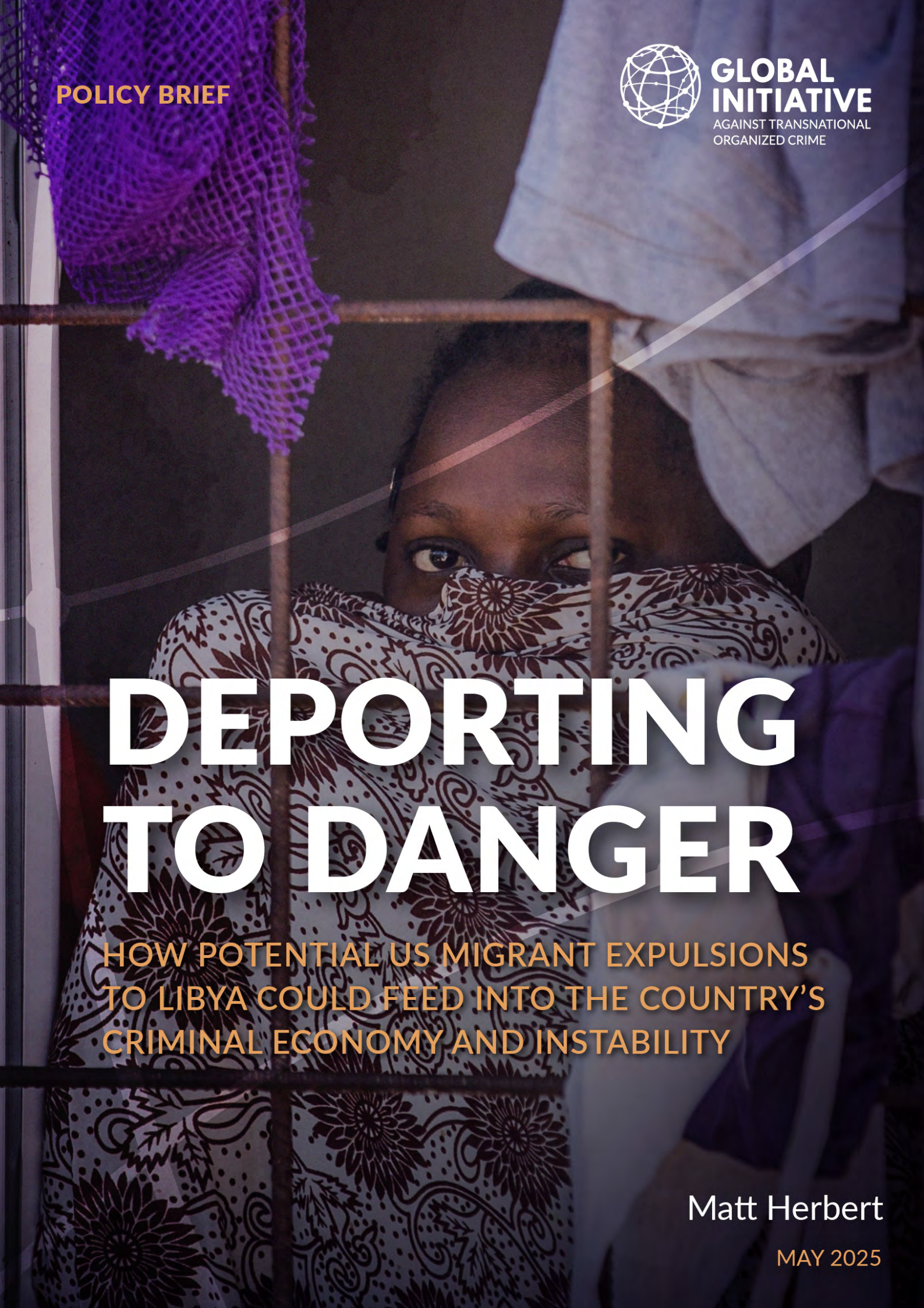

POLICY BRIEF

GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

DEPORTING TO DANGER

HOW POTENTIAL US MIGRANT EXPULSIONS TO LIBYA COULD FEED INTO THE COUNTRY'S CRIMINAL ECONOMY AND INSTABILITY

Matt Herbert

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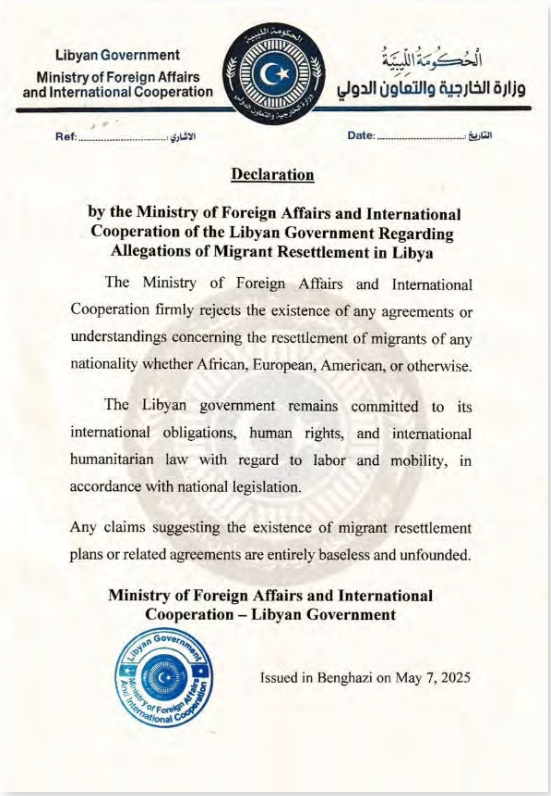
INTRODUCTION

On 7 May 2025, a number of reports surfaced claiming that the US was preparing to expel a group of irregular migrants to Libya.[1] The migrants reportedly were not Libyan citizens, but third-country nationals from a number of mainly Asian states. These reports gained further weight when advocates for Laotian, Vietnamese and Filipino migrants, claiming they had been pressured to agree to their transfer, sued to prevent their deportation.[2] A judge then ruled that the planned repatriations would violate a temporary court order.[3]

As of 20 May, no deportees had arrived in Libya, and the US government had neither confirmed nor denied media and court claims of planned expulsions. It is unclear whether the US still aims to use Libya as a deportation site. The temporary court order mainly involves due process questions for migrant detainees facing deportation, rather than barring the use of Libya per se.

Nonethless, there has been a substantial reaction within Libya to the rumoured transfers. The country's two competing governments, the Government of National Unity (GNU) and the Government of National Stability (GNS), along with the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), a powerful armed group that supports the GNS, have categorically denied any deal with the US.[4]



Libyan Government
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

الحكومة الليبية
وزارة الخارجية والتعاون الدولي

Ref: الإشارة ..... Date: التاريخ .....

Declaration

by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Libyan Government Regarding Allegations of Migrant Resettlement in Libya

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation firmly rejects the existence of any agreements or understandings concerning the resettlement of migrants of any nationality whether African, European, American, or otherwise.

The Libyan government remains committed to its international obligations, human rights, and international humanitarian law with regard to labor and mobility, in accordance with national legislation.

Any claims suggesting the existence of migrant resettlement plans or related agreements are entirely baseless and unfounded.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation – Libyan Government

Issued in Benghazi on May 7, 2025

Libya's Government of National Stability statement denying a US deal.
Photo: GNS Facebook page

Despite these denials, reports over the last two months suggest that some form of negotiations have occurred over the transfer of migrants. However, critical details remain elusive, such as which Libyan authority the US is engaging with, what incentives may have been offered and how receptive Libyan factions are to such arrangements.[5]

Should expulsions take place, they would represent an escalation in the US's strategy of deporting irregular migrants to countries other than their home nations. So far, most removals have involved Latin American countries such as El Salvador, Costa Rica and Panama, although in one case a third-country national was allegedly sent to Rwanda.[6] It is likely that the US is viewing Libya within this framework in order to leverage inducements and deterrents to achieve domestic political objectives. However, context matters. Compared to other countries to which the US has deported migrants, or is reportedly negotiating with, Libya stands out as a nation still mired in conflict and political chaos, with one of the world's worst human rights records, especially against migrants.

A car is destroyed following clashes in Tripoli on 13 May 2025. *© Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images*

LIBYA'S FRAGILITY AND CRIMINAL CONTEXT

Libya has been highly fragile since its 2011 revolution. Repeated attempts to hold national elections have failed, with recent internationally recognized governments being constituted through elite agreements rather than democratic consensus. The country has experienced recurring violence, with heavily armed militias frequently fighting for control. The most recent national-scale conflagration was the war for the capital, Tripoli, which took place between 2019 and 2020.[7] However, between 12 and 14 May 2025, Tripoli erupted into some of the most intense urban conflict since 2020, after the death of one of the capital's main militia leaders drove a shift in the city's balance of power, underscoring the continued inherent fragility of the situation.

At present, the country is functionally split between two governments. The Tripoli-based GNU, led by Abd al-Hamid Dabaiba, enjoys international recognition but is only able to exert influence over the north-western Tripolitania region. This area is home to most of the population. Most territory, including the eastern Cyrenaica region and the south-western Fezzan region, is under the control of the Benghazi-based GNS, led by Usama Hamad. The main power in these regions, however, is held by the LAAF, led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. It was Haftar's LAAF that tried – and failed – to seize control of the country in the war for Tripoli.

FIGURE 1 Libya, showing main towns and cities.

This image of opposing governments, however, is only part of the ground reality of power in Libya.[8] In areas controlled by the GNU and the GNS/LAAF, local armed actors enjoy a significant degree of autonomy. Many of these groups – including former revolutionary units, tribal militias and ideological networks – have been formally incorporated into various state structures. This has had stabilizing benefits for both the GNU and the GNS/LAAF, helping to protect vital infrastructure and institutions, maintain basic law and order, and exert influence and control over areas that would otherwise be resistant.

However, this reliance has come at the cost of outsized power for these militias through access to government resources such as funding, equipment and training.

The implications of this are most visible in the Tripolitania. While the GNU ostensibly rules the region, it is controlled by a patchwork of armed groups that use the state for resources and legitimacy but are not entirely subordinated to it. In turn, this has heightened the political vulnerability of centralized authorities and also has security implications, with recurrent, though often brief, clashes between groups nominally under the control of Prime Minister Dabaiba's government.[9]

This risk has been vividly underscored by recent events. On 12 May, Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli (aka Ghnewa), one of the most powerful militia leaders and commander of the Stabilization Support Apparatus, a sprawling government-linked force, was shot and killed alongside his bodyguards during a meeting with other senior governmental and armed group leaders. Al-Kikli's death radically altered the balance of power in Tripoli, fuelling a sudden intense urban conflict between different blocks of armed group forces, drawn both from Tripoli and from cities and towns across the west coast. Notably, the conflict has drawn together some previously antagonistic parties, as different armed groups have sought to protect their territory and interests or to leverage the fighting to expand power.

Technicals engaged in combat in Tripoli, 14 May 2024. *Photo: Social media*

While a ceasefire was declared on 14 May, it is unclear whether and how long it will last. Al-Kikli's killing, the fighting and decisions taken by Prime Minister Dabaiba have also catalyzed a political crisis. In the immediate wake of the killing, when forces linked to Dabaiba seemed to have the upper hand, the prime minister issued decrees reorganizing security forces to the benefit of some key constituencies, mainly from the cities of Misrata and Zintan. These decrees and the failure of Dabaiba-aligned forces to take the rest of Tripoli have catalyzed a broader coalition of armed groups to mobilize against his government, with some key figures demanding he step down. While negotiations are underway between Dabaiba and opposing armed groups, the potential room for agreement is, at present, narrow. Should mediation attempts that were ongoing at the time of writing fail, there is an acute risk of generalized conflict in Tripolitania.

The general situation has been less fractious in areas under GNS/LAAF control, with competition and divisions being much less visible. However, even in the east and south, armed groups have a significant degree of localized autonomy, particularly with regard to involvement in illicit economies.[10] Even here, however, there have been occasional outbreaks of fighting or social tension, including brief although intense fighting in the southern city of Qatrun in February 2025.[11] Nonetheless, such incidents are much rarer than on the west coast.

Critically, state fragility and fragmentation in Libya have fuelled the growth of illicit economies. Since the revolution, weak state capacity and the complicity of armed groups have led to a massive expansion in activities

such as drug and arms trafficking, fuel smuggling, and human smuggling and trafficking. For several years, the country has been ranked first for criminality in North Africa and in the top 20 globally on the GI-TOC's Global Organized Crime Index.[12]

Of these illicit markets, the most visible and salient in relation to the potential US deportations is human smuggling and trafficking. Although this industry predates the 2011 revolution, it has grown exponentially in size and brutality since then, with increasingly severe consequences.[13] This expansion has given rise to a well-developed criminal ecosystem surrounding human smuggling, involving various criminal actors, armed groups and government officials.

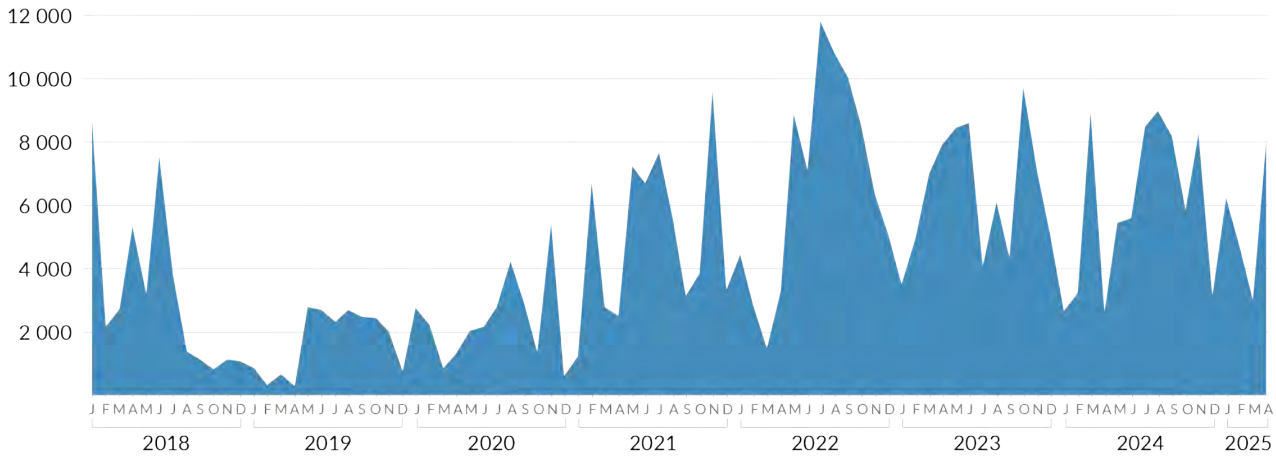


FIGURE 2 Total estimated departures from the Libyan coast, January 2018 to March 2025.

Part of this ecosystem facilitates the movement of migrants to and through Libya. Currently, the vast majority of migrants are smuggled into the country by air, arriving on commercial flights into the LAAF-controlled Benghazi airport, before being transported to GNU-controlled areas on the west coast and embarking with maritime smugglers.[14] Security actors linked to both the LAAF and GNU – often members of armed groups incorporated into the governments – are deeply involved at multiple points in the human smuggling chain, extorting bribes from migrants for release, offering protection to smugglers and in some cases allegedly moonlighting as smugglers themselves.[15]

Another element of this illicit market is the presence of predatory gangs that extort migrants. This generally involves kidnapping and torture until a ransom is paid. These groups are known to be highly attuned to the relative wealth of different nationalities, enabling them to leverage more money from certain targets.

According to migrants in north-west Libya, kidnappings for extortion have surged over the last 36 months. There have also been recent incidents in which this activity has resulted in mass killings. In early February, for example, security authorities in south-east Libya uncovered two mass graves containing the bodies of migrants believed to have been killed by extortion gangs.[16]

Although human smuggling from Libya has been well documented and highly visible since 2011, it has not generally been a major concern or policy issue for the US. Migrants in Libya have almost always travelled there in order to attempt to reach Europe. Historically, therefore, human smuggling in Libya has mainly been a consideration for European governments, with limited US equities at stake.

This changed briefly in 2024, when human smugglers began using charter flights through airports in Benghazi and Tripoli to transport irregular migrants to Nicaragua, from where they would continue on to the US–Mexico border.[17] This route was halted amid reports of US pressure and has not resumed to date. It is plausible that this nexus could form part of the basis for the US interest in Libya as a deportation site. However, given the information currently available, it does not appear that the nationalities believed to be on those flights – which included Central and South Asians – are among those reported to date to be targeted for deportation to Libya.[18]

This episode highlights the increasingly complex and global nature of human smuggling, with commercial and charter flights through airports in fragile states being used to move passengers in unexpected ways. While the US may consider Libya to be remote enough for expulsions to involve minimal blowback, this is likely to be incorrect. Heightened instability in Libya raises the risk that smugglers could seek to reactivate routes to the Western Hemisphere.

A detention centre in Tripoli, photographed in 2017. *© Florian Gaertner/Getty Images*

DETENTION, PREDATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS RISKS TO MIGRANTS

Human smuggling through Libya has created a migrant detention network that the US appears to be hoping to exploit. This system is run by the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM). As with most government entities, it is split into a GNU-linked body operating in the Tripolitania and a GNS/LAAF-linked body operating in the Cyrenaica and the Fezzan.

The GNU DCIM manages four official detention centres, mainly in and around the Tripoli area, which hold an average of 1 500 to 2 500 migrants per month. Another unspecified number of migrants, likely totalling more than 1 000 per month, are held in a number of non-DCIM facilities operated by other Interior Ministry forces. The current fighting has had substantial implications for the GNU DCIM, with one of Dabaiba's decrees incorporating it into the Interior Ministry, leading to changes in leadership. There have also been uncontrolled releases of detainees from some facilities.

The GNS DCIM operates under that government's Interior Ministry and is responsible for seven detention facilities in the east of the country, holding an average of around 1 200 to 2 000 migrants per month. The GNS DCIM also has a degree of functional control over eight additional detention facilities in the Fezzan, where roughly 2 000 to 3 000 migrants are held per month.

Conditions in both the GNU and GNS migrant detention facilities are extremely poor, with limited food and water and frequent overcrowding. The centres are also sites of chronic and grave human rights abuses, which have been widely recorded over the years.[19] Physical abuse, beatings, verbal humiliation and psychological torture are commonplace, and are often used during interrogations or as punishment.[20] There have been recurring cases of rape and sexual exploitation, primarily against women and girls, but also against men and boys.[21] These acts often take place at night, with the victims being released afterwards, making the abuse difficult to trace or document. There is also a pattern of migrant deaths, either due to direct violence by guards or gaps in medical care.

Ibrahim al-Dirsi in leaked footage. *Photo: Screen shot from video on social media*

Although the detention of migrants in these facilities is permitted by Libyan law, the system is highly arbitrary. There are no avenues for detainees to contest their detention. Most are released either through agreeing to return to their home countries, via forced expulsions into neighbouring states or by paying a bribe. There have been repeated allegations that human smugglers have colluded with guards to take control of migrants.[22]

Crucially, this context is set against the backdrop of a broader collapse in due process and the rule of law. This was starkly illustrated by recently leaked footage of Ibrahim al-Dirsi, a member of parliament from Benghazi, who was shown chained by the neck in a

dark, dirt-filled room, almost naked and pleading for his life. Al-Dirsi disappeared on 16 May 2024 after attending an LAAF parade in Benghazi. His abductors remain unknown, as does his current status, but in the recording he repeatedly appeals to Saddam Haftar, son of Khalifa Haftar, for his release. The video sparked widespread condemnation and demands for an investigation into al-Dirsi's whereabouts. There have also been calls for information on Seham Sergiwa, a member of parliament who disappeared in July 2019, also under circumstances suggesting that she was abducted by an armed group affiliated with the LAAF.[23]

These are high-profile cases in Libya, but they are not unique. The UN has reported extensive violence and human rights violations against Libyans and migrants in eastern and western detention facilities.[24]

Beyond the question of human rights, however, Libya's migrant detention centres are also major points of criminality in the human smuggling and trafficking ecosystem, either through corruption involving government contracts or – of greater concern – through the monetization of detention through the extortion of migrants.[25]

In many centres, guards systematically demand ransoms from detainees, under threat of torture or death, mirroring the actions of criminal extortion gangs operating elsewhere. In some cases, there is collusion with criminal gangs or armed groups that engage in similar activities outside the facility, with detainees being transferred off-site for the purpose of extortion.

Inside the Tajoura detention centre. *Photo: GI-TOC*

In many cases, smugglers and traffickers are directly involved in this process. They may buy migrants' debts to secure their release and then transfer them to their own warehouses, where they extract money from the migrants, making a profit. They can then charge an additional fee or force migrants into situations of indentured labour to secure the funds for subsequent smuggling out of the country, typically through sea crossings to Europe.

There is also a pattern of labour exploitation. Detainees are reportedly 'rented out' by detention centre staff, to private individuals, families or even businesspeople, or forced to work without pay, either inside detention facilities or in agriculture and construction. Physical violence against detainees who object is common, reflecting wider reports of abuse.

While it remains unclear what the potential terms of a US agreement with either the GNU or the GNS/LAAF would be, those deported would likely be placed in one of Libya's migrant detention centres in the short term. If US expulsions to Libya become systematized, there is a risk that these migrants could be targeted for extortion by armed groups and detention officials. They could be seen as a source of higher ransoms, particularly given that, due to their nationality or diaspora connections in the US, they would probably be perceived as wealthier than the sub-Saharan African migrants who typically make up the majority of those detained in Libya.

This risk is compounded by the lack of clarity around how long deportees would be held in Libya and how they would gain release. As noted, there is no due process or structured means for migrants to gain release aside from agreeing to return to their home countries.

It is plausible for deportees to be transported home by means of the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Voluntary Humanitarian Return (VHR) programme, which aids migrants in returning to their home countries through provision of return flights. Such an approach has reportedly occurred in some Latin American countries who have accepted third-country nationals from the US.[26] However, this would arguably pose substantially more reputational and ethical challenges for the IOM in Libya than for similar programmes in Latin America. Furthermore, any IOM process is likely to be lengthy given the high demand for VHR by the broader migrant community in Libya. This could substantially extend the period that third-country nationals in Libya could be housed within detention facilities.

It is equally likely that deportees may turn to bribery to escape the migrant detention system. This would raise an additional set of complications, given the worsening general situation they would face in Libya upon securing release.

AN UNSTABLE AND WORSENING MOMENT FOR MIGRANTS IN LIBYA

In addition to the direct physical risks faced by deportees, the expulsion of migrants to Libya could prove to have a destabilizing political impact. This concern is particularly acute for the GNU, given its mounting fragility in the wake of al-Kikli death, its broader vulnerability to armed group action, and the growing politicization of the anti-migrant issue in recent months.

Since 2021, there has been a surge in anti-migrant rhetoric, both online and from key political actors, which has accelerated over the last year or so. This has occasionally escalated into violence targeting migrants in western Libya. The unrest seems to be partly driven by a rise in the number of migrants and refugees living in the region, particularly those displaced by the Sudan conflict. However, there is also a clear instrumentalization of the situation for political gain, with major figures such as the GNU Interior Minister Emad Trabelsi repeatedly stating that the circumstances are unsustainable and calling for large-scale deportations.[27]

This growing anti-migrant sentiment has been particularly focused around the issue of migrant settlement, leading to a change in policy by the GNU and the GNS/LAAF. Both governments are working increasingly hard to remove foreign migrants from the country. There have been more arrests on the streets and at checkpoints, as well as more expulsions to neighbouring states and heightened official interest in promoting the VHR programme.

The migration issue has also become a lightning rod for the Dabaiba government. In March, it was alleged that Libya was considering accepting a large number of Palestinian refugees.[28] Although this was officially denied, it led to significant tension, and the alleged murder of a Sudanese migrant by a group of young men in Sabratha.[29] The situation became more explicitly anti-GNU in March. Unknown actors launched an online campaign accusing the government of acquiescing to the settlement of foreign migrants. Dabaiba pushed back against these claims, decrying European pressure to act as a border guard and emphasizing sovereignty.

Notably, claims that the US was attempting to induce Libyan authorities to accept Palestinians surfaced again on 16 May, with claims that the US hoped for Libya to accept up to 1 million.[30] Officially denied by the US Embassy to Libya, the plan reportedly was linked to the US unfreezing of Libyan financial accounts under US control.[31] At the time of writing, there had been limited reaction to this new reporting, likely due to the broader political crises ongoing in western Libya. However, as clearly demonstrated by the reaction to the reports that surfaced in March, these claims pose a further political risk to Libyan stability, given substantial Libyan sensitivities around foreign resettlement in the country. It could prove much more substantially destabilizing if even small numbers of Palestinians arrive in Libya, let alone the large number the US is allegedly pressing for.

The migrant resettlement issue is not only politically potent, but has also led to practical action against international organizations supporting foreigners in Libya. In a serious escalation, the GNU Internal Security Agency (ISA) – Libya's domestic intelligence apparatus – took action against international NGOs and UN agencies assisting migrants in the west of the country. In early April, the ISA claimed to have uncovered a plan to settle migrants in Libya as part of a strategic effort to alter the country's demographic balance. Nine international NGOs had their local offices closed down and some local staff were detained and interrogated. The ISA also targeted the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and while the local office of the organization was not closed, its staff were subjected to an online campaign inciting violence against them.

The ISA's actions effectively undermined several international efforts to provide assistance to foreign migrants in western Libya, including the provision of medical care in detention centres. With the work of most international actors halted, there is also far less external visibility of what is happening in these facilities, which could create an environment that enables worsening predation and abuse.

More broadly, if US deportations to Libya were to route to GNU-controlled areas, they would feed into the ongoing highly politicized debate surrounding migration in the region. This would pose a particular risk to Prime Minister Dabaiba, giving his opponents a potent line of rhetorical attack and poisoning public opinion against him. The present moment is particularly fraught, with al-Kikli's death, the subsequent clashes, and controversial decrees issued during the events by Dabaiba substantially weakening his position and raising questions as to his viability in the role. Events could well spiral rapidly. Even if he continues on, these dynamics will likely force him and the GNU broadly to rely even more heavily on armed groups to stay in power.

If, however, the US were to attempt to send deportees to eastern Libya, other stability risks would arise. Haftar's control in the east is much more robust than Dabaiba's in the west, and it is probable that he would minimize and weather any political blowback in areas under his control. Nevertheless, his power largely rests on an authoritarian and coercive governance model, which is often violent – as demonstrated by the al-Dirsi and Sergiwa cases – and this could be emboldened by open collaboration with the US.

Either way, if US deportations to Libya occur, they are likely to substantially heighten existing tensions and further impede efforts to stabilize the country and move towards democratic elections.

Protesters in Tripoli call for the resignation of the Government of National Unity, 14 May 2025.
© APF via Getty Images

CONCLUSION

The potential deportation of migrants to Libya by the US is substantially different in context and potential risks than its previous transfers of migrants to Latin American states. It risks entrenching and exacerbating some of the most dangerous dynamics in one of the world's most unstable states. Libya is not merely an unsafe destination; it is a country where the rule of law has collapsed and detention is commonly deployed as a means of extortion and abuse. Armed groups and criminal networks operate with impunity, preying on migrants. Deportees would almost certainly become caught up in this abusive system, risking torture, exploitation or disappearance within a detention economy that is deeply embedded in Libya's criminal fabric.

Even worse, such expulsions could have destabilizing ripple effects. In the Tripolitania, where the GNU's authority is challenged by powerful militias, any perceived foreign pressure to host migrants could inflame public anger, put additional strain on Prime Minister Dabaiba and his already fragile governance structures, and further strengthen regional militia groups. In the Cyrenaica and the Fezzan, deportations routed through GNS/LAAF-controlled areas may seem potentially more manageable, but they could embolden Haftar, a strongman whose forces have been repeatedly accused of human rights abuses, possibly incentivizing him to pursue deeper military ambitions or political repression.

By using Libya as a dumping ground for deportees, the US would also risk legitimizing criminal actors, further undermining prospects for accountability and stability. The process would weaken what remains of international humanitarian efforts, which are already under assault, and send a chilling message about the value of migrant lives. In short, deporting migrants to Libya – regardless of which faction accepts them – would not only endanger the people involved but also feed the systems of impunity and conflict that have long plagued the country. Rather than exporting political pressure, such a move would import instability.

In turn, this risks having implications for other US interests. Though successive US administrations have largely avoided focusing on Libya, the country has emerged as a critical territory for a host of issues important for the US, such as great-power competition with Russia, drug trafficking, oil politics and, to a nascent degree, US-bound migration. Heightened instability, fuelled by migrant deportations or other efforts to resettle refugees in Libya, could worsen many of these issues in ways that may undermine key US goals in the region and more broadly. Rather than viewing deportations though short-term political calculus, the US should assess the long-term risks to its broader interests in Libya and in the region that such a policy would entail.

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