Russian state, given their financial dependence on its Ministry of Defence. The group's ability to break that financial dependence by profiteering off illicit economies, as it does in the Central African Republic, is likely to be unfeasible in Libya.<sup>73</sup> Efforts by the Wagner Group to involve themselves in this activity necessitate supplanting the control of armed groups in eastern and central Libya who now control and profit off illicit economies. This would entail conflict, in which Wagner, with relatively limited and widely dispersed manpower and reliance on a small number of airfields for resupply, would be vulnerable and face substantial challenges for success.

## Arms and ammunition smuggling

Despite the existence of the arms embargo, the UN Panel of Experts has routinely reported violations of the embargo in recent years.<sup>74</sup> Since 2019, two shifts have occurred in this illicit economy. First, the nature of the weaponry transported into Libya has become increasingly advanced. One notable example is armoured vehicles, in particular personnel carriers or fighting vehicles, which have become increasingly available to armed groups affiliated with both the GNU and LAAF. Such vehicles were previously relatively uncommon among armed groups and often seen as elite or exclusive. However, since 2019 the UN Panel of Experts have documented the flow of such vehicles into Libya.<sup>75</sup> This proliferation, coupled with the appointment of armed group leaders to key posts in the GNU (and hence able to draw on larger budgets and access to government equipment), has led to heightened access to and visible employment of armoured vehicles by armed groups throughout the country.

The second shift involves the directionality of weapon flows and their threats. In the 2010s, a key challenge involved the flow of weaponry out of Libya, largely derived from Qaddafi-era stockpiles. The outflow had significant peace and security implications in the region, with Libyan weaponry and ammunition ported to conflicts in Mali and Syria.

Post-2020, weaponry has generally flowed into Libya, mainly from foreign sources, intended to equip the GNU- and LAAF-linked armed groups. Since the end of the war for Tripoli, there has been some outflow of weaponry to the Sahel – including assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns – that, while difficult to assess, does not seem to involve particularly large volumes.<sup>76</sup> There is a risk such smuggling could increase in the future, but there is reason to be cautious that Libya will re-emerge as the weapons trafficking hotspot that it was in the 2010s. This is largely due to reasons of regional conflict, with worsening fighting in the Sahel leading to the capture and sale of substantial volumes of government weaponry in that region.

Since the conflict in Sudan emerged in April 2023, some media reports have claimed or posited that the LAAF has delivered weaponry to the RSF.<sup>77</sup> A claim also emerged that the Wagner Group was involved in a weapons airdrop to the RSF, linked in part to two airbases in Libya where the mercenary group operates.<sup>78</sup> The GI-TOC has not been able to confirm or deny these accounts, though information on sensitive issues such as weapons often emerges slowly in Libya. However, the limited evidence around weapons transfers also tracks with the more limited weaponry needs of the RSF, which have extensive arms and ammunition stockpiles acquired through formal Sudanese government channels.

Preliminary information does suggest, however, that the Sudan conflict is driving the proliferation of weaponry on the regional black market. Weapons and ammunition from Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) garrisons and stockpiles in Darfur have reportedly been acquired there by criminal networks or from SAF personnel who have fled into Chad. The volume, to date, is unclear; however, it underscores an under-discussed proliferation threat from the evolving conflict, which could have impacts on Libya and other neighbouring states.

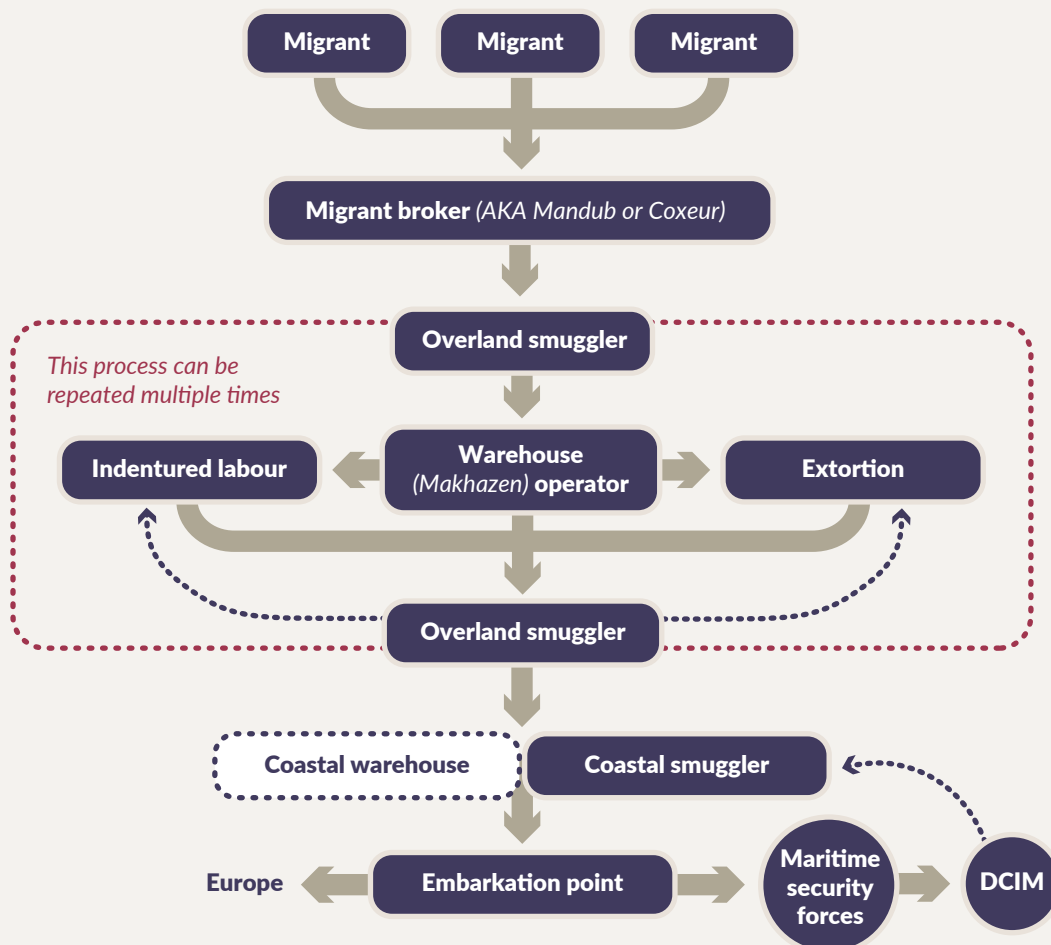
## Human smuggling and trafficking

Human smuggling and trafficking not only endanger the lives of vulnerable individuals but also contribute to the erosion of human rights and the perpetuation of violence in Libya. Organized criminal networks involved in human smuggling and trafficking exploit and abuse migrants, subjecting them to inhumane conditions, physical violence and, at times, forced labour. Further, disputes over smuggling routes often escalate into armed conflicts between rival groups, destabilizing communities and undermining stability. Beyond their contribution to overt violence in Libyan communities, these networks' empowerment is often at the expense of state authority, as they pose a direct challenge to government.

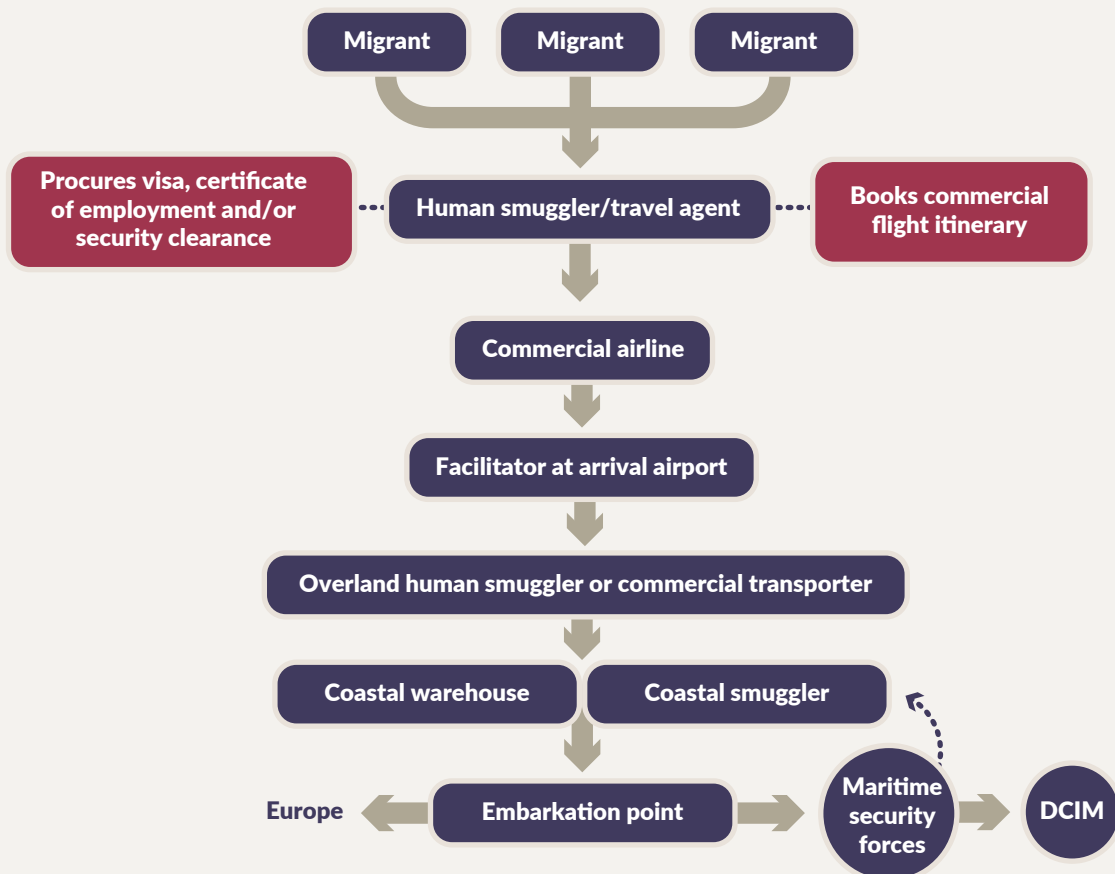
Libyan human smuggling networks often seek to perpetuate an ecosystem where the rule of law is consistently weakened, and where they can secure institutional titles and affiliations that enable them to masquerade as migration enforcement stakeholders. This allows them to financially profit from human smuggling and trafficking, as well as reap financial dividends for artificial efforts meant to counter the illicit market. Tackling human smuggling is essential not only for protecting the rights of migrants but also for restoring peace, security and stability in Libya.

### Average prices paid by key nationalities for smuggling services

- Pakistani: €5 850–€8 360
- Egyptian: €1 000–€1 935
- Bangladeshi: €3 850–€5 770



**FIGURE 2** Classic human smuggling methods in Libya.



**FIGURE 3** Hybrid human smuggling methods in Libya.

Since 2021, the number of migrants departing Libyan shores for Europe has increased year-on-year, ending a spell of subdued activity that lasted from the end of the last crisis in mid-2017 to roughly 2020.

This increase has been driven by the re-emergence of transnational networks offering a hybrid travel package to migrants from Egypt, Bangladesh, Syria and Pakistan. These packages include regular entry permits and flights to airports in both the west and east of the country. Benina, the main airport in the east, remains the most popular, apparently due to the lax policies of the LAAF, which benefits from the increased airport traffic by often imposing a separate entry fee. Many packages include transport to the coast and the sea crossing. This is a revival of the sophisticated networks that linked client populations with overland and maritime smugglers, which drove the previous crisis of 2015–2017.

The elements allowing for such a revival largely link to the post-2020 peace. The operations of sophisticated networks are underpinned by cooperation between a variety of different stakeholders throughout Libya and abroad. This requires trust, both between the network organizers and local actors, and between local actors whose activities for the smuggling network intersect. Such trust, which was limited during the 2019–2020 conflict, has gradually bounced back, allowing for sophisticated smuggling networks to move large numbers of migrants across nominal lines of LAAF and GNU control.<sup>79</sup>

Human smuggling involving migrants from African countries has continued but now comprises only a fraction of total departures. This has not been manifestly changed yet by the conflict in Sudan. Interviews suggest that between mid-April and early July 2023, several thousand Sudanese refugees have transited through the southern cities of Kufra and Um al Aranib.<sup>80</sup> An unclear, though reportedly limited, number have also transited from Egypt into Libya along the coastal road. This itinerary could intersect with the evolving migrant smuggling ecosystem in eastern Libya, raising the possibility of a sharp increase in Sudanese embarking for Europe in the medium term.

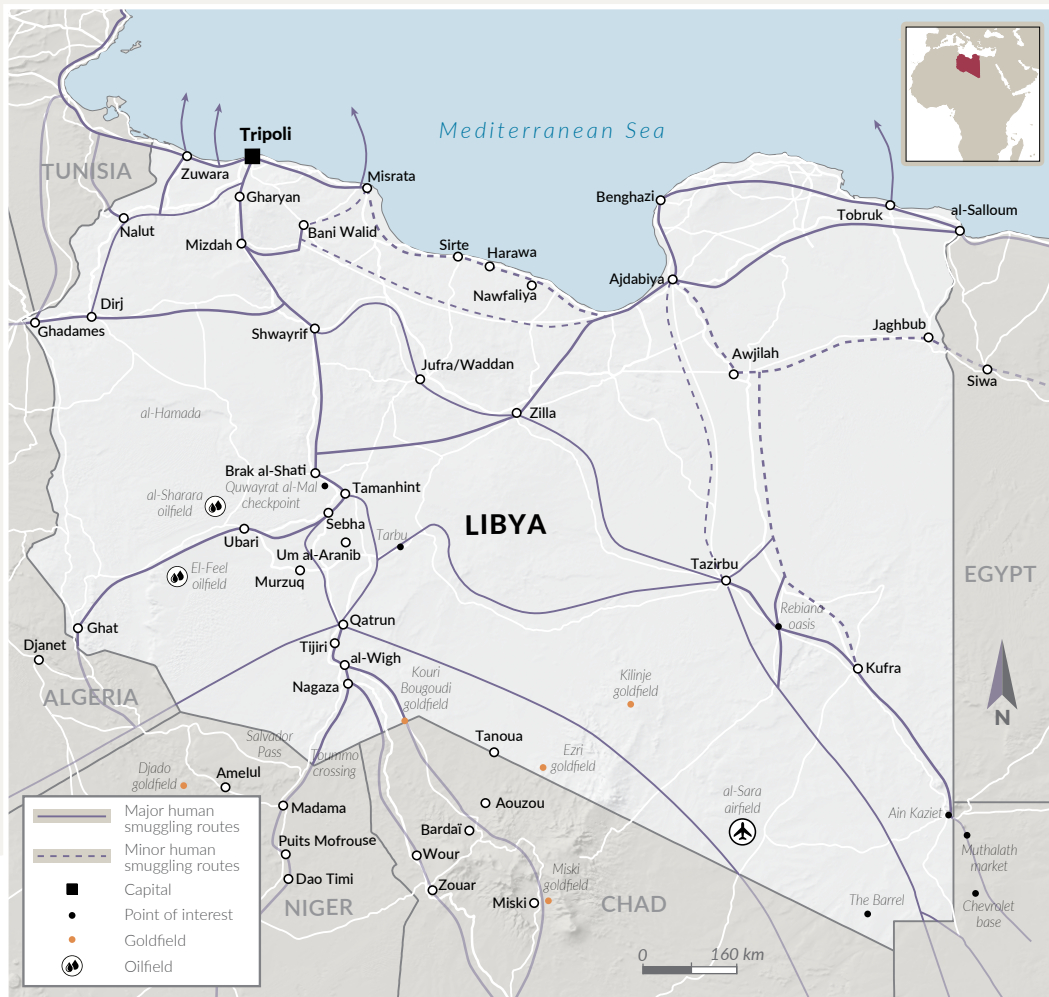
Since the start of 2022, departures from eastern Libya centred on the city of Tobruk have risen sharply. Previously marginal to human smuggling, the east saw, as of mid-2023, roughly as many embarkations as coastal Tripolitania, the historic centre of gravity for Libyan smuggling. Departures from the east carry an inherent risk due to the usage of large vessels, the high numbers of migrants crammed on each vessel and the complexity of the nautical journey to Europe. This danger was underscored by the sinking of the migrant ship *Adriana* in June 2023, killing hundreds.<sup>81</sup>

Rising levels of migration from the east have been fuelled in large part by networks previously involved in drug trafficking. These are tied into the sophisticated transnational networks detailed previously, which enable the supply of large numbers of migrants directly to eastern Libya. The rise in departures also appears to have benefitted from the apparent tacit allowance of multiple elements within the LAAF.<sup>82</sup> Complicating the situation, many of these elements have, at times, also cracked down on migrant departures, though the larger smuggling networks have been primarily untouched and the overall situation does not appear to have changed. Tobruk should not just be understood quantitatively as the addition of a new potential embarkation point, but as a qualitative game changer, with the potential to drive departures from Libya to levels last seen in 2017.

Finally, the abuse of migrants is an ongoing challenge, though some aspects of such predation have changed in recent years.<sup>83</sup> In the 2010s, Libya became notoriously dangerous for migrants, with kidnap for ransom, physical violence, extortion and sexual violence a recurrent phenomenon. These abuses were linked to smugglers and owners of warehouses used to store migrants, as well as officers of detention centres used by the Tripoli-based government to hold migrants intercepted on land or at sea.

Since 2020, reports of abuses in warehouses and kidnap for ransom have oscillated. Security gaps in the immediate aftermath of the Tripoli war opportunistic predation continued, particularly in areas south of Tripoli, including Mizdah, Shwayrif and Bani Walid. More recently, reports of warehouse abuse have become less prevalent, though they continue. This may be because warehousing and extortion do not seem to be part of the sophisticated smuggling model seen at present, which has occupied a dominant share of the present human smuggling market. Lack of reporting on abuse may also be due to the displacement of warehouses to remote areas of the south and south-west, limiting access to information.

Detention centres affiliated with law enforcement in the north-west continue to see abuse and extortion, with migrants often viewed as resources to be exploited for bribes or government spending. However, a key danger area is the Fezzan. There, armed groups affiliated with the LAAF have increased abuse and predation of migrants, in part under the guise of a law enforcement campaign countering irregular migration. In late 2021 and early 2022, this led to the mass expulsion of several thousand migrants into Niger.<sup>84</sup> Migrants interviewed reported that these deportations involved abusive conditions, robbery and offers of release in return for bribes. While deportations have ceased,



**FIGURE 4** Human smuggling routes in Libya, June 2023.

the same groups reportedly continue to routinely detain migrants, mainly at facilities in or near Sebha. Interviewees have noted recurrent instances of physical abuse and violence during detention.

The sharp rise in human smuggling levels since 2020, and the dispersal of human smuggling to new areas such as eastern Libya, underscores the challenge faced by the international community in addressing the phenomenon in Libya. In part, this is due to the dominant position of armed groups in Libya and the weakness of the state.

It is also the result of rebounding transnational smuggling groups, leveraging Libya's peace dividend to expand their operations and cater to new types of nationalities. It is likely that this will continue to intensify as long as Libya's internal peace holds, heightening the likelihood that the year-on-year increases in movement through and departures from Libya will continue in the near to medium future.





Debris of buildings, Sirte, December 2021. © Abdullah Marei/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images



## LOOKING AHEAD: RECOMMENDATIONS

Since 2020, Libya's illicit economies have shifted – some in substantial and highly visible ways, others in more opaque but equally impactful ways. Although it is difficult to assess how the situation will continue to evolve, based on current dynamics, it seems that the near to medium term will see more upheaval and reconfiguration in organized criminal activities. It is likely that some networks will move to consolidate control, in part through violence, and will become more systemically organized and powerful.

This mirrors, and is influenced by, upheaval and consolidation in the security and political spheres. A number of smaller players have been incorporated into larger groups or eliminated. This has been a contributor to the current stability Libya enjoys, which has led many international players to be cautious in their approach in the country for fear of upsetting the status quo. Others have flagged the international community's dependence on powerful political and security actors, viewing them as essential players if the country is to 'emerge from the current political impasse', as said by Abdoulaye Bathily, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Libya and Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya in a November 2022 UNSC meeting.<sup>85</sup>

However, as this brief has detailed, there are warning signs of long-term risk in the current situation. Efforts by Libyan and international actors to keep criminals and those complicit in illicit economies out of government have failed. There is a substantial risk that this dynamic will accelerate and links between state actors, armed groups and criminals will become increasingly symbiotic. This will heighten the difficulty of distinguishing illicit networks from state structures, and risks long-term degradation in the rule of law and public trust in institutions.

For Libyans and the international community, clearer strategic thinking and planning on illicit economies – and their links to armed groups and politics – are critical. The following are some options for such planning:

- The Security Council should schedule new thematic discussions to identify the current challenges posed by illicit economies within Libya. One key area will be the interplay between the conflict in Sudan and the unstable situation in Libya, assessing where illicit economies and risk factors overlap. Another key area for discussion should be the significance of criminally linked actors moving into political roles and the implications for international engagement.

- When renewing the UNSMIL mandate, the Security Council should insert language recognizing illicit economies' impact on peace, security and human rights, and giving the mission a more active tasking in tackling the challenge. Modifications to the UNSMIL mandate in recent years have been relatively limited, even as the context has shifted substantially.<sup>86</sup> Given the increasing power and political involvement of actors linked to illicit economies, a hands-off mission posture is problematic. Expanding the UNSMIL mandate, ideally in ways that draw in other non-crime-focused fixes, could benefit the UN as it seeks to address the conflict.
- UNSMIL should proactively develop the mission's capacity for analyzing the political economy of organized crime in Libya and how these networks fuel insecurity. This builds on recommendations offered in the UNSMIL strategic review, which stressed the need to strengthen analytic capacity on the 'financial networks that sustain militias'.<sup>87</sup> However, the changed context since the strategic review heightens the salience of going beyond analyzing criminality as a factor enabling militias, looking instead at the more full-spectrum threats posed by criminal actors in various geographic areas and spheres of public life.
- UNSMIL should adjust ongoing reconciliation efforts around the 5+5 Joint Military Commission to disincentivize armed group involvement in organized crime and ensure it is not unintentionally entrenched via the media process. Many groups engaged with the 5+5 are linked to organized crime to varying degrees, with very few conditionalities placed on engagement. This risks the resulting blueprint entrenching crime or embedding it within state structures. To avoid this, the UNSMIL could consider the development of preconditions for engagement, such as limiting engagement in organized criminal activities and complying with oversight.
- The Security Council and UNSMIL should promote genuine law enforcement initiatives to address illicit economies. Such approaches have had an impact in the past, with targeted action against human smugglers rather than migrants producing a notable lull in smuggling on Libya's west coast in the late 2010s.<sup>88</sup> President Dabaiba's use of drones to target criminal actors suggests that the current moment may be opportune for law enforcement approaches to be readopted by the GNU. The drug trafficking sphere – particularly at the level of interface with international drug trafficking – can offer openings, given authentic interest by some armed groups and Libyan actors in combating this phenomenon to protect Libyans from harm. The international community should use all available diplomatic tools to ensure that such approaches are based on the rule of law, and have adequate transparency and safeguards put in place to hedge against perceptions of the instrumentalization of anti-crime.
- The Sanctions Committee should look beyond sanctions on individual criminal actors and focus more comprehensively on networks. To date, it has tended to address illicit networks by targeting single individuals, often those in leadership positions. Only in one instance has the Sanctions Committee been more comprehensive, sanctioning three actors in Zawiya's Awlad Buhmeira network.<sup>89</sup> A sanctions approach built around deterring key individuals is relatively weak, and has little likelihood of creating systemic change or disincentivizing the structured and systemic armed group involvement in illicit economies currently developing. Rather, it is likely that a comprehensive approach to designating numerous network members – including facilitators – involving strict enforcement and the imposition of further designations on the network as needed would go further in shaping decision-making by armed groups around illicit economies.
- The Security Council, UNSMIL, Operation IRINI and the Sanctions Committee (with input from the Panel of Experts) should develop, in conjunction with Libyan authorities, a comprehensive plan for addressing illicit economies in Libya. This would require setting realistic goals around illicit economies – such as minimizing some typologies of crime, mitigating criminal infiltration of politics,

or addressing specific threats to peace and security or human rights emanating from crime – rather than aiming for a complete halt in illicit activity. A strategy would bring together the various salient tools currently employed by the international community – including sanctions, law enforcement capacity building, development support, political dialogue and maritime intervention – and identify how they can be used in a mutually supportive way. This would most most likely lead to a greater, more enduring effect than the current system of tools used in tandem.

- The Security Council and UNSMIL should assess strategic options to address criminally linked actors already incorporated into Libyan institutions. This involves international coordination around if and how to engage with such actors, including at security and diplomatic forums. Such an approach would, however, require assessing how Libyan citizens view the issue and what processes would be supported for addressing the challenge, such as rule-of-law approaches, security sector reform and transitional justice. For this, further data and research are needed.

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