

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2023 SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME



LIBYA

SOPHISTICATED SMUGGLERS THRIVE
AS LIBYAN GOVERNANCE STAGNATES

Rupert Horsley

SEPTEMBER 2023

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is part of a series of briefs published by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s Observatory of Illicit Economies in North Africa and the Sahel. This brief would not have been possible without the support and advice of Mark Micallef, Matt Herbert, Jessica Gerken, Alice Fereday, Raouf Farrah, Emadeddin Badi, Alladin Attiga, and Tasnim Abderrahim. The GI-TOC publications and communications teams have been key collaborators, ensuring that the exacting standards of delivery are met.

We would also like to acknowledge the dedicated efforts of a large number of local researchers engaged by the GI-TOC across the region. While we will not name them for their safety, they have our profound gratitude and respect for the excellent work they do under difficult circumstances.

The research for this report was supported by funding under the North Africa and the Sahel, and Lake Chad windows of the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of the GI-TOC and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rupert Horsley is a senior analyst at the GI-TOC. He is an expert on Libya, focusing on migration, organized crime, security and conflict trends in the country. He specializes in complex analysis and research in difficult-to-access communities.

© 2023 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the Global Initiative.

Cover: © *Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images*

Design and layout: Ink Design Publishing Solutions, Cape Town

Please direct inquiries to:

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
Avenue de France 23
Geneva, CH-1202
Switzerland
www.globalinitiative.net

CONTENTS

- Introduction 2**
 - Methodology.....4
- The political context of Libya’s emerging migration crisis 5**
 - Global economic stress drives emigration and encourages opportunism.....8
- Coastal smuggling dynamics continue 2021 trends..... 11**
- West coast political upheaval creates space for smugglers..... 17**
 - Sabratha emerges as key smuggling hub.....20
 - West coast SSA distracted and disrupted.....21
 - Zuwaran smugglers reportedly relocate to Sabratha due to pressure at home 24
- Rise in departures from eastern Libya 27**
- The growth of hybrid migration 33**
 - Egyptian migration to Libya..... 33
 - Bangladeshi migration to Libya..... 35
 - Syrian migration to Libya..... 36
 - Use and misuse of the regular migration ecosystem 37
 - Irregular migration to Europe and informal networks 39
 - The LAAF’s role in hybrid migration..... 41
- Conclusion 43**
- Notes 45**



INTRODUCTION

More migrants left the Libyan coast for Europe in 2022 than any year since 2017, with more than 80 600 attempted sea crossings. This was roughly 20 000 more than 2021's total of 60 250, which was already very busy compared to the post-crisis period from 2018 to 2020. The year 2022 not only recorded several extremely busy individual months, but also saw consistently high totals from month to month, with May to November all recording totals of above 5 000, and July, August and September being above 10 000.

The large annual total and the consistency of high monthly departures confirms that the post-crisis era of suppressed human smuggling in Libya has ended and has been replaced by a set of new norms. This evolution has been driven by several factors, including the global economic downturn, a return to normal levels of mobility both regionally and in Libya, and a general loss of interest on the part of Libyan elites in the politics of law enforcement and security sector reform. As a result, a favourable climate has emerged, which human smuggling networks have evolved to seize the opportunity of over the past two years.

The same period has seen the further capture of migration management systems by law enforcement entities – in both east and west Libya – that seek to profit politically and financially from the control of tools to combat human smuggling. These entities profit by taking bribes from smugglers even as they receive state funding for law enforcement, and use their influence over the smuggling ecosystem for political leverage. While this is not new, the sophistication of these operations grew significantly in 2022, in line with the general political maturation of armed groups.

The recent history of the evolution of human smuggling and trafficking in Libya can now usefully be sorted into three broad eras. The first is the crisis that emerged in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, which lasted from 2014 to 2017. In the report 'The human conveyor belt', the GI-TOC showed how this crisis resulted primarily from the increasingly close partnership – under conditions of post-revolutionary anarchy – between key Libyan armed groups and Libyan/foreign smugglers, leading to the emergence of complex, transnational networks that were capable of transporting huge numbers of migrants from East and West Africa to the Libyan coast and on to Europe.¹

This era ended in late 2017, giving way to the post-crisis era of suppressed smuggling networks and vastly reduced departure levels, which lasted from 2018 to the end of 2020. In 'The human conveyor belt broken', the GI-TOC explored the factors that led to the collapse in human smuggling in Libya, which included measures taken to hinder mobility upstream of Libya in other source and

transit countries, as well as a general strategic shift by the most serious and ambitious armed groups in Libya away from open predation and criminality towards legitimacy and long-term survival.²

This can be conceptualized as an example of class formation, with the winners of the post-revolutionary free-for-all gaining consciousness of a new set of responsibilities and interests, and the strategies necessary for survival. Aligning with law and order, both rhetorically and administratively, was one such strategy. While the results of these bad faith exercises were highly problematic – with corruption and criminality remaining pervasive – they nonetheless led to the suppression of the most egregious forms of open smuggling and trafficking. They also led to the advancement of state capture by militias in the migration management sphere with the direct and indirect involvement of armed groups in detention, and policing of migratory flows, both on land and at sea, reaching unprecedented levels.

This post-crisis period lasted until the end of 2020, with the weak law enforcement suppression of smuggling being bolstered by disruption and hindrance to mobility caused by the war for Tripoli of 2019–2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic. The GI-TOC report ‘Conflict, coping and COVID’ covers this period.³

With these obstacles being removed in 2021, alongside the growing disillusionment with the politics and rhetoric of law enforcement – at least the bad faith versions that had mostly been on offer so far – human smugglers found opportunities to once again grow their business, as detailed in the paper ‘Libya: Stability fuels rebound in human smuggling’.⁴

The current paper is the latest in this series, detailing how smugglers have further consolidated their business – and in particular the growth of hybrid smuggling operations – over 2022, as political and social conditions have continued to provide a favourable environment.



Libyan special forces assemble in Bani Walid to enforce inspections at points of entry through the desert borders, January 2023. Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images

The following sections discuss the overall political context of Libya in 2022, followed by an examination of the departure data from the Libyan coast, looking beyond the overall numbers to the nationality of migrants and the kind of boats being used. The paper then moves on to political and security developments in key departure areas along the west coast, as well as the unprecedented surge in smuggling from the far east of Libya, which was previously quiet. Finally, the continued growth of hybrid migration that combines regular and irregular aspects is outlined.

Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2022 – the reporting period for this study – field researchers in the region collected data through semi-structured interviews with smugglers, migrants, community members, transporters, NGO personnel, international observers and others.

Open-source data relevant to human smuggling and trafficking was systematically collected and analyzed on a weekly basis. This data was used to formulate questions and inquiry areas for field research and validate field interviews collected by researchers.

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed in this brief are inherently opaque and the geographic areas covered often remote, volatile or difficult to access. Because of this, the brief should be viewed as a snapshot that will feed into future reporting and analysis from the GI-TOC that is planned to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Libya and the broader region.



THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF LIBYA'S EMERGING MIGRATION CRISIS

At the outset of 2022, it appeared certain that Libya was set to experience a year of political turmoil after the elections that had been planned for December 2021 were indefinitely postponed.⁵

Following this failure, the country quickly relapsed into executive bifurcation, with part of the Libyan House of Representatives in eastern Libya nominating former Government of National Accord Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha as prime minister-designate in March. Abd al-Hamid Dabaiba, who by then was seeking to entrench his Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli as a *fait accompli*, was quick to discredit the process of Bashagha's appointment. Nonetheless, diverging international stances vis-à-vis Bashagha – who benefited from significant Egyptian backing – created a space for him to establish a parallel government named the Government of National Stability (GNS), which was initially headquartered in Sirte.

Bashagha's legitimacy rested on his ability to install himself in Tripoli and dislodge Dabaiba. The GNS recruited the support of disgruntled western groups – in particular, the formerly pro-GNU Zintani commander Usama al-Juwaili and the west coast branch of the Stabilization Support Apparatus (SSA). The latter is the front for the Zawiyah Busriba network and Muammar al-Dhawi from Warshefana. The SSA itself was originally created by former Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj in a failed attempt to shore up his premiership and undermine his key rival, Bashagha (then Interior Minister). The GNU, on the other hand, had the support of a critical weight of groups in Misrata and Tripoli.

As a result of this unstable balance, a state of institutional divide and simmering conflict persisted through the whole of 2022. With balance-of-power competition once again the defining dynamic of Libyan politics, back-door deals and direct negotiations with armed group commanders – predominantly in western Libya – absorbed all energy and attention as both Bashagha and Dabaiba made public appearances and direct overtures towards politico-military figures in order to secure their backing.

In Bashagha's case, this dynamic proved especially damaging. His political strategy led him to form a government backed by Aguila Saleh and Khalifa Haftar, deeply unpopular figures in his native Misrata. This also entailed open alliance with other pro-GNS groups, such as the Busriba network,

which he had opposed as criminal during his time as interior minister. These accommodations damaged his revolutionary legitimacy in his native Misrata and across the west coast. Critically, the law enforcement agenda that Bashagha himself had cultivated during his era as interior minister was irrevocably tarnished by his accommodation of the very same figures he had formerly vowed to combat.⁶ On the other end of the fence, Dabaiba's leadership style was openly transactional, seeking to secure deals with important armed groups – including with Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli, aka Ghnewa, the leader of the other half of the SSA – to secure his hold on the capital. This cynicism eroded the credibility of the politics of law enforcement during 2022.

Bashagha's loss of support in Misrata left few options but to attempt to enter Tripoli using force, relying on the assistance of other western pro-GNS groups– particularly Usama al-Juwaili and the west coast SSA – while negotiating with some in Tripoli. This led to clashes in late August, as Tripoli saw its worst fighting in two years, with dozens of civilians dying as militias nominally aligned with Dabaiba's GNU and Bashagha's GNS sought to expand their footprint in the capital and undermine their opponents.⁷

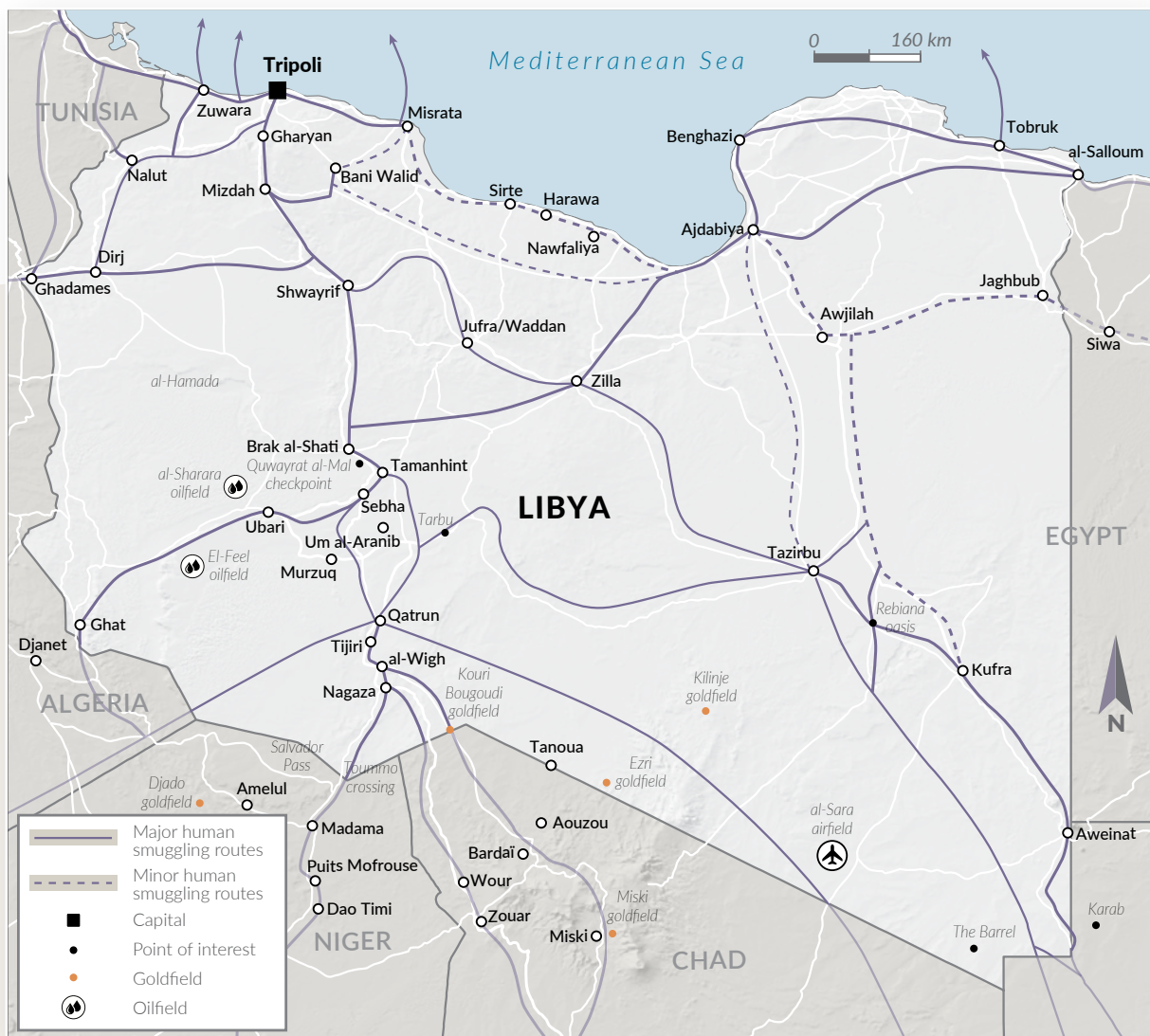


FIGURE 1 Libya, showing main people smuggling routes, December 2022.



Fathi Bashagha and Ali Busriba appear together at the House of Representatives session in Tobruk. *Photo: Facebook*

This conflict ended in favour of the GNU, substantially shifting territorial control in Tripoli and to a lesser extent on the west coast. Pro-Bashagha groups, including the Nawasi Brigade, Haithem Tajouri's Tripoli Revolutionaries' Brigade, Ayoub Buras' Presidential Guard and al-Juwaili's units from Zintan, were effectively evicted from the capital by armed groups aligned with Dabaiba. The latter comprised the Special Deterrence Force under Abdul Raouf Kara, the General Security Apparatus under Emad Trabilisi, the SSA under Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli, and the 444 Brigade under Lieutenant Colonel Mahmoud Hamza. These groups then proceeded to carve up territorial control in Tripoli between them. The pro-Bashagha block on the west coast also suffered significant setbacks (this was highly salient for smuggling and law enforcement dynamics in western Libya and is discussed in greater detail below). Defeated but undeterred, Bashagha resumed his duties as prime minister in eastern Libya, putting his ambitions of capturing Tripoli on the back burner.

The power politics described above further elevated and entrenched the political relevance of controversial and corrupt armed groups, a dynamic that reflected itself prominently in respect to their capture of the state's migration management apparatus. At the same time, this process devalued any rhetorical push towards governance and security reform promoted by state officials.

Both the GNU and the GNS made controversial appointments to sensitive positions for highly cynical, political reasons. This delegitimized them in the eyes of large parts of the Libyan public and many international stakeholders. For instance, the GNU appointed Mohamed Bahroun (al-Far), a controversial armed group leader from Zawiyah, as head of the west coast counter terrorism division of Libyan Intelligence, thereby empowering an entirely compromised ally (this is also discussed in greater detail below).

In November 2022, Dabaiba also appointed Emad Trabilisi as interim interior minister – the first instance in which this ministry was officially handed over to an individual known to have controlled an armed group.

Bashagha has not offered a better alternative model. His cabinet, formed through direct negotiations with parliamentarians in eastern Libya and armed group commanders from across the country, has empowered many factions that Bashagha once blamed for western Libya's ills. Perhaps the most glaring example is the appointment of Isaam Busriba, one of the brothers of the Busriba network in Zawiya, which Bashagha once tried to target with his infamous 'Operation Snake Hunting'.⁸

The pattern of appointing controversial figures for political expediency led to a stagnation in all substantive governance. Support for the reform of law enforcement, once used to claim legitimacy, further lost salience in 2022, with cronyism and armed groups' penetration of executive portfolios and state institutions effectively normalized. This had a knock-on effect on organized crime dynamics, with many factions adapting to the 'hands-off' approach to law enforcement by scaling their involvement in illicit activities. This paper analyzes the main developments in human smuggling in Libya during 2022 within this broader analytical framework.

Global economic stress drives emigration and encourages opportunism

The global economic headwinds that saw inflation rise and living standards drop across the world in 2022 affected human smuggling in Libya on the supply side. As discussed at length later in this paper, the growth of human smuggling during 2022 was primarily driven by a form of hybrid migration whereby Egyptians, Bangladeshis and, to a lesser extent, Syrians travelled to Libya and from there attempted a sea crossing using a mixture of regular and irregular means.

This was primarily, although not in every case, a story of economic migration. Almost all migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC from these two countries over the course of 2022 cited the lack of economic opportunities at home, and the allure of jobs in Libya and Europe, as their reason for travelling. Political oppression or instability were rarely cited and tended to be individual cases, unlike in some past years when, for example, Eritreans and Sudanese made up a significant proportion of departures (a partial exception to this is the case of Syrian migration, which is discussed later in the paper). Economic push and pull factors have existed for decades and are not new. However, the added strain of inflation – with food and energy price spikes affecting the poorest – doubtless intensified the push factors to undertake the journey.

Inside Libya, the economic picture is a little more mixed. While Libya has benefited from the windfall in global oil prices owing to Russia's war on Ukraine, residents of Libya (citizens and migrants) continued to face structural challenges accessing salaries and buying imported goods in 2022.

The economic downturn and inflation in food and other necessities caused hardship for migrants living in the country. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), increasing numbers of migrants were unable to find work of any kind and relied on support from relatives or friends who were also living in precarious circumstances.⁹ Coping strategies include rationing food intake and neglecting basic healthcare requirements. The IOM's monitoring of migration trends in Libya reported that unemployment among migrants reached around 26% in October and November, with 62% stating that economic hardship was their most pressing concern. GI-TOC interviews with migrants living in western Libya in 2022 underscored the strains and hardship this put on migrants.

However, the impact on human smuggling is not straightforward. Economic hardship and unemployment might be expected to encourage migrants who would otherwise stay and work in



Russia's war on Ukraine has affected Libyan residents (citizens and migrants), who have struggled to buy imported goods amid rising inflation for food and other necessities. *Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images*

the country to take the risk of a sea crossing. While this does occur, the reality is that many migrants who travel to Libya have already decided on the sea crossing, while others are extremely resilient to hardship and accustomed to precarity. The key determinant of whether to take the sea crossing or not is most often the ability to pay for a ticket, which migrants save up for while working in Libya. In at least some cases, then, a lack of local job opportunities in 2022 prevented or postponed the decision to make a sea crossing. As such, worsening of conditions locally did not have a clear impact on the decision to leave Libya.



© Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images



COASTAL SMUGGLING DYNAMICS CONTINUE 2021 TRENDS

The consistency of high departures during 2022 was a strong quantitative indicator that the more sophisticated human smuggling networks that revived in Libya in 2021 had become consolidated, and that their capacity to reliably transport greater numbers of migrants was firmly established. This also confirmed the GI-TOC's previous assessments that 2021 marked a transition from the post-crisis years to a new era of human smuggling in Libya.

This thesis was not simply based on the abrupt increase in departures during 2021, but also on other aspects of the data, including the relative increase in migrants from Egypt and Bangladesh making the sea crossing, the greater use of wooden vessels and an increase in the average number of passengers on board.¹⁰

These same trends continued in 2022 and, in some crucial cases, significantly intensified. Egyptians, Syrians and Bangladeshis amounted to more than 48 600 estimated departures from Libya during 2022, up from 24 000 in 2021, 7 100 in 2020 and 1 500 in 2019. This is a remarkable increase in absolute terms. Although it is difficult to accurately calculate the proportion of this cohort as a share of total departures due to some limitations in the data, by any measure irregular migrants from these three countries made up a majority of departures in 2022 and drove the surge. For example, when grouping them with total estimated departures for the whole year, the former cohort made up 60% of departures.

Egyptians and Bangladeshis along with Syrians form a qualitative block not due to geographic similarity of their home countries but because their migration patterns are similar: a hybrid of regular and semi-irregular movement, with many migrants arriving in Libya bearing official entry visas and travelling via regular means, only becoming fully 'irregular' at the point at which they seek out a smuggler in Libya for a sea crossing to Europe. The growth of this kind of migration has been the major development of the past two years and will be looked at in closer detail below.

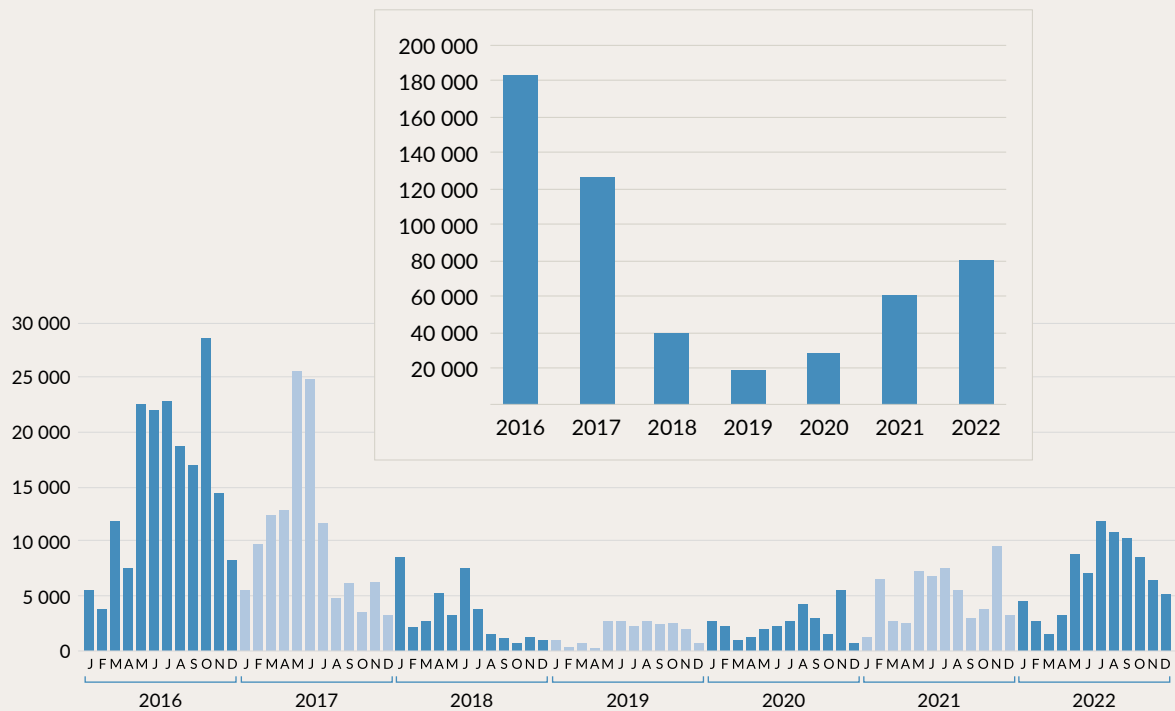


FIGURE 2 Total number of attempted departures from the Libyan coast by month and annual totals.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring and Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale

By contrast, sub-Saharan Africans have typically travelled to Libya without any official paperwork, using informal overland routes.¹¹ While this type of regional, irregular mobility was the main driver of the 2014–2017 crisis, it has played a far smaller role in the increase seen in the last two years.

Several supply-side factors are at play in the relative unpopularity of migration through Libya among sub-Saharan Africans, including law enforcement efforts at home and along land routes to Libya; the distance, danger and cost of the overland routes (particularly from West Africa), as well as negative experiences of migrants percolating back to communities at home.¹²

As a corollary to the moderate levels of migration from East and West Africa, the overland routes in Libya via Kufra (for the east) and Fezzan (for the west) have also remained subdued since the collapse in 2017. One contact interviewed in November 2022 estimated that around 50 migrants arrive in Sebha per day, and between 30 and 40 travel on to the north of Libya from Sebha, amounting to approximately 1 200 a month. This is a very rough approximation, but it broadly aligns with the estimated total departures of West Africans from the Libyan coast – particularly given that not all migrants who travel north from Sebha will attempt the sea crossing.

Although there is some continued migration, and predation on migrants by armed groups in these areas is a considerable protection concern, as an aspect of the political economy of human smuggling in Libya these routes are no longer as central as they once were.

Along the coast, the type of boats that are used and the average number of passengers on board are also important data points regarding the nature of coastal human smuggling networks in operation in Libya. These observations stand as a rough but useful proxy for the kinds of networks in operation because larger and/or more seaworthy vessels often involve greater complexity, either because they are harder and more expensive to procure (in the case of large fishing vessels) or simply because they are harder to conceal and transport to embarkation points, in the case of more available fixed-hull vessels. Rubber boats, by contrast, are relatively easy to conceal and transport to embarkation points.

Similarly, larger numbers of people on board require more sophisticated logistics and confidence in the environment on the part of smugglers, who must be able to transport hundreds of migrants to departure points and manage their embarkation without being detected.

For these reasons, the GI-TOC has long assessed that the collapse in passenger size and greater use of small rubber vessels from 2018 onwards was a key indicator – alongside the more obvious overall collapse in departures – of the shift from sophisticated, durable networks entrenched in coastal areas to more opportunistic and clandestine operators.¹³

Although there is no accurate data reflecting average passenger size and type of boat used in the 2014–2017 crisis, it was clear from observations at the time that very large embarkations of 400 migrants or more were common, as was the overloading of smaller rubber boats with as many as 200 passengers and instances of shipwrecks involving very large numbers.¹⁴

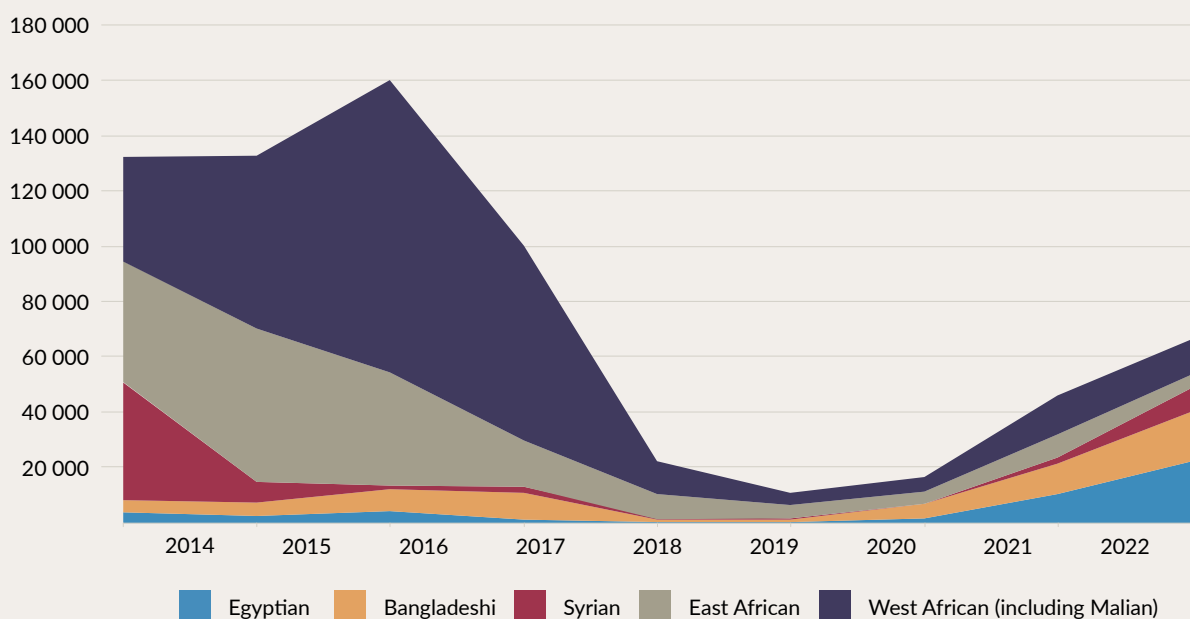


FIGURE 3 Annual breakdown of select nationalities departing the Libyan coast.

SOURCE: UNHCR, the Italian Interior Ministry, IOM and GI-TOC monitoring

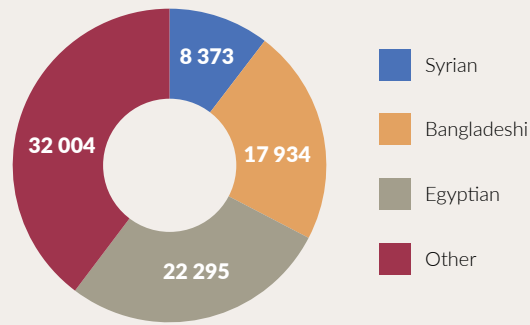


FIGURE 4 Estimated Syrian, Bangladeshi and Egyptian departures versus the rest in 2022.

SOURCE: UNHCR, the Italian Interior Ministry, IOM and GI-TOC monitoring

From 2019, when more granular data on passenger sizes becomes available from regular GI-TOC monitoring, it is possible to trace the development of average passenger loads. In 2019 and 2020, fewer than 1% of boats exceeded 200 passengers, making this a negligible aspect of human smuggling. In 2021 and 2022, by contrast, 4% of boats exceeded 200 passengers on board.

Although this may seem like a small increase, it represents a meaningful change in the confidence and capacity of human smugglers to conduct large operations – which was almost entirely absent in 2019 and 2020 – particularly given the overall increase in absolute numbers that lies behind this proportional increase. In the last two years, there have been 27 and 33 embarkations above 200 respectively, with 11 and 12 of these being greater than 400. In other words, Libyan networks now have the capacity to conduct such large-scale operations at a tempo of greater than two a month, compared to almost none in the prior two years.



In addition to the use of rubber dinghies with limited passenger capacity, such as the one pictured here, Libyan networks are now able to carry out larger operations involving hundreds of passengers.

Ximena Borrazas/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

The picture painted by the type of boats being used is less clear. The use of wooden and fiberglass boats dramatically increased in 2021, making up 29% of departures in 2021, while they were only 14% in 2018 and 17% in both 2019 and 2020. In 2022, this fell away both as a proportion of the total and in absolute terms. Despite this, wooden and fibreglass boats were still used more commonly than rubber boats. Furthermore, the number of unknowns increased dramatically during the last year – probably due to Libyan security forces limiting access for humanitarian organizations to disembarkations. As such, the margin for error is likely to be too great to draw firm conclusions.

Aside from the data, however, anecdotal accounts from close observers of maritime rescues suggest that the quality of engines significantly improved in 2022, with 150hp Mercury starting to appear more frequently versus the more standard and much cheaper Yamaha Enduro 40hp. This is another indicator of the existence of more durable networks that are able and motivated to procure more expensive engines in service of an added-value business.

Another important factor behind the relative preponderance of fixed-hull vessels and average passenger size in 2022 was the dramatic surge in departures from Tobruk in the far east of Libya. Departures from Tobruk are almost always large and made in relatively seaworthy, fixed-hull boats (often repurposed fishing vessels). This is because the sea crossing from Tobruk covers a greater distance, and the smugglers operating here have the confidence in their environment to manage large departures.

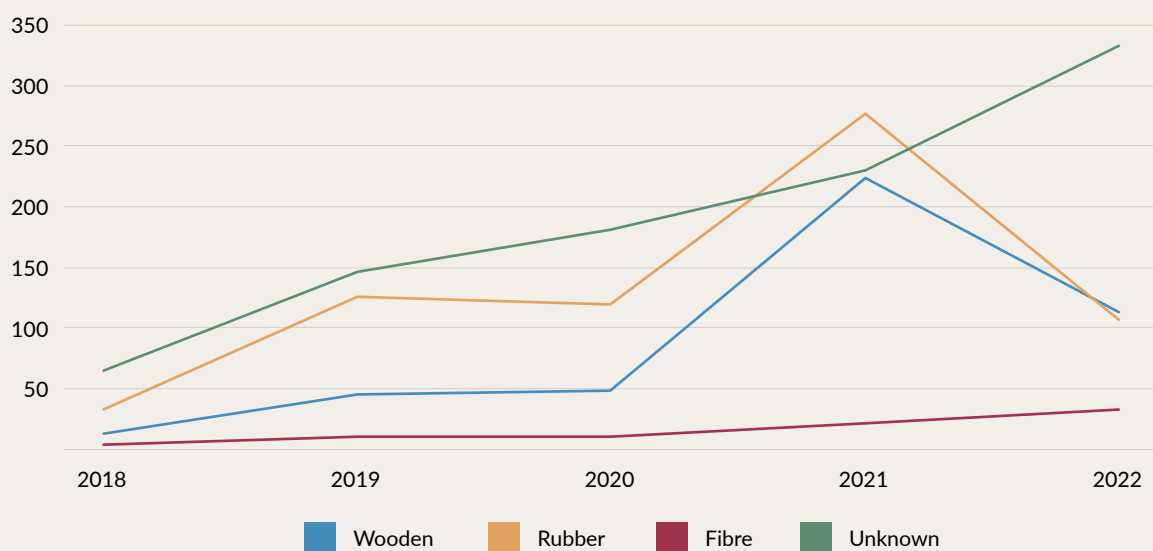


FIGURE 5 Estimated breakdown of the type of boats used for attempted sea crossings.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

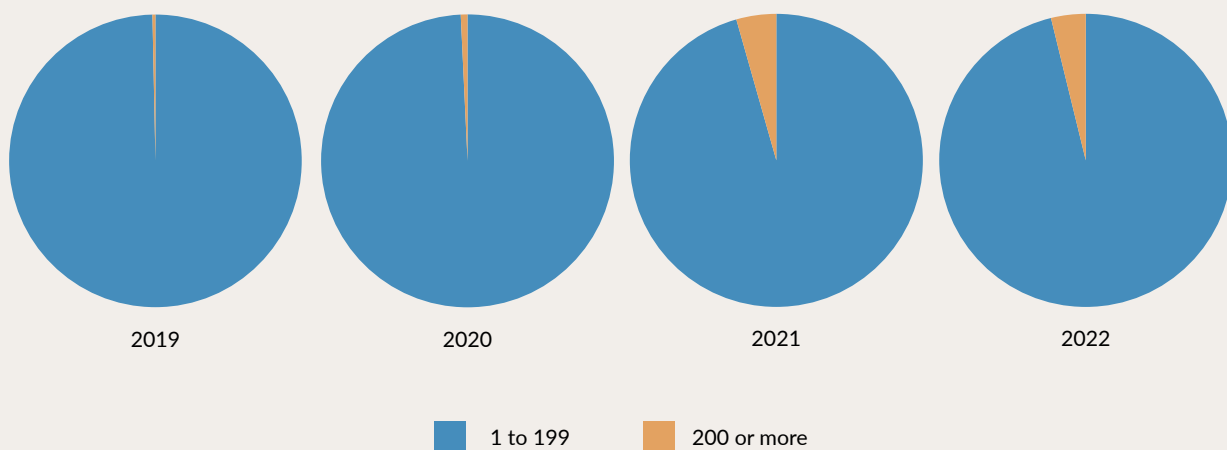


FIGURE 6 Estimated number of embarkations exceeding 200 people on board, 2019–2022.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

The rise of Tobruk as a departure point is in itself a significant aspect of some of the headline developments in human smuggling seen during 2022, including the revival of sophisticated networks, the continued growth of semi-regular migration from Egypt and Bangladesh, and the loss of interests by some authorities (in this case, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces – LAAF) in being seen as the guarantors of law and order. These developments are discussed in a sub-section below.

Despite the explosion of departures from Tobruk, the west coast remained by far the most important area for maritime human smuggling in Libya in 2022. Important political developments in this area over the year directly affected human smuggling.



A police vehicle waits on the shore near to Garabulli, east of Tripoli. *Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images*



WEST COAST POLITICAL UPHEAVAL CREATES SPACE FOR SMUGGLERS

The power struggle between the GNU and the GNS, which played out over 2022, had an impact on the politics and balance of power across the west coast, particularly following the failure of Bashagha to enter Tripoli in August and the resulting losses of the pro-GNS faction. These developments directly affected both human smuggling and local security ecosystems.

The most important pro-GNU block in this area during 2022 comprised the Zawiyan commanders Mohammed Bahroun (al-Far) and the Islamist Mahmoud Bin Rajab. The Sabrathan Ahmed al-Dabbashi was also informally allied with this group but did not have a formal status in the government. All the groups in Zuwara were also pro-GNU, although they generally maintained a higher degree of autonomy than other Libyan actors.

The pro-GNS faction included the Busriba network in Zawiya, Muammar al-Dhawi from Warshefana and Usama al-Juwaili from Zintan. Othman al-Leheb, the Zawiyan commander from the Awlad Saqr tribe, vacillated between the factions but inclined towards the pro-GNS side.

At the start of 2022, the pro-GNS faction – organized under the umbrella of the SSA – appeared to be in the commanding position. They were dominant in Zawiya and Warshefana and were able to leverage their position to take an influential role in the formation of the GNS, having Isaam Busriba appointed interior minister, among other important positions. If the GNS had prevailed in installing Bashagha in Tripoli – as seemed very possible – this faction would have emerged as the uncontested masters of the west coast, with a strong say in national decision making and an unprecedented level of control over migration management and the human smuggling ecosystem.

The pro-GNU faction by contrast was divided. Bahroun, a former ally of the Busribas, had been in conflict with his erstwhile allies since the summer of 2021, a conflict that led to him becoming isolated and reduced to a defensive position in downtown Zawiya. Mahmoud Bin Rajab, although still very influential and with a commanding reputation, was keeping a low profile in Janzur and did not have strategically significant control on the ground along the west coast.

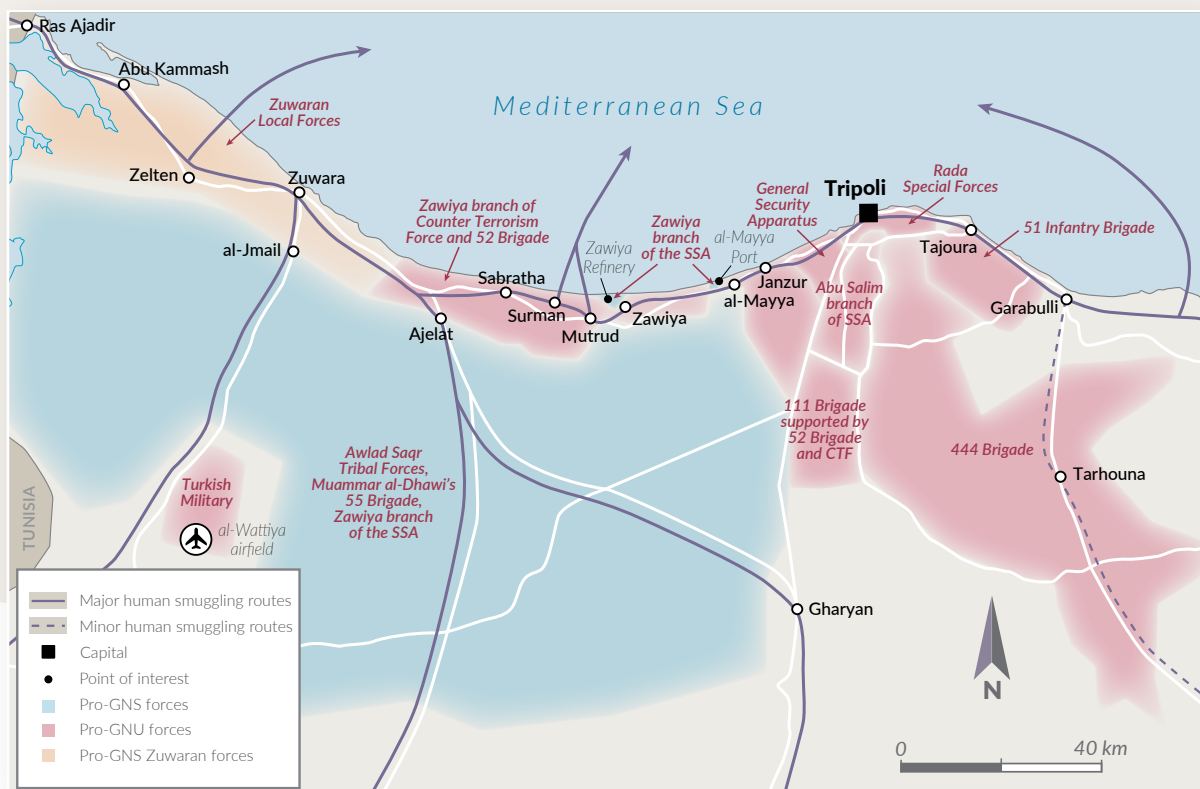


FIGURE 7 Libya's west coast, showing main people smuggling routes and territorial control of the main coalitions, December 2022.

This rough balance of power first began to shift when the GNU appointed Bahroun to head the Libyan Intelligence counter-terrorism division for the west coast in June. Armed with this powerful sinecure, Bahroun established forces in Sabratha and resurrected the Surman branch of the Criminal Investigations Directorate (CID) – which was formerly headed by the pro-Haftar Salafist Mohammed Swissi. Bahroun also forged a strategic alliance with Ahmed al-Dabbashi.

The young militiaman, Bahroun, was a controversial candidate to run a counter terrorism division, even by Libya's standards. However, his appointment is entirely political, inserting a Dabaiba supporter into a strategic location on the west coast, thereby undermining the dominance of pro-Bashagha/Haftar groups over this territory.

The entirely political nature of this appointment – in the face of concerns about suitability – is significant for the quality of law enforcement. As outlined above, the primacy of raw power politics in Libya during 2022 eroded what little sway remained to the politics of law and order. Although Bahroun-linked groups published sporadic posts about their anti-smuggling operations in Sabratha during 2022, this was not enough to obscure his reputation as a militiaman. The general political atmosphere, as well as the transactional cynicism of his appointment, left Bahroun largely free to act as he wished in Sabratha.

The pro-GNU faction on the west coast was further bolstered in August 2022 when Bashagha failed in his attempt to enter Tripoli for the second time, causing a general reversal for him and all allied forces.¹⁵ This rout saw the 777 Brigade of Haithem Tajouri and the Nawasi Brigade expelled from Tripoli. In the chaos, the pro-GNU Zawiyan consolidated their control over much of the coastal territory between



Mohammed Bahroun (al-Far), who was appointed to head the Libyan Intelligence counter-terrorism division for the west coast in June 2022. *Photo: Facebook*

Janzur and Sabratha, including over the coast road east of Zawiya, with Bin Rajab gaining control of Gate 27 from the west coast SSA in what appears to have been a peaceful exchange. This left pro-GNU groups as the dominant force over most coastal territory between Janzur and Sabratha, a significant reversal from the disposition at the start of 2022.

In the period immediately following the August clashes, a key question was whether the pro-GNU forces would further press their advantage. Some hawkish elements felt that if they could dislodge pro-GNS groups from territory in Tripolitania then they could begin negotiations with the LAAF on a more equal footing, with both sides having uncontested control of their own core domains. It was also possible that the SSA – which was divided between the pro-GNU faction of Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli in Abu Salim and the pro-GNS faction of the Busriba network in Zawiya – would finally collapse under this contradiction, for example if al-Kikli chose to use his greatly expanded power to eject the Busriba network from the SSA or have the agency dismantled altogether.

In the end, neither scenario came about in 2022 (the West Coast SSA was eventually ejected from the overall structure in February 2023, however it continued operating under different administrative arrangements). In early September 2022, a militiaman from Warshefana called Ramzi al-Lifa launched an attack on Muammar al-Dhawi – who had kicked him out of the area back in 2018 – but this failed to garner any substantial support and came to nothing. Given the problems caused to many communities on the west coast when Warshefana was a lawless area following the 2011 revolution up to 2017/18, there was a general reluctance to violently upend the status quo that had ended this period, regardless of political considerations.

Regarding the SSA, al-Kikli's refusal to get involved in a conflict against the rival faction within this body at this time reflected the need to shore up his advances in Tripoli. Relations between al-Kikli and the Rada Special Forces – the other main beneficiary of the routing of pro-GNS groups – were not cordial, and there was a widespread expectation that Rada could turn on al-Kikli and try to

clip his wings, should an opportunity present itself. This led al-Kikli to be cautious in pressing his advantage against the west coast faction of the SSA, whether militarily or administratively.

Finally, the potential for further conflict on the west coast appears to have been dampened by the restraint imposed by Turkish authorities, who reportedly warned both sides against further destabilization. Given Turkey's drone capabilities in western Libya, these warnings essentially froze the disposition of forces from the end of August up to the end of 2022.

To summarize how this disposition lay from August until the close of the year, the pro-GNS coalition of western forces – which included the Awlad Buhmeira network, the Awlad Saqr commander Othman al-Leheb, and Muammar al-Dhawi, along with remnants of militias expelled from Tripoli in August – largely controlled the inland coastal territory from Warshefana through Zawiya to the border. On the actual coast, they only maintained direct control of a few small but logistically significant locations, including around the Zawiya Refinery and the al-Mayya Port further east.

The pro-GNS Zintani military commander Usama al-Juwaili dominated from Zintan up to Bir al-Ghnam and north-west to Aziziya, on Tripoli's south-eastern flank. Al-Juwaili thickened the network of checkpoints between Zintan and Bir al-Ghnam after his military setbacks in August.

On the other side, Bahroun dominated most coastal territory from Sabratha, through Surman to Zawiya. Bin Rajab controlled the coast road between Zawiya and Janzur, having gained control of the important Gate 27 during the August clashes.

It is important to clarify, however, that these were not hard domains of control with fixed borders. Rather, as is typical in Libya, power was projected in an uneven way from communal strongholds and certain strategic assets, which acted to deter or complicate the ability of one side or the other to operate in a given area.

The main takeaway from all this, with regards to the ecosystems of smuggling and law enforcement, is that Bahroun's success in establishing himself in Sabratha as a Dabaiba ally, alongside the gains of Bin Rajab in Janzur and at Gate 27, undermined the west coast SSA's claim to rule the coast from Warshefana to the border of Zuwara and hindered the possibility of any joined-up policing efforts emerging.

Sabratha emerges as key smuggling hub

In 2022 Sabratha re-emerged as perhaps the most important smuggling hub on the west coast, partially overtaking both Zuwara and Zawiya. It is not possible to determine the departure points for enough boats with sufficient accuracy to quantify this shift with data. However, multiple well-placed contacts confirmed that over the latter part of 2022 Sabratha began to overtake other departure hubs, even to the extent of attracting highly professionalized Zuwaran smugglers.

During this period, the town was effectively governed by Bahroun. According to multiple interviews, the UN-sanctioned smuggler Ahmed al-Dabbashi (al-Amu) also held influence in the town. Al-Dabbashi is an important player in the recent history of human smuggling in Sabratha, formerly heading up one of the networks that contributed substantially to the 2014–2017 crisis.¹⁶

He lost out in the battle for legitimacy that erupted in mid-2017 – which helped end the migrant crisis by incentivizing dominant smugglers to pivot to a bad-faith law enforcement role – leading to his expulsion from the town and exile in Zawiya.¹⁷

Even after al-Dabbashi's return to Sabratha in 2020, following the eviction of the LAAF, the town remained relatively peripheral to human smuggling on the west coast. This was partly due to the influence that Zawiyā groups associated with the Busriba network could project onto their smaller neighbour, including through the Zawiyā Refinery Coast Guard and later the SSA.

This influence was always limited, and the commitment of these groups to suppress human smuggling partial and selective. However, both the influence and the motivation were sufficient to keep a lid on human smuggling surging in Sabratha during 2020 and much of 2021. The motivation was sharpened, as an increase in departures from Sabratha following the expulsion of the LAAF would essentially confirm the latter's propaganda surrounding its assault on Tripoli – namely, that the assault was undertaken to dismantle militias and bring order and lawfulness.

With Bahroun gaining dominance in Sabratha in mid-2022, this restraint – which had already been fraying – appears to have given way altogether.

A well-known local crime family, for example, reportedly built up its activities in Sabratha during 2022 using its logistical expertise in smuggling and connections to middlemen from migrant communities. Leaders from this family were reportedly responsible for logistics, arranging transport from areas where migrants gather (such as Misrata) and connecting with middlemen (known in Arabic as *mandub*; plural, *manadib*) in source communities. As a Libyan activist explained in an interview:

Each nationality has its own network; they have the focal point within their own countrymen. [The Libyan smuggler] coordinates with the focal point and arranges the trip overland for the migrants who have signed up. He then talks [with partnered security officials] and coordinates the access to the coast. This is working very well and smoothly at the moment; it is a good system.¹⁸

The money was only paid by the migrant once he/she reached the coast in Sabratha; based on interviews and local contacts, this was set at around LYD10 000 (€1 900) for a sea crossing. Once there, migrants used hawala to have the money paid to the coastal smuggling operation, which then distributed the cash along the chain, including with partnered security officials. After payment was received, the migrants could take the boat.

As noted above, the surge in departures from the west coast during 2022 was driven to a large extent by Bangladeshis and Egyptians. In a following section, the dynamics that have driven this migration are dealt with more holistically. Here, it is sufficient to note that a key part of the picture in Libya in 2022 was the proliferation of connections between *manadib* residing in key residential areas such as Misrata and smugglers in coastal hubs such as Sabratha. The creation of an easier operating environment in Sabratha appears to have helped thicken the web of connections between *manadib* and coastal smugglers, which is one of the key chokepoints in the overall flow of irregular migrants from home countries to Europe.

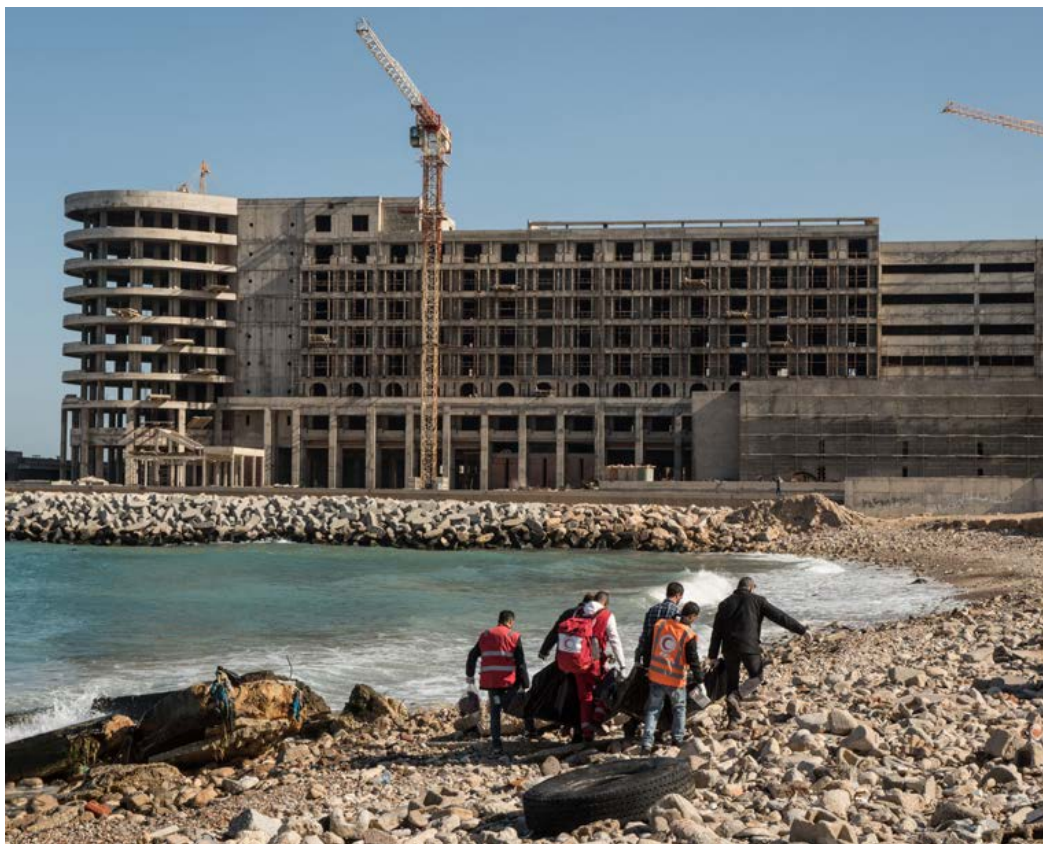
West coast SSA distracted and disrupted

Another result of the political upheaval during 2022, albeit one that is hard to quantify, was the disruption of efforts to construct a more joined-up policing and security ecosystem in western Tripolitania under the aegis of the west coast SSA. (The west coast SSA was distinct from the Tripoli-based SSA, which is led by Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli and is on the opposing side of the political divide.)

Over the course of 2021 and 2022, the GI-TOC covered the meteoric rise of the west coast SSA as a political and security front representing the interests of the Awlad Buhmeira network in Zawiya and Muammar al-Dhawi in Warshefana, with several other groups also allied with it.¹⁹ A core part of the west coast SSA's strategy has been to corner the market in anti-smuggling and migration management.

In November 2021, the west coast SSA formalized its involvement in anti-smuggling work with the creation of the Department for Combating Settlement and Illegal Migration (DCSIM). The west coast SSA built its own maritime capabilities with four boats: three tactical cabined rigid-hulled inflatable boats – the *al-Qayid 1*, the *al-Qayid 2* and the *al-Qayid Saqr* – and a fourth, unidentified metal-hull patrol boat based out of al-Mayya Port. These capabilities complimented the work of the Zawiya Refinery Coast Guard, which is part of the Awlad Buhmeira network. The west coast SSA also ran the al-Mayya detention centre.

As a result of its improved maritime capabilities, the SSA conducted a significant proportion of interceptions from the last three months of 2021 and during all of 2022. Combined with the Zawiya Refinery Coast Guard, these maritime forces conducted around 200 operations in 2022, compared to around 145 for the remaining forces across the country. In June 2022, the SSA went further and launched an anti-smuggling campaign – through the video of a speech to rank and file that has since been deleted from the DCSIM Facebook page – which planned for the militarization of the whole of the western shoreline, from Tripoli to the border. This campaign called for active operations targeting smugglers on the high seas, rather than simply the interception of migrants.



Members of the Libyan Red Crescent carry the bodies of drowned migrants after they washed ashore in Tripoli. *Taha Jawashi/AFP via Getty Images*

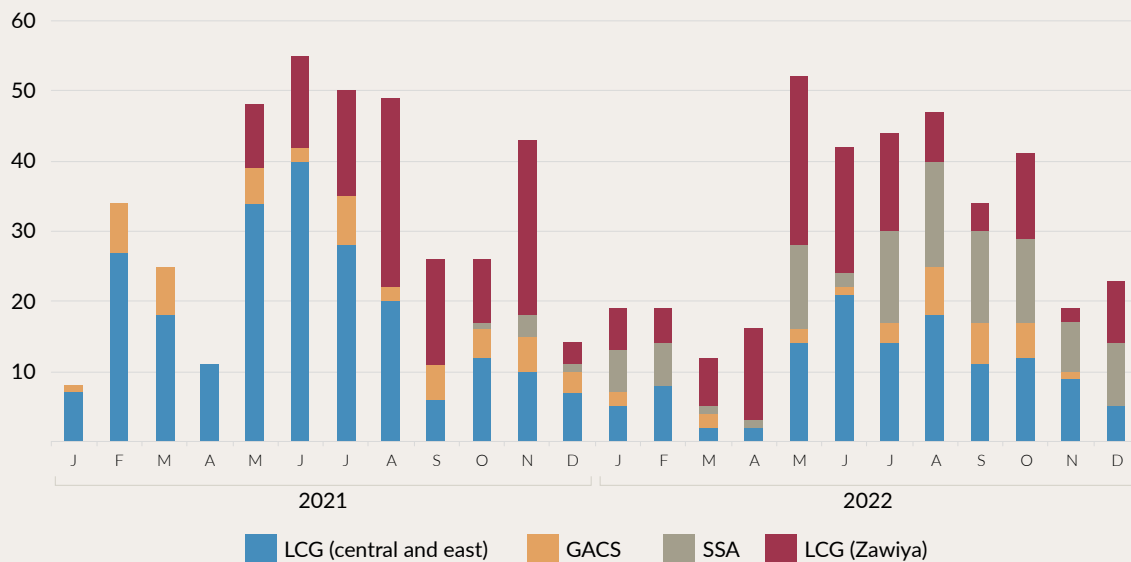


FIGURE 8 Estimated breakdown of search-and-rescue operations in 2021 and 2022.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

As departure data from June to the end of 2022 amply demonstrates, the campaign failed to materialize or have any discernible impact. In fact, the general expansion of SSA anti-smuggling capacity coincided with the continued surge of human smuggling from the west coast in the past two years.

Although long-term issues are likely to be behind this failure – including structural weaknesses, corruption and conflicting incentives, such as the fact that the group allegedly profits through the extortion of migrants in its detention centres²⁰ – there is no doubt that the power struggle that played out over 2022, and the political setbacks that the west coast SSA suffered during the summer, played at least some role in preventing it from delivering on its stated goal to clamp down on smuggling. As a local activist told the GI-TOC:

The Busribas are out of this business [human smuggling]; all they are doing is holding people at al-Mayya and being paid by the state. Because of the political situation, they are focused on mobilizing and preparing their forces; they are not focused on policing on the west coast at the moment. This is a time for survival. They say that their goal is not to be screwed like Nawasi were or get hit by a Turkish drone or sucked into a war. If they simply survive this round, that is a victory. It is a long-term view – so they lost one round, but there are many rounds, and the important thing now is to prepare and win the next round. Not to try and fight human smuggling.²¹

In addition to the political distraction, the events in August effectively led to the west coast SSA losing influence over strategic territory, particularly Sabratha, as it fell more fully under the control of rivals. Even if the west coast SSA wanted to pursue the policing of human smuggling, its ability to act was limited by this reality. By contrast, a GNS victory would have concentrated power in the hands of a single faction that has been publicly building counter-migration capabilities and positioning itself for this purpose for several years. In this scenario, the west coast SSA could have been squarely blamed for the surge in departures, which would cut against its long-term goals.

Zuwaran smugglers reportedly relocate to Sabratha due to pressure at home

Historically, Zuwara has been the core departure hub for human smuggling on the west coast. However, it had seen significant dips in recent years driven by local law enforcement initiatives aimed at mitigating the town's reputation as a smugglers' nest. During 2021, a policing vacuum in Zuwara – precipitated by the detention of the Security Directorate commander, Emad Abza – directly resulted in a substantial increase in human smuggling activities. The town re-emerged as the busiest coastal smuggling hub in Libya and was a major factor behind the explosion in departures recorded in 2021.²²

In November 2021, the Western Border CID – also known as the Masked Men – was positioning itself to fill this vacuum and bring human smuggling in the town back under control. This was a significant development. Despite its involvement in the arrest of local smuggling kingpin Fahmi Slim in 2017²³ – which led to its ostracization in the town – and a reputation for harshness, the Western Border CID is perhaps Zuwara's most credible security force and was best positioned to fill the policing vacuum in the town that persisted throughout 2021. Buoyed by a civic wave of discontent following a series of tragedies at sea in 2015, the Masked Men were almost single-handedly responsible for shutting down Zuwara's thriving human smuggling industry in a matter of months – an unprecedented community-driven event in Libya's history with human smuggling and trafficking at that point.²⁴

Although the Western Border CID published only limited information on their activities in 2022, they reportedly managed to make headway in combating human smuggling in the town, although departures did remain among the highest in Libya. During interviews in April and May, two Zuwaran smugglers confirmed to the GI-TOC that the group had been taking a strong stand. One smuggler explained that they were particularly targeting the housing in which smugglers keep migrants as they prepare for an embarkation.



A shipwreck on a beach in Zuwara, October 2019. Florian Gaertner/Photothek via Getty Images

Unusually, smugglers were also being arrested and reportedly receiving custodial sentences when caught, in addition to large fines. As a Zuwaran smuggler stated, 'When they catch a smuggler, they transfer them to the public prosecutor's office. The punishments nearly always range from a short prison sentence, and fines of between LYD5 000 [€950] and LYD70 000 [€13 500], depending on how big the smuggler is, or if the smuggler is responsible for the death of migrants.'²⁵

The focus on raiding warehouses, and the risk of a fine and a custodial sentence, had an impact on how smugglers were operating. For example, smugglers interviewed by the GI-TOC said they were using several different houses inside Zuwara to accommodate migrants, so that if one of the locations was discovered they would not lose all their clients at once. Smugglers also noted frequently changing locations and using abandoned buildings, sometimes situated outside of town. Smugglers also avoided keeping the migrants in the same place for a long time to minimize the risk of detection.

Subsequent efforts reportedly helped to bring human smuggling in Zuwara further back under control. Key initiatives included the establishment of a Western Border CID checkpoint at a small harbour in Abu Kammash, sometime around October. This harbour, which is on a lagoon, is typically used for the launching of flat-bottomed fishing vessels known locally as *taraad*. These vessels are popular with human smugglers because of their large capacity and ease of procurement. The boats can be tested for seaworthiness near the harbour before being navigated along a dredged channel out beyond Farwa Island to the open water. In cases of human smuggling, migrants are often picked up on the shoreline of Farwa Island facing the open sea, having been moved there by land.

By establishing a checkpoint at Abu Kammash harbour, the Western Border CID gained visibility over the comings and goings of boats. This allowed the group to detect when boats were being used for human smuggling – as smuggling vessels do not return to harbour or keep to their registered schedule – exposing the owner to potential prosecution. The Western Border CID also established a presence for its own members at a police checkpoint that controls land access to Farwa Island, making it more difficult for smugglers to transport migrants to beaches on the island. Finally, the directorate reportedly started limited maritime patrols relying on privately owned vessels and raided some boat-building factories.

The Abu Kammash harbour and beaches of Farwa Island are not the only locations used by human smugglers in the area of Zuwara. However, several contacts reported that these efforts erected a further set of obstacles to smugglers and dampened their activities.

In reaction, some Zuwaran smugglers reportedly relocated their operations to Sabratha – the same migration of smugglers to Sabratha from Zuwara occurred after the Western Border CID's crackdown in 2015. To relocate to Sabratha, Zuwarans enter into partnerships with local smugglers there. Highly experienced and professional smugglers from Zuwara are sought after as partners, as they bring capital and unrivalled networks often built up over decades. As one contact put it, 'You might be a smuggler from some town thinking you know your own community very well, but some guys in Zuwara have been in the business since before Qaddafi, and you'll find they have more knowledge and better relations with bribeable officials in your own community than you do.'²⁶

In return for this capital and know how, the Zuwaran smugglers gained access to an area of coast that was far easier to operate in due to the absence of effective anti-smuggling efforts.



© Valeria Ferraro/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images



RISE IN DEPARTURES FROM EASTERN LIBYA

Since 2021, departures from the coast around Tobruk, in the far east of Libya, have resumed following a years-long hiatus. The trend started gradually in 2021, with a total of around 11 departures recorded in the entire year. However, this accelerated dramatically in 2022, which recorded more than 17 000 migrant departures across 85 vessels. According to the UNHCR, 25% of sea arrivals in Italy departing from Libya came from the Cyrenaica. While the vast majority of departures took place from Tobruk, there was also some activity in Benghazi and Ajdabiya.

The LAAF does not control the Cyrenaica to the extent that its own propaganda might suggest, and Tobruk is a particularly independent town due to its strong tribal communities. Even so, it is inconceivable that such an abrupt and sizeable increase in human smuggling activity took place from eastern Libya without at least the passive blessing of the LAAF. In fact, the GI-TOC received several reports suggesting that the LAAF occupies a more active role. During interviews conducted in August and September 2022, several contacts reported that the ongoing surge in departures, particularly from Tobruk, was the result of highly placed individuals in the LAAF giving a 'green light' to corrupt local officers and smugglers to up their activities.

The Navy Special Forces are the group primarily responsible for maritime security in the area of Tobruk. In February 2022, it carried out a security campaign in the area in response to the increase in departures, targeting the smuggling of both people and drugs. A local activist at the time claimed that this was largely theatrical, with the security forces unwilling to antagonize powerful crime families, and that the actions were being coordinated with the smugglers they were meant to be targeting.

The group has continued to regularly publish information on land operations targeting human smuggling and, at the end of 2022, there was a flurry of maritime anti-smuggling operations.²⁷ The Navy Special Forces reportedly intercepted four large vessels carrying more than 2 000 migrants between 29 November and 16 December. Many of these claimed interceptions were supported by video footage, which rarely occurs in eastern Libya. This flurry of interceptions was accompanied by a relatively slick video published by the Navy Special Forces, and comments by the mayor of Tobruk, Faraj Abu al-Khatabiya, during a visit to Toruk port reportedly condemning the smuggling operations and calling for the full force of the law to be used against them.²⁸

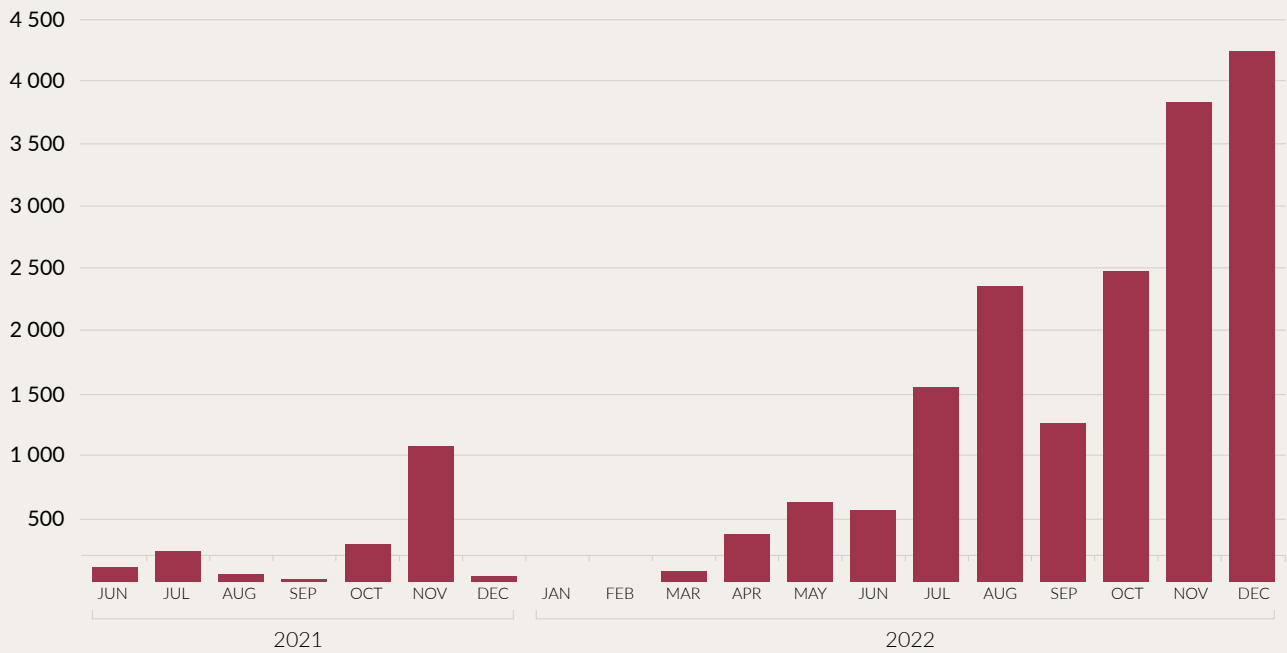


FIGURE 9 Estimated number of migrant departures from the Cyrenaica, June 2021 to December 2022.

SOURCE: UNHCR, GI-TOC monitoring

Maritime interceptions of loaded vessels had previously been very rare in eastern Libya. Along with the pointed public messaging, this flurry of activity might appear to have suggested a policy shift by the Navy Special Forces and the LAAF to a more aggressive interventionist posture. This is particularly when land-based operations were also taken into account. However, the first half of 2023 did not bear this out, with departures from Tobruk continuing their upward trajectory. If anything, smuggling activity became even more entrenched in the area during this period.

Several contacts claimed that individuals associated with the LAAF sit 'at the top of the pyramid', providing smugglers with top-level security and political cover. As with other groups in Libya, the LAAF has struggled to secure enough resources from the state, owing to the withholding of funds by the Central Bank of Libya. Elements within it have therefore turned to self-funding through criminal activity, among other things. These allegations are consistent with this wider pattern of behaviour.

On the other hand, human smuggling has a particularly strong political and diplomatic valence in the context of Libya and Europe. Disentangling financial and political or diplomatic considerations is therefore not easy.

Regardless of the motivations – and a mixture of political calculation and financial opportunism is the most likely explanation – it is clear that increased departures from Tobruk would not have been possible without the blessing of elements within the LAAF, and that they were orchestrated by highly connected individuals.

The emergence of capable and well-connected human smuggling networks in Tobruk was to some extent a distinct development reflecting local conditions in this town, and the characteristics tend to differ from the west coast of Libya in several ways.

The most obvious difference is that Tobruk lies much further from the Italian coastline than the west coast does. Migrants departing from Tobruk seldom travel towards Greece, which is much closer, probably because of the risk of becoming stranded on a Greek island, from which onward travel is far more difficult.

In response to this challenge, smugglers tend to embark much larger passenger loads – often of around 500 people or more – on bigger, more seaworthy vessels, such as repurposed fishing boats. Contacts reported a broad spectrum of prices for the journey, ranging from €600 to as much as €3 000. Even at the cheaper end, a boat of 300 migrants would therefore net €180 000.

Embarking such large passenger sizes is inherently more logistically complex than embarking a high volume of small boats, as it requires decent control of suitable locations. In the case of Tobruk, smugglers often ferry migrants out to larger vessels in smaller batches. As argued earlier in this brief in the context of west coast human smuggling dynamics, the ability to embark large passenger loads is a good proxy for the sophistication and social or environmental control of the smugglers involved. In the case of Tobruk, this is also backed up by the reported involvement of senior officers and high-level smugglers.

In addition to the process of embarkation, procuring the larger and more seaworthy vessels preferred by smugglers operating out of Tobruk is also complex. Although contacts reported that there are local factories to meet this demand, often fishing boats are sailed from Zuwara to be used in human smuggling in the east. There were several interceptions by the Navy Special Forces and the Libyan navy of fishing boats heading to Tobruk for this purpose in 2022.



A large fishing boat is disembarked at Tobruk Port after being intercepted by the Navy Special Forces, 7 December 2022. Photo: General Administration for Coastal Security Tobruk Facebook page

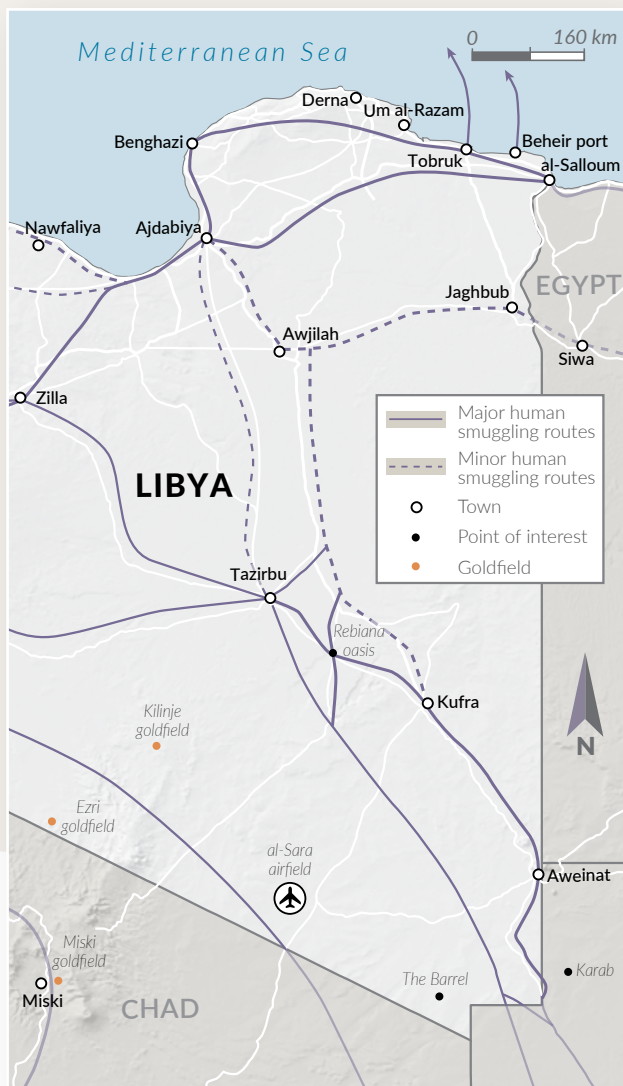


FIGURE 10 Libya's east, showing main people smuggling routes, December 2022.

Although these characteristics set Tobruk apart, to some extent, they also echo wider developments in the political economy of human smuggling in Libya over the past two years. Such developments include the increasing sophistication of networks that have exploited the opportunity of easier mobility and deteriorating commitments to law enforcement to grow their operations.

As with the west, Tobruk-based smugglers also focused on servicing relatively well-off semi-regular migrants during 2022. In terms of nationality, migrants departing from the east of Libya are largely Egyptian, with significant cohorts of Syrians, Bangladeshis and – more recently – Pakistanis. This is to be expected, given that Egypt shares a long border with the Cyrenaica and Tobruk is close to this border. Although contacts reported that some Egyptians departing Tobruk enter Libya using labour-migration agencies (see below for more detail on how this works), it seems that many continued to enter the country across the land border using smugglers. Despite strict border controls, Egyptians were able to cross the border irregularly with relative ease, and huge numbers of Egyptians continue to live and work in the east of Libya.

In 2022, this population constituted most of the migrants making the sea crossing from Tobruk, which became the most convenient departure point for residents of the east since smugglers began to increase their activities. As noted above, Bangladeshis also live and work in eastern Libya in large numbers and they made up the second-largest population group departing from Tobruk in 2022. Syrians were the third population group to be notably visible in departures from Tobruk. Pakistanis also began to leave from Tobruk in 2022, a trend that dramatically intensified in 2023.

The signs of revival of smuggling elsewhere in the Cyrenaica, particularly Benghazi and Ajdabiya, suggest that the development of new networks over the past two years was not simply a top-down matter driven by partnerships between business families and LAAF officers, but was also to some extent a natural development resulting from the growing population of migrants from these countries living and working across eastern Libya, which has created multiple opportunities for different smuggling operations to come into being as they cater to this large market.

While the west coast remained by far the busier stretch of Libyan coast in 2022, the revival of departures from Tobruk was an important aspect of the overall human smuggling ecosystem in Libya. There is a particular risk that these networks are now established enough to drive an unprecedented surge in departures from Tobruk, should economic and social conditions in Egypt deteriorate sharply, forcing a sudden exodus. With Tobruk being close to the Egyptian border, and smugglers already experienced in procuring and embarking large vessels, a crisis could emerge with little warning.



© Abdullah Doma/AFP via Getty Images



THE GROWTH OF HYBRID MIGRATION

Over the past two years, there has been a remarkable increase in the number of Egyptians, Bangladeshis and – to a lesser extent – Syrians travelling to Libya, both as a destination and as a transit point on the journey to Europe.²⁹ This trend has been steadily gathering steam, to the extent that the group of three nationalities made up more than half of sea crossings in 2022, according to estimates based on UNHCR, IOM and GI-TOC data.

Although each of these nationality groups has different characteristics, the GI-TOC treats them as a block because they represent the growth of a specific type of hybrid migration that combines regular and irregular migration. Briefly, this hybrid migration involves regular travel to Libya with official entry visas or other documents, often using regular air transport, followed by onward travel to Europe irregularly by boat, either immediately upon arrival or after working locally for some time.

The explosive growth of this hybrid migration over the past two years has been facilitated by a combination of the easing of travel restrictions to Libya (particularly in the case of Egypt); improvements in visa regimes; and upgrades in security in Libya following the end of the war for Tripoli, which has made it easier and more attractive for migrants from these countries to travel to the country. Finally, networks spanning home countries, Libya and transit countries have organically expanded to exploit and accelerate this opportunity, creating a self-reinforcing trend.

This section provides a brief history of Bangladeshi, Egyptian and Syrian migration to Libya before looking more closely at several characteristics of hybrid migration, including the use and misuse of the visa regime, how regular transport links are used, the role of the LAAF and the growth of smuggling networks.

Egyptian migration to Libya

Egyptians have historically migrated to Libya in large numbers to take advantage of their neighbouring country's rich labour market. In 2015, the Egyptian government interrupted this long tradition when it imposed emigration restrictions due to concerns about the safety of Egyptians in Libya – particularly following the beheading of a group of Coptic Christians in Sirte by the Islamic State³⁰ – and due to the fear that Egyptian dissidents or terrorists might exploit the chaos in Libya

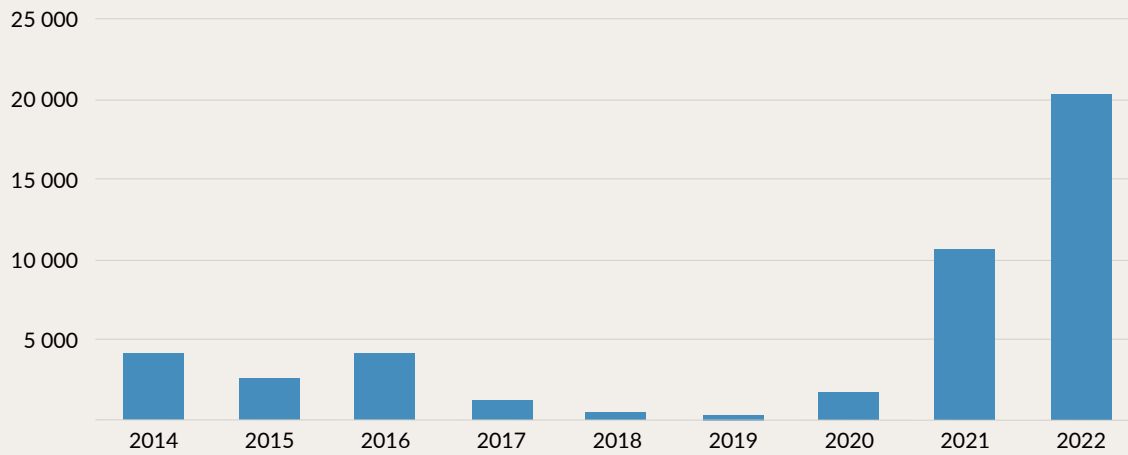


FIGURE 11 Estimated Bangladeshi departures from the Libyan coast based on interceptions and arrivals.

SOURCE: UNHCR, IOM and GI-TOC

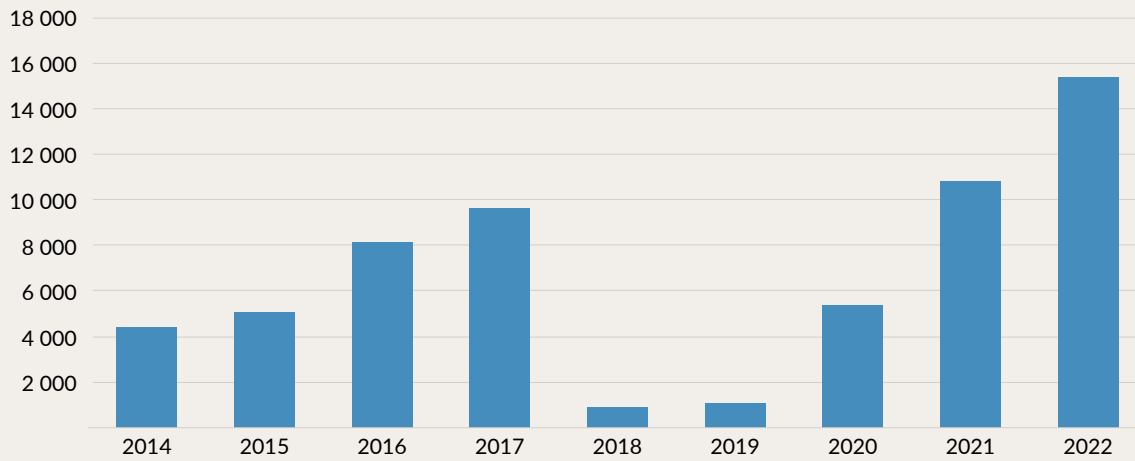


FIGURE 12 Estimated Egyptian departures from the Libyan coast based on interceptions and arrivals.

SOURCE: UNHCR, IOM and GI-TOC

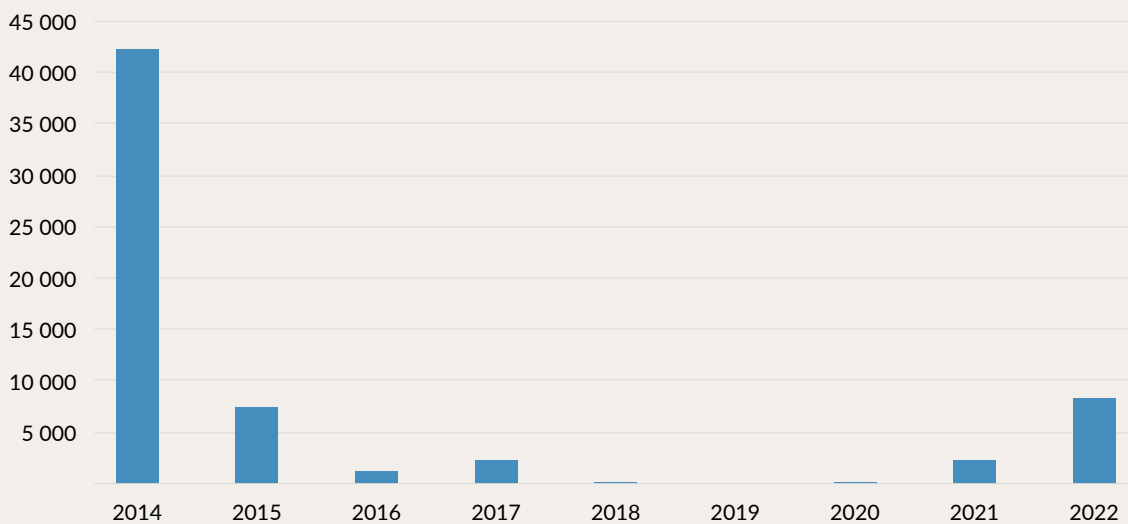


FIGURE 13 Estimated Syrian departures from the Libyan coast, 2014–2022.

SOURCE: IOM and UNHCR

to organize. This was also a particularly unstable period in eastern Libya, with the LAAF having launched its Operation Dignity in 2014.³¹

Despite this ban, Egyptians continued to emigrate to Libya irregularly, employing smugglers to cross the long border with the Cyrenaica. In 2019, the LAAF and eastern-based House of Representatives made some efforts to regularize this flow of migrants, issuing work permits to some Egyptian migrants and opening discussions with the Egyptian government to coordinate the regulation of Egyptian labour migration.³² However, these efforts did not bear fruit, and the legal status of Egyptian migrants in Libya remained ambiguous.

This situation began to change from mid-2021, when the Egyptian government started easing emigration restrictions to Libya. This reflected the stabilization of the situation in Egypt and improved political relations between the Egyptian government and the government in Tripoli. (The Egyptian government's support for the LAAF had been a major barrier to cooperation during the war for Tripoli.) These developments resulted in a series of agreements to coordinate the importation of large numbers of Egyptian labourers to assist in Libya's reconstruction, and allowed for the creation of a visa regime for Egyptian labourers.³³

While there was continued signalling regarding reconstruction plans during 2022, the GI-TOC is not aware that any large-scale projects were in fact importing Egyptian labourers in a systemic way – and none of the migrants interviewed in Libya were employed by such. However, the establishment of a Libyan visa process made individual travel to Libya much easier, particularly to the west of the country. In essence, this was a return to the situation prior to the revolution in 2011, when Egyptian migration to Libya was common. However, under these new circumstances, this led to a large number of Egyptians making the decision to attempt a sea crossing to Europe.

Bangladeshi migration to Libya

As with Egyptians, there is a long history of Bangladeshis migrating to Libya to participate in the local labour market, particularly after the lifting of international sanctions in the first decade of the 2000s, which led to booms in the consumer and construction sectors. By the time of the 2011 revolution, 70 000 Bangladeshis were estimated to be living in Libya. Although the revolution of 2011 briefly interrupted Bangladeshi labour migration to Libya, the cessation of fighting led to a rebound in regular migration, with nearly 15 000 Bangladeshis estimated to have arrived in Libya in 2012.³⁴

Regarding sea crossings, violence during the 2011 revolution forced Bangladeshi migrant labourers to flee Libya by sea. With the return of Bangladeshi migration to Libya from 2012 onwards, Bangladeshis went on to make up a significant cohort during the crisis of 2014–2017, with 9 600 departures recorded in the latter year. That number dropped to around 500 in 2018, before slowly rebounding. The reduction from 2017 to 2018 was partly the result of various Libyan authorities clamping down on Bangladeshi migration due to the onward movement to Europe. For example, in 2015, the eastern-based government sought to ban Bangladeshi workers from entering the country.³⁵ In 2017, there was a clampdown on the use of Mitiga airport to bring Bangladeshi migrants, among others, into western Libya for the sea crossing, given that Bangladeshis had previously flown into the airport in large numbers.³⁶

The surge in Bangladeshi sea crossings during 2022 can therefore be seen as a resumption of the trend of using Libya as a transit country that started in 2014 (but is separate to the forced exodus during 2011), with Bangladeshis simply finding new ways to return to a practice that was gaining in popularity before being disrupted. However, for Bangladeshis to make up the second-largest population group departing Libya is unusual and illustrates how regular and irregular migration combined to fuel the increase in overall departures.

Syrian migration to Libya

There were 8 370 confirmed departures by Syrians from Libya during 2022. This makes Syrians the third-largest national cohort behind Egyptians and Bangladeshis.

Syrians also made up a significant number of the migrants and asylum seekers departing Libya in the early days of the 2014–2017 crisis and were, in fact, instrumental in providing the financial boost that helped develop the smuggling ecosystem in Libya at that time. Around this period, the Syrian civil war was at its height and many Syrians had sought refuge in Libya, which was easy to access and required no paperwork to enter. (Although a visa requirement was imposed in 2013, large numbers had already travelled and irregular access remained relatively simple.)

As Syrians came to realize that their exile would be protracted, the mindset shifted to looking for a permanent new home. At the same time, deteriorating security in Libya made residing in place less attractive for many. These factors caused the exodus of Syrian migrants to Europe by sea in 2014 (although significant movement had started already in late 2013), in a manner similar to Bangladeshi migrants at the same time.

This surge was brought to an end by several factors. A huge number of the Syrian migrants who attempted the sea crossing from Libya did so from Zuwara, paying for relatively high-quality services and travelling largely in the open. For example, many Syrians embarking from Zuwara stayed in the town's main hotel.



Libyan police stand guard outside Mitiga International Airport in Tripoli. *Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images*

When the Zuwaran community chose to shut down smuggling in the town in 2015 – in part due to tragedies in which many Syrians drowned – this had a big impact on Syrian migrants who had relied on the superior services of Zuwaran smugglers and were less willing to accept the lower standards and higher risks offered in other west coast towns. At the same time, the Aegean routes started to surge, offering Syrians a far safer option than routes through Libya.

To some extent, the increase in Syrian migration via Libya in 2022 reflects a revival of this phenomenon, driven by the same general conditions that caused a surge in Egyptian and Bangladeshi migration using hybrid human-smuggling methods.

Use and misuse of the regular migration ecosystem

Bangladeshis, Egyptians and Syrians can obtain entry visas for travel to Libya. In the case of Egyptians, irregular migration across the land border with the Cyrenaica remains an important part of the mix, particularly for Egyptians who are afraid of being arrested for their political views. However, regular migration via air to western Libya grew in the past two years and was an important factor driving the increase in sea crossings in 2022, particularly from western Libya.

To travel by air to western Libya, Egyptians must obtain an entry visa with the sponsorship of a registered Libyan company. The certificate of employment used in the visa application must be approved by the Labour Ministry, which supplies a unique number. There are also security checks by both Egyptian and Libyan authorities.

While some migrants reported using established travel agencies with offices in Egypt, others used individual agents with connections in Libya. Although the process varied, it typically involved handing over the passport to an agent or agency in Egypt to apply for the visa ahead of travel. The migrant then travelled using their passport and received a visa from regular immigration officials on arrival at the relevant airport.

A Libyan agent reported to the GI-TOC that he has a 'mobile' travel agency – essentially a registered agency with all the paperwork, but no office or physical presence. During 2022, he worked with three Egyptian travel agencies, arranging for them around 15 to 20 visas each week. He applied for the visas manually in Libya and the visas had to be collected from the Libyan embassy in Egypt. The GI-TOC also identified individuals advertising these services directly to customers on Facebook.

Other migrants reported that they had not secured an entry visa, but instead had flown into Benina with a simple 'security clearance', which did not involve any actual paperwork and was cheaper and simpler to arrange. This latter process appears highly irregular and demonstrates the plethora of options now available for travel between Egypt and Libya.

The requirements of the visa mean that agencies or agents can charge high prices for their services. Migrants interviewed in 2022 reported prices of between EGP20 000 and EGP38 000 (roughly €1 000– €1 935, although a collapse in the exchange rate in 2022 means that these values vary greatly depending on when the migrant travelled) for a service that includes the visa and flights.

Despite the high costs and the difficulty that some Egyptians face in obtaining security clearance from their own government, the new process made accessing western Libya far easier and less hazardous than was previously the case. There are several direct flights from Egypt to Misrata and Mitiga airports.

Once in western Libya, Egyptians travel openly using taxis. Migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC reported that they did not have to hide, as they had the correct paperwork. However, this claim overlooks the fact that many migrants arriving with entry visas fail to subsequently apply for residency permits as they should, which explains why some security forces can still demand bribes.

The visa process is similar for Bangladeshis and Syrians, including the requirement of a certificate of employment from a registered Libyan company. The majority of Bangladeshi migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC in Libya during 2022 and previous years submitted their passports to a migrant labour agency in Bangladesh, which then applied for a visa on their behalf. The passports were returned for travel and an entry visa was issued upon arrival in Benina. Although a local agent was occasionally present to facilitate passage of immigration controls, several migrants reported passing through Benina airport with minimal checks.

The price of this service for migrants – including flights, accommodation, paperwork and possibly work placement – is between LYD20 000 and LYD30 000 (€3 850–€5 770). Bangladeshis who are unable or unwilling to pay this amount up front and have employment in Libya as part of the service can pay in instalments. One migrant said that the instalment he paid was LYD1 000 (€190) per month, leaving him with only LYD500 (€96) to take home.

Unlike Egyptians, who flew directly to eastern and western Libya, Bangladeshis almost exclusively flew into Benina airport. The flight routes from Bangladesh were indirect and often involved connections in the UAE, Turkey or Syria.

All arrivals in Benina must pay US\$500 in cash to the LAAF directly on arrival in Libya. A contact in eastern Libya explained that this is an entry fee that is collected by the Military Authority of Investments and Public Works (MAIPW).

The visa regime for Egyptians and Bangladeshis is legitimate, but it is routinely misused. As noted above, a visa application requires a certificate of employment from a registered company that has a set number of visas allocated to it annually. Several contacts reported to the GI-TOC that there was an active market in Libya for these allocated visas in 2022, with labour or travel agencies buying the visa allocations from registered companies – most often service companies, such as cleaning contractors, that have strong labour requirements – and selling them on to migrants as part of their travel service.

It is reportedly difficult to set up new companies in Libya due to corruption and red tape. This means that existing companies are valued for their visa allocations alone. One contact reported that he was offered LYD20 000 (€3 850) for a defunct cleaning company he owns, because the buyer wanted access to the allocated visas. The prospective buyer was reportedly associated with known smugglers.

Another contact reported that security officials in western Libya were aware of this from their examination of the passports of intercepted Bangladeshi migrants. As a Libyan travel consultant said, 'Libya authorities are aware of abuses, but unfortunately government workers and embassy workers are involved in bribes and corruption in order to allow workers to enter smoothly. There are many meetings to discuss mechanisms to prevent abuse of the workers' visa system, but those meetings are just for show.'³⁷

Irregular migration to Europe and informal networks

A fluid blend of formal and informal networks were involved in driving the high levels of Egyptian, Bangladeshi and Syrian migration: from the process by which they secured travel documents and arranged their flights, through to accommodation and employment in Libya, right to the sea crossing to Europe.

There are multiple ways in which Bangladeshis were recruited for, or sought out, travel to Libya. Based on interviews conducted in Libya in 2022, many journeys started with well-known, locally based agencies specializing in sending migrant labourers to the UAE and Libya.

These Bangladeshi agencies partnered with Libyan operators – networks of individuals or companies – to apply for the entry visas and arrange reception on arrival in Libya. While some of the migrants had no intention of travelling to Europe, often citing the danger of the sea crossing as their reason for not doing so, many saw Libya as a gateway to Europe; the intention of making a sea crossing was there from the outset.

In fact, several migrants and security officials in Libya reported to the GI-TOC that travel or labour agencies in Bangladesh, the UAE and Libya offered the sea crossing as part of their original service, essentially using their legitimate facade as a cover for smuggling activities. One contact in eastern Libya claimed that a single agency based in Dubai is thought to process many of the Bangladeshis travelling to Libya for the purposes of being smuggled to Europe. This exemplifies the blending of regular and irregular migration services, right from the point of applying for the official travel documents.

These networks also blend formal and informal typologies. While registered companies and agencies with physical addresses might collect the money, apply for visas and book flights, personal recommendations and information-sharing were often key to connecting migrants with these service providers. This kind of organically expanding chain of migration – where migrants who have arrived at their destination pass on to friends or family the information and contact details necessary to make a successful trip – has been a critical factor behind the explosion of Bangladeshi departures over the past two years.

However, the informal aspects go beyond information-sharing. In several cases, Bangladeshi migrants interviewed in Libya reported that their whole trip was coordinated by Bangladeshis already living in Libya, who were occasionally referred to as smugglers. The Bangladeshis playing this role also often managed the large accommodation blocks that migrants lived in and were the focal point for arranging sea crossings, with trips to embarkation points in Zuwara or Zawiya occurring regularly. As a Bangladeshi migrant interviewed in Misrata said:

I heard from someone that there are young people who travelled to Libya and from Libya they go to Italy; the idea was formed with me, and I said it to my older brother, who encouraged me to do so because I am single and I can travel comfortably [...]. I inquired from a person who travelled to the Gulf and he connected me to a person who is in Libya. I went to the office that performs the travel procedures, and there are several services, including access to Libya only and the other to Italy, and payment is prepaid. I paid LYD20 000 [EUR3 850].³⁸

The role described above has the clear characteristics of a *mandub* – the middleman from a migrant community who connects would-be migrants with smugglers. The emergence of a class of well-connected *manadib* has typically been a critical factor in the growth of irregular migration by a particular nationality, with this role providing confidence and trust to the migrants, and a ready supply of clients to professional Libyan smugglers. The proliferation of such figures among the Bangladeshi community in Libya was inseparable from the increase in sea crossings in 2022, bringing this mode of migration back from the semi-regular towards the irregular.

A notable characteristic of the organic growth of Bangladeshi networks that facilitated hybrid migration in 2022 was the role of Misrata as a hub for accommodation and work. GI-TOC contacts in Misrata reported that there was a sizeable Bangladeshi population settled in western suburbs of the city, such as Mahjoub. Bangladeshi migrants all landed at Benina airport and travelled overland to Misrata, where they stayed in large accommodation blocks owned and protected by influential local Libyans. The overland journeys were generally taken in shared taxis, with small bribes paid to negotiate checkpoints as required. Although most migrants appeared to make this trip relatively easily, some reported being detained by security forces when entering Misrata, and only being released after payment of a bribe.³⁹

For migrants to have relatively safe areas to live in and work while they save up the cost of the sea crossing is vital for a stable and reliable pathway to Europe. As a Bangladeshi migrant in Tripoli said, 'The conditions here are fine. I'm working in construction and cleaning now, and I'm earning LYD100 [€20] per day most of the days, and I manage to eat one meal a day to save money for my trip to Europe. It is not very easy, but the Bangladeshi network in Italy know of different smugglers who can help to put you in a boat.'⁴⁰

Although the same basic principles apply to Egyptian migration, there are a few specific characteristics to draw out. Perhaps the key development to emerge from the easing of travel restrictions and opening of transport links was that access between Egypt and the west of Libya, from which the vast majority of boats depart for Europe, became far easier. Before the resumption of direct flights to Misrata and Mitiga, accessing western Libya from Egypt most often required a hazardous overland journey from the Cyrenaica, at a time when the eastern and western halves of the country were at war. This was further compounded by the absence of a valid visa, necessitating the use of smugglers to travel clandestinely. This was not only dangerous but also costly.

Although official data is not available, anecdotal evidence suggests that the opening of direct flights to western Libya and the creation of the visa regime led to an increase in the number of Egyptian migrants living and working in western Libya. Many of these migrants had no intention of taking boats to Europe. Several migrants living in Zuwara reported that they had travelled to Libya to work and were not planning to take a boat. However, it is clear from the data and from anecdotal accounts that the increase in regular migration from Egypt to western Libya created a huge pool of potential clients for smugglers on the west coast.

Semi-regular migration to western Libya was also clearly used as a cover by networks offering a full service with the sea crossing included. Several contacts reported that such networks charged between €5 000 and €6 600 for this service, including the boat. One contact reported that some networks based out of Egypt and Zuwara were offering a money-back guarantee for migrants who did not successfully reach Europe. The departure data from the Libyan coast strongly indicates that these networks had an important overall impact on human smuggling in Libya in 2022 and were a core driver for the current surge.

The LAAF's role in hybrid migration

The networks involved in hybrid migration to Libya are diverse, fluid and distributed; no single actor can be said to control this flow or held solely responsible for it. However, there several ways in which the LAAF – and other organizations/infrastructure under its influence – have come to play an increasingly important role in this form of migration.

As described above, most Syrians and Bangladeshis migrating to Libya in 2022 flew into Benina airport. At Benina airport, they then paid an entry fee to the LAAF's MAIPW. Several migrants described arriving at a military section of the airport. Similarly, some Egyptians reported flying directly to Benina with nothing more than a semi-official 'security clearance'. As such, the LAAF exerted important control over, and derived benefit from, these migrants travelling to Libya in greater numbers – regardless of whether this was for local work or to be smuggled on to Europe – in so far as institutions and infrastructure under the LAAF's control were the key access points to Libya.

A contact in the east emphasized that the hard currency paid as an entry fee is particularly valuable to the LAAF. According to one migrant, 'All the procedures [for our arrival] were guaranteed by officers from the Libyan army, and we were about 120 people, and each person paid the army US\$500.'⁴¹ An income of US\$60 000 from entry fees on a single flight indicates how profitable this can be for the LAAF.

There is also circumstantial evidence suggesting that many of the travel and labour agencies securing visas for Bangladeshis and Egyptians are based in the east of Libya. A security official in western Libya, who has investigated the passports of intercepted Bangladeshi migrants, claimed that all the companies named in the visas are based in the Cyrenaica.⁴² The GI-TOC also interviewed an agent offering these services who was based in the east, and identified a travel company connected to a senior officer.⁴³

The GI-TOC also received reports suggesting direct involvement in the irregular aspects of Bangladeshi migration to Libya and Europe among LAAF rank and file. The GI-TOC interviewed several migrants working for the LAAF as service staff at a base in Benghazi.⁴⁴ An officer at the base reportedly advertised to Bangladeshi staff trips to western Libya and a boat to Europe for US\$300. This is too cheap a price to be profitable, however, and it may be that the offer only included travel to the west, at which point more money would be demanded. Either way, it is a glimpse into the kind of low-level alleged involvement in smuggling among LAAF officers that is likely to be common.

The GI-TOC does not have evidence of systemic and organization-wide involvement by the LAAF in the hybrid migration of Egyptians and Bangladeshis. However, the reports above – coupled with the explosion of departures from Tobruk – form a strong argument that the growing tolerance of the factions within LAAF to involvement in the business was a key part of the growth story of 2022.



© Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images



CONCLUSION

Seen in retrospect, 2021 marked the end of the era of suppressed human smuggling that held sway since the collapse of coastal networks in 2017. In 2022, the new smuggling systems that had started to take shape in 2021 consolidated, and the underlying dynamics came into sharper relief. As outlined in this brief, these dynamics essentially saw more sophisticated networks evolving to take advantage of the favourable conditions afforded by the return to more normal levels of mobility – thanks to relative stabilization in western Libya and the end of the COVID-19 pandemic – coupled with a general loss of interest in the politics of law and order and security sector reform across Libya's elite. While a broad spectrum of migrants continues to make the sea crossing from Libya's coast, greater numbers of Egyptians, Bangladeshis and Syrians – migrating in a hybrid fashion – were the main drivers of the increase in departures recorded in 2022.

The critical question going into 2023 was whether these evolving smuggling systems would further mature, bringing forth a new, full-blown migration crisis. In the first half of the year, most signs indicated that this might be the case. Departures from the coast continued their upward trajectory and the main trends – increased hybrid migration, the rise of Tobruk – were also extended. Importantly, there was an explosion in the number of Pakistani migration to and through Libya, making it the second largest cohort from a very low base. This indicated that hybrid smuggling networks have become able and willing to seek out new markets to exploit.

To some extent, these trends are determined by factors beyond Libya's border. The bulk of irregular migrants departing Libya in 2022 and the first half of 2023 were economic. While this is not particularly new, the global inflation crisis has doubtless intensified the pre-existing push factors and increased the pool of people for whom the journey is worth the risk. The economic headwinds seem unlikely to entirely reverse direction and, in any case, it is very likely that the economic-driven demand for access to Europe will remain strong enough to supply large numbers of clients to Libyan smugglers. As such, conditions in Libya are going to be vital in determining whether the current trends lead into a new crisis.

So far in 2023, the main ingredients that contributed to the kind of raw power politics that defined 2022 – the balance of forces internally, the intransigence of key players and the lack of international consensus over what outcome is most desirable – have continued. Under these conditions, meaningful security sector reform and focus on the rule of law has been elusive, and the high departure numbers are the result.

However, in May and June there were several separate law enforcement campaigns in both eastern and western Libya. The campaign in western Libya was unorthodox and highly politicized – including drone strikes on political rivals of the GNU. Despite this, more legitimate criminal targets were also struck, including locations connected to fuel and human smuggling. This aggressive approach was followed by a concerted political effort to coordinate the arrest of wanted criminals on the west coast – an area that has typically been beyond the reach of the attorney general. In the far east, huge numbers of migrants were detained and rugs confiscated. However, to date, there has not been a corresponding arrest campaign.

In the past, Libya has seen many superficial security campaigns that fail to address the underlying issues of criminality. It is too early to say if that is the case here. It is notable that there was a substantial drop in departures in July, immediately following these interventions, suggesting at least a short-term impact. Given Libya's political instability, however, it will be difficult for Libyan authorities to sustain such efforts – regardless of will. And there is little reason to believe that the will is there for Libyan elites to meaningfully return to prioritizing security sector reform and the rule of law other than for the purposes of elite jockeying. This was already visible by late February 2023, with the reported efforts of Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli to dismantle the anti-smuggling infrastructure built up by the rival faction of the SSA on the west coast.

The lack of capacity and will is particularly problematic given that the kind of hybrid smuggling that flourished in 2022 is more complex for police to deal with. Apart from a few clear-cut cases (such as with coastal smugglers), it is not obvious where the provision of normal services – such as procuring travel documents, transport and accommodation – ends and criminal smuggling (facilitating the illegal crossing of a border) begins. As such, there is a risk that there will be few obstacles to the further growth of human smuggling in the following years.

However, in some areas, fruitful intervention may be possible. Regarding Bangladeshi, Syrian, Pakistani and Egyptian migration, the challenge is to clamp down on transnational smuggling operations, without interfering with legitimate labour migration to Libya. Policies targeting Libya alone will either be ineffective or unfairly directed at those seeking legitimate work opportunities. Better regulation of migrant labour agencies operating in Bangladesh, Egypt and the UAE will be an important part of any response. This should come in addition to coordinated, multistate law enforcement efforts that target these networks transnationally. Furthermore, systematically debriefing migrants arriving in Europe to better understand how the smuggling networks operate – including in Italy – will be a key part of this.



NOTES

- 1 Mark Micallef, The human conveyor belt: Trends in human trafficking and smuggling in post-revolutionary Libya, GI-TOC, March 2017, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/report-the-human-conveyor-belt-trends-in-human-trafficking-and-smuggling-in-post-revolution-libya/>.
- 2 Mark Micallef, Rupert Horsley and Alexandre Bish, The human conveyor belt broken: Assessing the collapse of the human-smuggling industry in Libya and the central Sahel, GI-TOC, April 2019, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-human-conveyor-belt-broken-2/>.
- 3 Mark Micallef et al, Conflict, coping and COVID: Changing human smuggling and trafficking dynamics in North Africa and the Sahel in 2019 and 2020, GI-TOC, April 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/smuggling-trafficking-sahel-2020>.
- 4 Rupert Horsley and Jessica Gerken, Libya: Stability fuels rebound in human smuggling, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Human-smuggling-and-trafficking-ecosystems-LIBYA.pdf>.
- 5 Ahmed Elumami and Ayman al-Warfali, Libyan election collapses with no plan out of crisis, Reuters, 22 December 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/libyan-parliament-committee-says-presidential-election-not-possible-2021-12-22/>.
- 6 Mark Micallef et al, Conflict, coping and COVID: Changing human smuggling and trafficking dynamics in North Africa and the Sahel in 2019 and 2020, GI-TOC, April 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/smuggling-trafficking-sahel-2020>.
- 7 Reuters, Deadly battle erupts across Tripoli, raising fears of wider Libya war, 27 August 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/shootouts-blasts-erupt-libyan-capital-amid-political-standoff-2022-08-27/>.
- 8 Sami Zaptia, Tripoli defence ministry denies being part of Bashagha's operation "Snake Hunting", Libya Herald, 12 January 2021, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2021/01/tripoli-defence-ministry-denies-being-part-of-bashaghas-operation-snake-hunting/>.
- 9 IOM, Libya – Migrant report 44, September–October 2022, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/libya-migrant-report-44-september-october-2022>.
- 10 The quality of data on maritime smuggling in Libya is uneven, reflecting the inherent difficulty of monitoring these sea crossings and inconsistent record keeping and access to Libya disembarkations. Given these inherent limitations, the data cited in this report should be taken as indicative of general trends rather than a final accounting.
- 11 Mark Micallef, The human conveyor belt: Trends in human trafficking and smuggling in post-revolutionary Libya, GI-TOC, March 2017, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/report-the-human-conveyor-belt-trends-in-human-trafficking-and-smuggling-in-post-revolution-libya/>.
- 12 IOM, Returnees from Libya: The bittersweet experience of coming home, September 2015, <https://publications.iom.int/books/returnees-libya-bittersweet-experience-coming-home-summary-report>.
- 13 Mark Micallef, Rupert Horsley and Alexandre Bish, The human conveyor belt broken: Assessing the collapse of the human-smuggling industry in Libya and the central Sahel, GI-TOC, April 2019, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-human-conveyor-belt-broken-2/>.
- 14 BBC, Migrant crisis: Libya boat sinks off Zuwara carrying hundreds, 28 August 2015, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-34082304>.
- 15 Reuters, Deadly battle erupts across Tripoli, raising fears of wider Libya war, 27 August 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/shootouts-blasts-erupt-libyan-capital-amid-political-standoff-2022-08-27/>.
- 16 United Nations, Security Council, Narrative summary of sanctions on Ahmad Oumar al-Dabbashi, 7 June 2018, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1970/materials/summaries/individual/ahmad-oumar-al-dabbashi>.
- 17 Mark Micallef and Tuesday Reitano, The anti-human smuggling business and Libya's political endgame, Institute for Security Studies and GI-TOC, December 2017, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Libya_ISS_Smuggling.pdf.

- 18 Interview with a Libyan activist, November 2022.
- 19 Rupert Horsley and Jessica Gerken, Libya: Stability fuels rebound in human smuggling, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Human-smuggling-and-trafficking-ecosystems-LIBYA.pdf>.
- 20 Amnesty International, Libya: Hold Stability Support Authority militia leaders to account, Amnesty International, 4 May 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/libya-hold-stability-support-authority-militia-leaders-to-account/>.
- 21 Interview with a local activist in western Libya, October 2022.
- 22 Rupert Horsley and Jessica Gerken, Libya: Stability fuels rebound in human smuggling, GI-TOC, July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Human-smuggling-and-trafficking-ecosystems-LIBYA.pdf>.
- 23 Mathew Vella, Kingpin fuel and human smuggler with Malta links arrested by Libyans, Malta Today, 28 August 2017, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/80035/kingpin_smuggler_with_malta_links_arrested_by_libyans.
- 24 Raouf Farrah, Zuwara's civil society fight against organized crime: Successes and failures of local community efforts, GI-TOC, 15 December, 2021, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/zuwaras-civil-society-fight-against-oc/>; Margaret Coker, Libya's 'Masked Men' hunt human smugglers, *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 October 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/libyas-masked-men-hunt-human-smugglers-1444697206>.
- 25 Interview with a Zuwaran smuggler, April 2022.
- 26 Interview with a Zuwaran activist, November 2022.
- 27 The General Administration of Coastal Security (GACS), Tobruk, Images of a migrant boat in Tobruk Maritime Port, GACS Facebook page, 7 December 2022, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid02cnpNGhqK9xSCXYAG5cEjNhJ3yq2YX2WYBfQARGNfgebL6yfTr5UJDXxTPoRAsZJEI&id=100076318634573&mibextid=qC1gEa.
- 28 Navy Special Forces, Promotion video showing maritime exercises, Navy Special Forces Facebook page, 20 November 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=658116522518639>.
- 29 In 2023, this has also come to include Pakistanis, who made up the second largest cohort in the first half of the year.
- 30 Ahmed Tolba and Shadi Bushra, Egypt bombs Islamic State targets in Libya after 21 Egyptians beheaded, Reuters, 16 February 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-libya-egypt-idINKBNOLKODY20150216>.
- 31 Operation Dignity was a military campaign launched in 2014 by a coalition of forces that was led by Khalifa Haftar. It targeted the power of Islamist groups in eastern Libya. There was sustained conflict in Benghazi and Derna.
- 32 Ahmed Aleem, New pact will open flow of Egyptian workers to Libya, al-Monitor, 25 March 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/03/egypt-libya-agreement-border-work-illegal-smuggling.html>.
- 33 Mohamed Seid, Egypt seeks foothold in Libya's reconstruction, al-Monitor, 30 April 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/egypt-seeks-foothold-libyas-reconstruction>; Ahram online, Egypt, Libya to launch electronic link system to allow entry of Egyptian labour, Ahram online, 19 December 2021, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/1234/446781/Egypt/Foreign-Affairs/Egypt,-Libya-to-launch-electronic-link-system-to-a.aspx>.
- 34 Tasneem Siddiqui and Rashed Alam Bhuiyan, Emergency return of Bangladeshi migrants from Libya, Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, April 2013, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/cntss/0028086/f_0028086_22872.pdf.
- 35 Reuters, Libya's official government bans Bangladeshi workers from entry, Reuters, 16 May 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-libya-bangladesh-idUKKBN0O10SY20150516>.
- 36 Libyan Express, Mitiga airport authorities ban entries of five countries' nationals to Tripoli, 8 May 2017, <https://www.libyanexpress.com/mitiga-airport-authorities-ban-entries-of-five-countries-to-tripoli/>.
- 37 Interview with a Libyan travel consultant, June 2022.
- 38 Interview with a Bangladeshi migrant in Misrata, October 2022.
- 39 Interview with a Bangladeshi migrant in Misrata, October 2022.
- 40 Interview with a Bangladeshi migrant in Tripoli, July 2022.
- 41 Interview with a Bangladeshi migrant in eastern Libya, July 2022.
- 42 Interview with a security official in western Libya, November 2022.
- 43 Interviews with a local research and travel agent, August and September 2022.
- 44 Interviews with Bangladeshi migrants in eastern Libya, July 2022.



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 600 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

www.globalinitiative.net