

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2025 SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME



LIBYA

HYBRID MIGRATION SYSTEMS
UNDERPIN RESILIENCE OF
HUMAN SMUGGLING IN 2024

Rupert Horsley

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BGDP	Border Guard and Desert Patrol
CBL	Central Bank of Libya
CTF	Counter Terrorism Force
GACS	General Administration for Coastal Security
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
GNS	Government of National Stability
GNU	Government of National Unity
LAAF	Libyan Arab Armed Forces
LCG	Libyan Coast Guard
POE	Port of entry
SSA	Stabilization Support Apparatus
TBZ Brigade	Tariq Bin Ziyad Brigade
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Western Border CID	Western Border Criminal Investigations Directorate



INTRODUCTION

In 2024, Libya was the main point of entry for irregular migrants reaching Europe on the central Mediterranean route. This reflects a notable trend of continuity over the past several years and has ensured that arrivals in Italy remained relatively high, even as departures from Tunisia – the other major embarkation country on this route – fell dramatically. According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the proportion of people arriving in Italy from Tunisia fell from 62% to 29% between 2023 and 2024, while for those arriving from Libya it rose from 33% to 62%.¹ The resilience of human smuggling in Libya is therefore critical to understanding the challenge of sea arrivals in southern Europe, as it reveals how entrenched smuggling networks, local power dynamics and Libya's political fragmentation continue to sustain a steady flow of departures despite international deterrence efforts and shifting regional trends.

In 2024, there were approximately 71 000 attempted sea crossings from Libya, roughly comparable with the previous two years, which saw 72 000 and 75 000 attempted sea crossings. This remarkable consistency has been sustained by the hybrid smuggling system, which emerged as the dominant model of migration in Libya in 2021 and remained so in 2024. Hybrid smuggling refers to the system whereby migrants initially travel to Libya through regular or semi-regular routes, such as flights into airports, and then are moved overland to coastal departure points for the sea crossing to Europe.

This system is adaptable to local changes and delivers a consistently high level of attempted departures, despite some localized improvements in security. Critically, the Government of National Unity (GNU), which rules western Libya, continued to struggle with internal division and weak control over crucial areas, especially on the west coast, a key region for human smuggling stretching from the Tunisian border to the city of Zawiya. Political infighting and disputes over state resources weakened the government's ability to assert authority in this area, enabling human smugglers to offer relatively reliable sea crossings to migrants undertaking hybrid journeys.

The assassination of Abd al-Rahman Milad (aka al-Bija), the commander of the Zawiya refinery branch of the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG), in September 2024 had a significant impact on the security landscape in the strategically important city of Zawiya. His death created a power vacuum, destabilizing the city and weakening efforts to curb smuggling activities along the coast. The subsequent internal conflict allowed smuggling networks to flourish and prevented the authorities in Tripoli from cutting off access to the Mediterranean.

By contrast, the situation in Tobruk, a key port city in the far east of the country, saw notable changes in 2024 when compared to the previous two years. Following a major crackdown on human smuggling in the region in 2023, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) continued to prevent the departure of large vessels. This was part of a concerted effort by the LAAF to use migration management as a diplomatic tool. Suppressing maritime smuggling in Tobruk was a significant intervention that contributed to the overall reduction in departures between 2023 and 2024. However, it also led to a shift in dynamics, with smaller-scale operations gradually gaining ground over the course of the year.

This is the latest monitoring report on human smuggling in Libya from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC). It builds on the series of annual reports issued by the GI-TOC since 2017, which track the evolution of human smuggling in Libya, as well as the political, security and economic dynamics that influence it.²

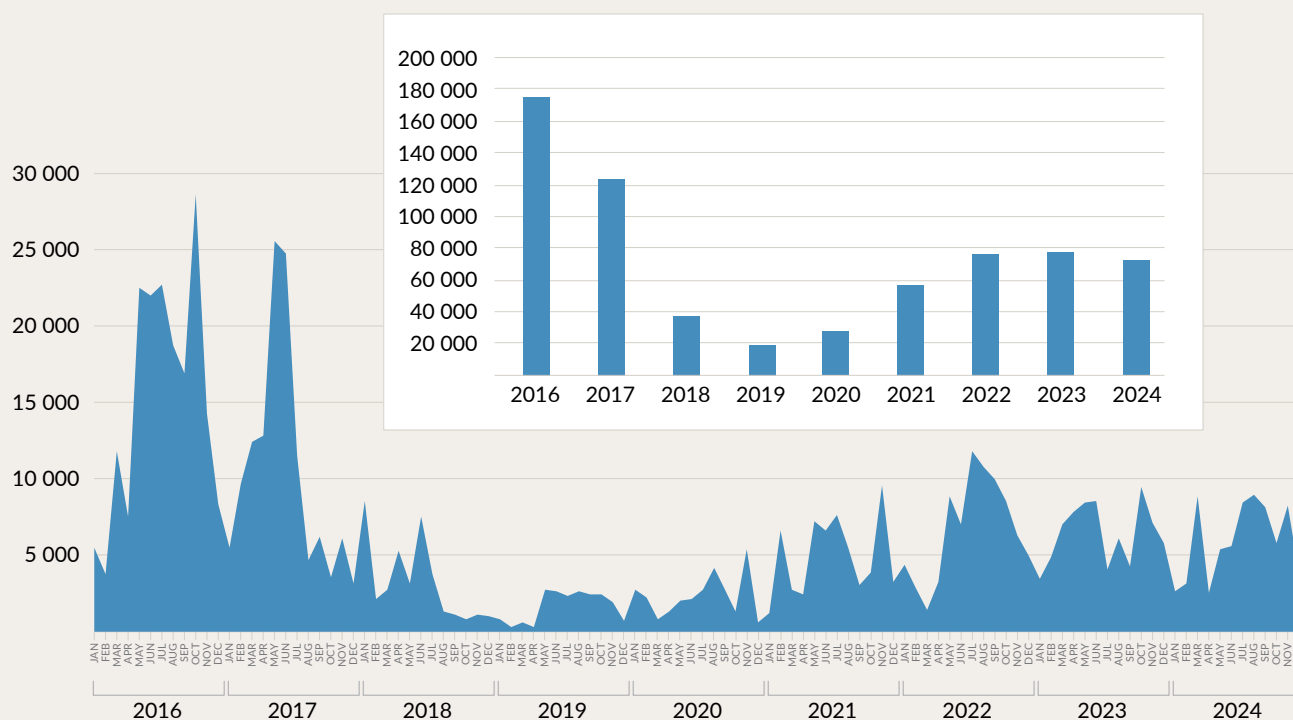


FIGURE 1 Total annual sea crossings attempted from the Libyan coast, 2016 to 2024 (annual totals inset).

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2024 – 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 areas of inquiry for field research and to validate the field interviews collected by researchers.

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed are inherently opaque and the geographical areas covered are often remote, volatile or difficult to access. For this reason, the brief should be seen as just one part in a long-term GI-TOC reporting series, designed to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Libya and the wider region.

Key points

- Since the 2011 revolution, central authority in western Libya has remained weak, with real power fragmented among armed groups and elite networks long involved in smuggling and other illicit economies. Successive governments have depended on these actors for security, granting them formal law enforcement roles that undermine reform and entrench corruption. This dynamic persisted in 2024, when the western Tripolitania region was destabilized by overlapping conflicts.
- Zawiya and Sabratha have remained particularly central to Libya's west coast smuggling, with entrenched networks continuing to shape regional security in 2024. Most major armed actors in these cities are directly or indirectly involved in smuggling, with notorious figures from the post-revolutionary period retaining significant influence.
- In eastern Libya, the Haftar family has consolidated power into a personalized system under the LAAF, with its civilian government serving more as a vehicle for patronage and foreign engagement than real decision making. Despite internal divisions and corruption, the LAAF has greater command of the territory it controls, as demonstrated by its decisive curbing of Tobruk's maritime smuggling in mid-2023.
- Libya re-emerged as the primary gateway for migrants to Europe in 2024, but flows primarily came from South Asia and the Levant rather than West and East Africa. This shift highlights the dominance of hybrid smuggling systems, sustained by relative stability, weak policing and easy air access.
- Alongside a more deeply entrenched model of arrivals at Benghazi's Benina airport and departures from the west coast, new trends surfaced, including the resurgence of small-boat departures from Tobruk, a series of anomalous flights transiting migrants from Central Asia to Nicaragua via Libya, and a major increase in displaced Sudanese travelling to Libya.



POLITICAL CONTEXT OF LAW ENFORCEMENT AND HUMAN SMUGGLING DYNAMICS IN 2024

To understand the dynamics of human smuggling in Libya in 2024, it is crucial to consider the political context of law enforcement. Following the collapse of central authority after the 2011 revolution, the Libyan state has remained extremely weak, with real power fragmented among local armed groups, elite networks and community-based forces. Many of these entities have a long history of involvement in smuggling and other illicit economies, and they have increasingly assumed formal law enforcement roles under successive governments. Instead of establishing effective state control, this situation has forced the authorities to constantly negotiate with and manage unruly coalitions of armed actors, thereby undermining meaningful reform and hindering genuine law enforcement. This volatile and compromised security landscape not only enables human smuggling, but allows it to operate with the tacit or direct involvement of those tasked with stopping it.

Political fragmentation in the Tripolitania

In 2024, the Tripolitania was plagued by multiple overlapping conflicts that threatened the survival of the GNU and destabilized the entire west coast. The GNU's weakness stems from the structural realities that have crippled every Tripoli-based government since 2011. Western Libya is characterized by a dense and fragmented social fabric comprising tribal, ethnic and city-based identity groups, many of which harbour deep-seated rivalries. The post-2011 revolutionary process and cycles of civil war have hardened these divisions, producing a mosaic of heavily armed local polities that guard their autonomy while competing for influence over national institutions. In this landscape, authority is inherently transactional and unstable. In order to remain in power, the GNU must continually manage a volatile coalition of local factions, with the threat of defection or armed defiance always looming. With few genuinely neutral state institutions to mediate between groups or enforce decisions, the central government is often forced to negotiate from a position of weakness. This arrangement fuels widespread corruption and impunity, as dominant factions are left to police themselves and pursue their own interests. The GNU risks provoking war or the collapse of its rickety coalition if it encroaches upon their interests.



The Central Bank of Libya, headquartered in Tripoli, is a seat of political power in Libya.

© AFP via Getty Images

This situation has dogged the GNU since its establishment in 2021. However, conditions became even more challenging in 2024, when the GNU dismissed the former Central Bank of Libya (CBL) chief, Sadiq al-Kabir, leading to a power struggle that disrupted financial oversight and oil revenue distribution.³

The CBL is a central pillar of political power in Libya, as it controls the disbursement of public funds and is thus a key enabling actor for patronage networks. In a state where access to salaries, budgets and foreign currency allocations is the main incentive for political loyalty, controlling the CBL is essential for controlling the system itself. Al-Kabir, who had served as governor of the CBL for over a decade, was removed in a decree issued by the Presidency Council – backed by the Dabaibas – that appointed a new board. This decree contravened the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement and sparked a power struggle that resulted in the appointment of Naji Issa as the new chairperson.

This loss of clear control over the CBL significantly undermined the GNU's leverage over rival factions. Without reliable access to spending tools, the government struggled to manage patronage networks, reward loyalty or discipline defection, further eroding its ability to maintain political cohesion in an already volatile environment.

The breakdown in relations between the GNU and the CBL also contributed to the wider polarization of pro- and anti-government coalitions in Tripoli. The pro-GNU camp was built around the Stabilization Support Apparatus (SSA) led by Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli, various groups from Misrata, as well as Interior Minister Emad Trabelsi from Zintan. The opposing faction was led by the Rada Special Forces. In April, these groups clashed in central Tripoli.⁴ While the conflict was quickly resolved, the outbreak of fighting between members of the GNU coalition revealed the dysfunction of its rule. Further sporadic episodes of violence broke out throughout the rest of the year.⁵ This instability hindered the GNU's ability to pursue a credible programme of reconstruction and state renewal (a polarization that continued to deteriorate in 2025).

It is important to emphasize that, with a few notable exceptions, this was not a matter of extreme lawlessness in the streets. While the central government is weak, local power bases have gradually become more established and stable. Most areas now have authorities that are more or less accountable for upholding law and order, based on a blend of informal communal structures and local branches of state security forces.

This is in contrast with the anarchic years that followed the Fajr Libya civil war, which took place between 2014 and 2015, when extreme levels of general crime, often highly violent, were widespread.⁶ Although some communities managed to police themselves to a certain extent during this period, others descended into lawlessness due to their rejection of the post-revolutionary order or internal divisions that prevented the emergence of strong leadership to impose local order.

It was in this context that the migrant crisis of 2014–2017 spiralled out of control, with the wider climate of violent criminality becoming inextricably linked to the abusive practices of human smuggling networks.⁷ The areas that became the most notorious hotspots during this period were precisely those that had either rejected the post-revolutionary order, such as Warshefana and Bani Walid, or were chronically divided, such as Zawiya.

As the factions controlling the Tripolitania have consolidated and developed, the level of general, street-level crime has decreased. However, this has not translated into a reduction in high-level organized crime and systemic corruption, since the factional elites themselves are often the main beneficiaries of these activities. Corruption and illicit economies are not merely tolerated, they are integral to the power structures that sustain these groups, making any meaningful crackdown unlikely.⁸ Even when a certain criminal activity, such as human smuggling, pose a diplomatic liability to the political system as a whole, the fragmented governance and competing interests of the various factions prevent unified or sustained efforts to combat it. Instead, enforcement remains selective, driven by short-term political considerations rather than a genuine commitment to the rule of law.

Against this backdrop, human smuggling, particularly the maritime aspects of hybrid smuggling systems, continued to thrive in western Libya in 2024. The GNU clearly recognizes that its rival in eastern Libya has benefited from its ability to curb maritime smuggling (see below) and would like to emulate this. However, the political structures in western Libya prevent this from happening. In practice, it is simply unable to dictate to factional elites what they can and cannot do in the territories under their control. Moreover, the political advantages of reducing departures from the west coast are frequently outweighed by the urgent necessity of maintaining a coalition amid mounting opposition, compelling the GNU to empower unreliable actors, including those with a history of criminality who may be considered likely to allow human smuggling within their domains. This has been particularly problematic in Zawiya, where the GNU faces considerable resistance from the powerful Busriba network. This has led the GNU to partner with controversial figures such as Mohammed Bahroun, the head of the Anti-Security Threats Agency, in order to balance the risk of having an openly defiant group so close to the capital.

Despite struggling to effect changes on the ground, the GNU is nonetheless aware of the diplomatic and political importance of migration management for its international legitimacy. To this end, it organized a large migration conference in July 2024, attended by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.⁹ While hosting world leaders in Tripoli was a political victory for the GNU, the event lacked clear objectives and has not produced any tangible results in terms of human smuggling.



Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni attends a migration conference in Tripoli in July 2024, organized by Libya's Government of National Unity. © Hamza Al Ahmar/Anadolu via Getty Images

Notably, it is not only the GNU leadership who want to stop departures from the west coast. Powerful elements in major hubs such as Zuwara and Zawiya, driven by a combination of financial, political and moral incentives, have made some effort to curb human smuggling. However, these endeavours are thwarted by the same local and regional power structures, including the weak central government, intense rivalry between towns and groups, and the overriding priority of internal cohesion and solidarity. These factors reduce the incentive for good-faith engagement with law enforcement efforts, as communities face little penalty for allowing smuggling to occur in their areas, while suppressing the activity would alienate and weaken organized networks of young men who are often critical to defence and power projection in times of crisis.

The major developments that undermined stability and weakened the resolve and capacity to combat human smuggling in western Libya in 2024 were the assassination of Milad and Bahroun's subsequent loss of power, and Trabelsi's controversial attempt to assert control in Ras Ajadir.

Assassination of Milad and Bahroun's expulsion from Zawiya

Zawiya is the largest and most significant city on Libya's west coast, which stretches from the border with Tunisia to Zawiya's eastern hinterland. Home to various tribes, many of which maintain well-armed militias that have been integrated into state structures, the city is plagued by factionalism and has one of the highest crime rates in the country.¹⁰ Its strategic coastal location has also made it a focal point for maritime human smuggling operations.

There has been a long-standing rivalry in Zawiya between the Busriba network and Bahroun. The Busriba network is a powerful, clan-based militia drawn from the Awlad Buhmeira tribe and led by

brothers Hassan and Ali Busriba. It exerts influence over the Zawiya refinery, Zawiya University and other critical assets. Senior elements within the network, including Mohammed Kushlav and the late Milad, have previously been sanctioned for their role in human smuggling and other illicit economies.¹¹ Nevertheless, the Busriba network is a key player in local and national security and politics, with Essam Busriba (Ali and Hassan's brother) serving as interior minister of the Government of National Stability (GNS).

Bahroun is a fast-rising militia commander who has been steadily promoted by the GNU. This promotion has come despite what Small Arms Survey has described as a history of criminality and Bahroun having been previously implicated by Attorney General al-Sadiq al-Sour for allegedly assisting the Islamic State.¹² He began his career as the commander of the First Support Force, a powerful armed group made up of socially diverse elements from central Zawiya, before going on to establish the Anti-Security Threats Agency. Following the revolution, Bahroun became closely associated with the Busriba network, acting as an enforcer. This relationship ended in 2019, around the time he was appointed as a captain in the Zawiya Security Directorate. He leveraged this role to expand his power on the west coast and his involvement in illicit economies.

Other influential tribes and factions involved in this rivalry include the Awlad Saqr tribe, the Karaghala tribe, the 52 Brigade led by Mahmoud Bin Rajab, and a constellation of smaller groups. Frequent clashes and continual politicking among these parties create chronic instability, facilitating an environment conducive to illicit activities.

The GNU itself has also played a destabilizing role, empowering certain Zawiyan factions to divide the city and counter opposing forces. Before 2024, this function was chiefly fulfilled by Bahroun, who, despite his controversial and divisive reputation, was steadily promoted by the GNU. Notably, by the end of 2022, Bahroun had risen to the head of the Anti-Terrorism Office for the western region of the Libyan Intelligence Service, despite being wanted by the Attorney General on terrorism charges.¹³ After removing him from this position in the first half of 2023, the GNU appointed him as the head of the Anti-Security Threats Agency.

On 2 September 2024, the long-running conflict between the Busriba network and Bahroun escalated sharply, when Milad was shot dead as he left the Janzur Naval Academy.¹⁴ Milad was a prominent figure in the Busriba network and a key player in the west coast security landscape. Although politics in Zawiya are of a violent nature, high-level assassinations are relatively rare, and Milad's killing was a seismic event.

Local investigations led by allies of the Busriba network quickly determined that Bahroun had ordered the killing, and that Abd al-Fattah al-Shalali, a known hitman and member of Bahroun's Anti-Security Threats Agency, had carried it out. Based on this information, the attorney general issued an arrest warrant for al-Shalali. Bahroun, however, refused to hand him over, causing tensions to surge. Mohammed Kushlav (aka al-Gsab) – a cousin of Milad and another leading member of the Busriba network – mobilized forces in the streets and threatened to attack Bahroun directly.¹⁵ Bahroun subsequently agreed to comply, surrendering al-Shalali and turning himself in on 6 September.¹⁶

Bahroun was released on 7 October in murky circumstances. After spending some time abroad, he returned to Libya sometime in late October and remained there for the rest of 2024. In his absence, the Zawiyan factions arranged for his units in the First Support Force to be placed under the command of Abdel Basit al-Shiwa. However, Bahroun retained the loyalty of some of his men, who continued to hold positions in central Zawiya and Surman, reportedly becoming involved in



criminal activity and causing instability.¹⁷ On his return to Libya, Bahroun's influence over his former units increased once more. Nevertheless, he was still officially wanted by the attorney general and did not take on any visible leadership responsibilities.

Milad was an extremely controversial figure. Following his sanctioning by the UN for his involvement in human smuggling in 2018,¹⁸ he was arrested on similar charges in 2020.¹⁹ Following his release in 2021, however, he rehabilitated his reputation, particularly through a project to restore the Janzur Naval Academy.

This project is a good example of how destabilizing figures such as Milad, who are both powerful and compromised, can also be crucial in establishing a minimum level of security and law and order in Libya. The academy is located in an area west of Tripoli that became particularly lawless during and after the civil war. As the navy was unable to access it safely, it fell into disuse and disrepair. In the summer of 2021, when Milad was looking for a way to improve his reputation, he used his influence with Muammar al-Dhawi – the Warshefana armed group leader who controlled the area – to negotiate access and provide the security guarantees that were vital for the refurbishment and reopening of the facility.²⁰

The political relationship between the Busriba network and al-Dhawi under the SSA was pivotal in completing this project. In turn, it greatly boosted Milad's prestige and influence within the Libyan navy: the commander of the LCG, Rida Issa, and the chief of general staff, Mohammed al-Haddad, both visited the location in the summer of 2021.²¹ This conferred a huge amount of legitimacy on Milad, marking a new level of his influence within the formal military.

The assassination of Milad weakened the Kushlav faction of the Busriba network to which he belonged and created a power vacuum that further destabilized Zawiya's already fragile security landscape. It also loosened constraints on human smuggling on the west coast by alienating key elements of the Kushlav faction and removing a figure who, despite his criminal activities, had played a role in regulating and mediating the smuggling trade. Without Milad, divisions within the Busriba network deepened, making it more difficult for any single group to impose control over key departure points.²²

In addition to the major developments surrounding the assassination of Milad and the arrest of Bahroun, the relentless churn of Zawiyan politics continued in 2024. One case in which this had a direct impact on law and order was that of local armed group leader Mohammed Sifaw. A controversial figure frequently involved in armed clashes in the city, Sifaw was exiled from Zawiya in 2023 after his forces were targeted by a GNU drone strike.²³ He returned to Zawiya in the first quarter of 2024, having been made commander of the Ministry of Defence-affiliated 555 Brigade, granting him official backing and protection.²⁴ This move allowed Sifaw to re-establish his presence in the city and provided the GNU with an additional ally. However, it also empowered an extremely divisive local figure.

These events further entrenched the role played by human smuggling in local power dynamics. The assassination of Milad, factional competition and the GNU's attempts to gain political leverage all undermined law enforcement and fractured control over important areas, weakening any consistent regulation of smuggling routes. As a result, the west coast remained Libya's primary departure zone for Europe-bound migrants (this is discussed in more detail below).

Trabelsi's ambitions drive tensions at the western border

One of the few genuine attempts to expand state authority in 2024 ultimately had the opposite effect, as widespread scepticism over its motives fuelled further instability. Throughout the year, Interior Minister Trabelsi's attempts to assert control over the Ras Ajadir port of entry (POE) and the Tunisian border from Ghadames to al-Assa remained contentious and problematic.

The push to place the Ras Ajadir POE firmly under the control of the Interior Ministry began in late 2023, with overwhelming force used to effect the transition.²⁵ However, the move was met with strong resistance from both Zuwaran and Zawiyen factions, the former of which had long dominated the crossing due to its geographic proximity and vested interests. They viewed the intervention not as an assertion of central authority, but as an attempt to transfer control to forces from Zintan, the city from which Trabelsi originally comes, under the guise of government oversight.²⁶ This perception further eroded local trust, transforming what was framed as a governance initiative into another flashpoint in Libya's ongoing power struggles.

On 19 March, tensions escalated when Trabelsi deployed a small Law Enforcement Force detachment from Tajoura to Ras Ajadir, nominally to tackle smuggling. The unit's inflammatory behaviour provoked local traders and smugglers into a riot, prompting the intervention of the Western Border Criminal Investigations Directorate (Western Border CID), formerly known as the Masked Men.²⁷ This led directly to a spike in departures from Zuwara, as law enforcement agencies halted their activities.

In addition, Trabelsi's public comments following the incident inflamed hostilities between ethnic groups. Ras Ajadir remained closed while complex negotiations regarding its future security and policing arrangements continued. These concluded in June, with Trabelsi conceding that security duties would have to be shared, and Ras Ajadir was scheduled to reopen on 20 June. However, the reopening was delayed as local actors in Zuwara felt the agreed terms were not being respected. Although the situation remained under control for the rest of 2024, tensions over anti-smuggling efforts at the border and at sea continued to complicate efforts to curb human smuggling in Zuwara.



Libyan Interior Minister Emad Trabelsi speaks at a press conference in Tripoli in July 2024, deploring Libya's role as a gateway to Europe for migrants from other countries. © Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images

Trabelsi's attempt to assert control over the Ras Ajadir POE was part of a broader strategy to strengthen Zintani influence over border security in the area stretching from Ghadames to the coast. Another element of this plan was to establish the Border Guard and Desert Patrol (BGDP) as the dominant border enforcement agency in the north-west. Trabelsi's actions arguably reflect a dual ambition: to secure financial control over cross-border flows, and to translate this into political legitimacy and leverage, both domestically and in engagement with Tunisia.

The BGDP, under the command of Trabelsi's fellow Zintani Mohammed al-Shibani, was the key vehicle of this strategy in 2024. It mainly operates out of the border towns of al-Assa and Ghadames, playing a significant role in receiving migrants expelled or informally transferred from Tunisia. Al-Shibani, formerly the undersecretary for migration, is a long-time associate of Trabelsi in the Zintani Sawaiq Brigade. He has leveraged this position to align the BGDP closely with GNU Interior Ministry priorities under Trabelsi's leadership.

An example of this can be seen on the Libya–Tunisia border, where reports of coordination between the BGDP and Tunisian forces around the expulsion of migrants surged in 2024. In February, for example, reports received by the GI-TOC claimed that Tunisia's National Guard handed over more than 1 000 migrants to the BGDP in three operations. The modalities of the coordination between the two sides around expulsions is deliberately opaque and irregular; nonetheless, the sheer volume and regularity of reporting suggests it became an entrenched feature along the frontier in 2024.

This cooperation has enhanced the BGDP's profile as a border force and helped position it as a preferred partner for Tunisian officials, particularly in times of crisis. Trabelsi's focus on improving infrastructure in Zintani-aligned zones, including the construction or formalization of detention centres in Nalut, Ajelat and Bir al-Ghanem, has strengthened this objective. These facilities serve a dual function: they project an image of state control while generating revenue through extortion, forced labour or collusion with smugglers. The financial incentives of managing migration and detention in this unregulated space have been central to the BGDP's rise and its informal agreement with Tunisian security actors.

Stability in the LAAF's domains

While the political landscape in the Tripolitania remains fragmented, the LAAF and the Haftar family have centralized power in the Cyrenaica and, to a lesser extent, the Fezzan, creating a personalized political system by co-opting or eliminating rivals. The main political dynamics revolve around competition between the sons of LAAF head Khalifa Haftar, particularly Saddam and his brothers Khalid and Belqasim. Although the GNS nominally runs eastern Libya, it is in fact subservient to the Haftars and effectively serves as a means of coordination, patronage and legitimization. It has genuine aspirations to be seen as a technocratic government and a legitimate and indispensable partner to foreign powers, but it is not the ultimate seat of decision-making or political contest.

The level of unity and legitimacy of the authorities in the east should not be overstated, nor should their commitment to law and order. Like the west, it is a post-conflict environment characterized by deep social divisions, weak institutions and high levels of crime and corruption. The region played a major role in human smuggling in 2022 and 2023, with departures from the port of Tobruk skyrocketing.²⁸

However, unlike the authorities in western Libya, when the LAAF did decide to clamp down on maritime smuggling in the city in July 2023, the intervention was decisive.²⁹ Given this abrupt surge and the LAAF's later decisive intervention, one might reasonably infer that earlier, less stringent enforcement reflected a deliberate policy choice, possibly as part of a strategy to translate strong territorial control into greater legitimacy with international partners by demonstrating effective collaboration on the migration file. This is a comparative advantage the LAAF has over the GNU. While the latter may have stronger international legitimacy, it has struggled to exert any effective control over human smuggling and trafficking. In May 2024, the GNS organized a migration conference with this in mind.³⁰ It was reportedly poorly attended and had no material outcomes; direct bilateral talks with relevant governments are clearly of far greater utility. Nevertheless, as an early effort by eastern authorities to host international events, it was an important, if intangible, step towards normalization and legitimacy.

While the hybrid smuggling systems that predominated in 2024 continued to rely on Benina airport as the main access point to Libya (see below), the LAAF can credibly deny involvement in most of the maritime stages of these journeys. To date, it does not appear to have incurred any political consequences for allowing Benina to be used in this way.

The maritime smuggling that did occur from eastern Libya involved small boats, usually carrying fewer than 50 migrants, and was generally low profile. While authorities are likely to have given at least some tacit approval, based on the calculation that plausible deniability would be possible and that the diplomatic risk was minimal, this level of activity did not intersect with political developments or calculations at the same scale as before the 2023 crackdown. (However, this situation has changed dramatically in 2025, with a major increase in sea crossings from Tobruk to Greece.)

The LAAF also has a well-established and robust presence in the Fezzan, despite the region's vast and challenging terrain. It exercises control through a combination of local and non-local forces. Since its first forays in 2018, maintaining a balance between these groups and respecting local claims to territorial sovereignty have been pivotal to its governance. As its position strengthened, the focus shifted towards a greater role for core LAAF groups, particularly the 128 Brigade and the Tariq Bin Ziyad (TBZ) Brigade. Both came to play an important role in border security and managing human smuggling between 2019 and 2023.

Notably, from 25 August 2023, LAAF forces began to increase their presence in the far south of the Fezzan in response to instability in the Sahel, particularly following the coup in Niger. The main formation involved in these deployments was the 128 Brigade – at the time the largest LAAF unit in the region, controlling the Ubari–Ghat operations room – with its commander, Hassan Maatoug al-Zadma, personally joining some patrols. The 128 Brigade was dominated by members of the Awlad Suleiman tribe, which has a significant presence in the Fezzan. Other units involved included Mohammed al-Jarah's 676 Reconnaissance Company and the 152 Battalion of the TBZ.

The patrols covered an area stretching across the Niger–Chad border region and the Algerian border, as far as the Salvador Pass and Toummo, the main crossing point into Niger.³¹ The Salvador Pass has historically been a major trafficking corridor characterized by lawlessness. Patrolling this area marked a step change in the LAAF's ability to operate in the most remote parts of the Fezzan, compared to its initial expansion to the south-west in 2019.



Stills from a video released by the 128 Brigade, showing Hassan Maatoug al-Zadma's trip to al-Wigh airbase, near the Chadian border, and the Toummo crossing, a main gateway between Libya and Niger. *Photos: Facebook*

In September and October 2023, al-Zadma visited the al-Wigh airbase, near the Chadian border, and the Toummo crossing.³² While both sites were controlled by a loose coalition of Tebu groups at the time, al-Zadma's visit signalled the long-term consolidation of the LAAF's position as the recognized ruler of the Fezzan.

In 2024, the LAAF began a major reorganization of its forces in the Fezzan. While the exact rationale was not made explicit, it was related to the Haftar family's concerns about the increasing independence of the al-Zadma family, as well as that of the Awlad Suleiman tribe more generally. Throughout the year, the LAAF leadership gradually but firmly moved to sideline al-Zadma, even placing him under house arrest for a time.³³

Relatedly, photographs surfaced in early April showing Massoud Jeddi, a prominent Awlad Suleiman militiaman and former commander of the 116 Brigade, dining with key LAAF figures, including Saddam Haftar, al-Zadma and Omar Imraja. This marked Jeddi's return to the LAAF after a two-year absence, following his falling out with Haftar in 2022.³⁴ Although Jeddi did not go on to assume a prominent position within the force, the public meeting offered an insight into the LAAF's efforts to navigate its relationship with the Awlad Suleiman tribe.

Tensions with al-Zadma continued to simmer until February 2025, when the LAAF ordered the dissolution of the 128 Brigade. This sparked clashes in Qatrun and heightened hostilities in the far south of the Fezzan.³⁵ This latter development disrupted drug and human smuggling in southern Libya, due to the resulting insecurity and the direct involvement of some of those concerned in these illicit activities.³⁶

However, apart from the short-term disruption in February and March 2025, the impact of the LAAF's policies in the Fezzan on the Libyan human smuggling system was negligible. This is primarily because hybrid smuggling, whereby migrants fly into Benina airport in Benghazi before being transported overland to western Libya, has become the dominant method of irregular migration, rather than traditional trans-Saharan smuggling. Unlike in previous years, when large numbers of sub-Saharan African migrants travelled overland through the Fezzan before attempting sea crossings, the current system relies heavily on air routes and facilitated transport.

To the east, in southern Cyrenaica, the political landscape of the Kufra region remained relatively stable in 2024. Subul al-Salam continued to dominate, while larger LAAF units were occasionally deployed for specific operations. Although there were high tensions, shifts in control and banditry on the Sudanese side due to the civil war, the situation did not spill over into Libya. Social relations between the Tebu and Zway in Kufra remained steady, with the Tebu recognizing Subul al-Salam's dominant position.

Cross-border trade, both licit and illicit, is crucial to Kufra's economy. Despite the war in Sudan causing disruptions, food exports and fuel smuggling flourished. Subul al-Salam and other local groups maintained control of these activities, imposing taxes and overseeing various aspects of the operations. The local population also benefited from selling fuel on the black market, further boosting the economy. Although there was potential for conflict over these resources, the situation remained stable due to the LAAF and Subul al-Salam's firm control.



Prominent Awlad Suleiman armed leader Massoud Jeddi (second from right) meets with key LAAF figures (from left to right) Hassan Maatoug al-Zadma, Omar Imraja and Saddam Haftar. *Photo: Facebook*



KEY TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN HUMAN SMUGGLING

The following section examines the shifting dynamics of Libya's human smuggling landscape in 2024 and early 2025, with a particular focus on hybrid smuggling systems and their sustained dominance in both the east and the west of the country. These systems have matured and adapted to enable the continued flow of migrants, primarily from South Asia and the Middle East, through semi-legal air arrivals, overland travel and clandestine maritime departures. While hybrid systems remained the backbone of the smuggling ecosystem in 2024, there were also some peripheral yet emerging trends, such as the resurgence of small-boat departures from Tobruk, the expansion of the Sudanese population in Libya, and Libya's transient and unexpected role as an intermediate point in transcontinental smuggling routes to Latin America.

Hybrid smuggling continues to dominate

Since 2021, hybrid smuggling systems, whereby migrants travel to Libya using regular or semi-regular routes before undertaking irregular sea crossings, have come to play a pivotal role in Libya's human smuggling ecosystem.³⁷ In 2024, these systems remained central to the journeys of migrants from Bangladesh, Syria, Egypt and Pakistan. These four nationalities accounted for the majority of confirmed arrivals in Italy that year, with 13 800 Bangladeshis, 12 500 Syrians, 4 300 Egyptians and 3 290 Pakistanis recorded. This pattern closely resembled the situation in 2023, when an estimated 76% of all arrivals in Italy from Libya were from these four countries.

The emergence and persistence of the hybrid smuggling system in Libya is the result of a robust and dynamic ecosystem involving Libyan and home-country travel agencies, Libyan officials, intermediaries, smugglers and, in some cases, embassy staff. These networks are not hierarchical or tightly structured, but have instead developed organically. This model initially emerged in 2021, when relations between Egypt and the Tripoli-based government improved, and concerns in Egypt about insecurity in Libya eased. This reversed years of restricted movement, enabling Egyptians to obtain travel documents and fly directly to western Libya. At first, the route was mainly used by Egyptians seeking work, with regular flights arriving at Mitiga and Misrata airports. However, as more people began making sea

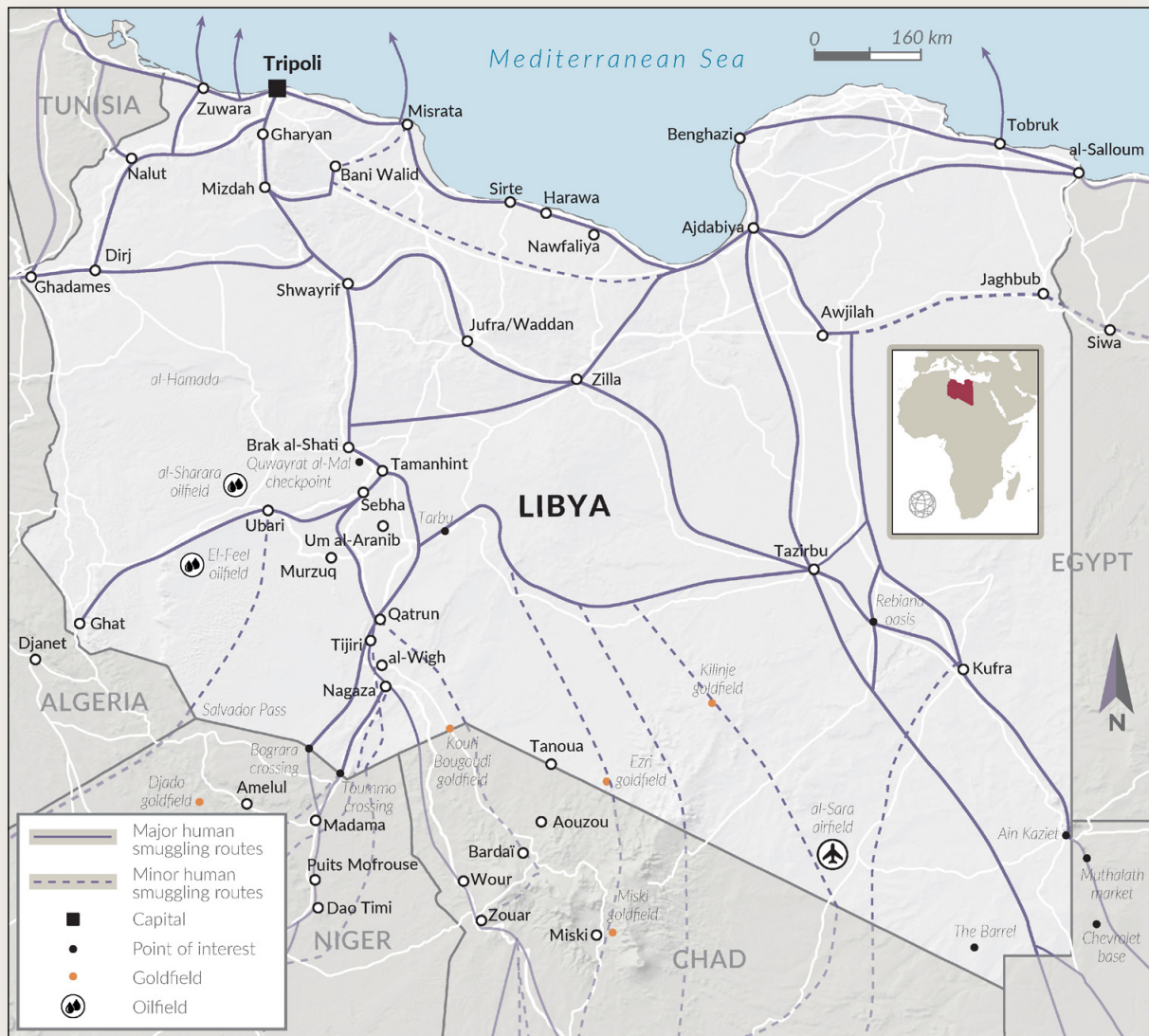


FIGURE 2 Libya, showing main human smuggling routes.

crossings on an ad hoc and opportunistic basis, travel agents and smugglers began to exploit the emerging market.³⁸ Packages for part of or the entire journey – including legal entry, limited inland travel and the final maritime leg – began to be offered as a service.

In the early days, entering Libya typically required sponsorship from a registered Libyan company and approval from the Labour Ministry. This was a significant obstacle, as only a limited number of work permits were granted. Reports emerged of companies selling their allocations, or of smugglers attempting to purchase registered businesses outright in order to access the paperwork needed.³⁹ As demand from Bangladeshis and Syrians grew, Benina airport in Benghazi became increasingly central to the ecosystem, eventually eclipsing the western airports entirely. The process of obtaining the necessary documents for arrival at Benina airport was also complicated, although it gradually became more streamlined. By 2023, a simplified security clearance issued by the LAAF for US\$500 (€452⁴⁰)

allowed migrants to board flights and pass through immigration at Benina. However, securing the clearance still required connections within the LAAF or the GNS, and these relationships were essential for any travel agent providing regular services.

The emergence of Benina as the key POE for migrants undertaking hybrid journeys caused a rise in embarkations from the area around Tobruk. Before this, sea departures had been concentrated along Libya's west coast, particularly in the area stretching from the Tunisian border and Tripoli's western suburbs, where well-established smuggling networks in Zawiya, Sabratha and Zuwara provided reliable services. However, from 2022 onwards, networks in Tobruk began to attract increasing volumes of business. This shift was enabled in part by a policy change within elements of the LAAF, who tacitly condoned these activities, and by the logistical convenience of Tobruk's proximity to Benina airport.

With smugglers launching large fishing vessels capable of carrying 300 to 400 people, Tobruk quickly became a key departure point. By early 2023, it accounted for nearly half of all sea departures from Libya. However, in May and June of that year, the LAAF launched a major security campaign against human smuggling in the city, causing a total collapse in activity in the area.⁴¹ This crackdown appeared to be an attempt by the LAAF to present itself to international actors as a reliable partner in controlling migration. Following the shutdown of large-scale departures from Tobruk, the maritime leg of hybrid smuggling was almost entirely confined to western Libya (this process and its development through to 2024 are discussed in greater detail below).

By the beginning of 2024, the version of the hybrid smuggling system outlined above was firmly established, and it functioned smoothly throughout the year with only minor adjustments. Benina airport remained the main hub and the GI-TOC did not identify any significant changes to its operational dynamics. Although smaller numbers of Bangladeshi and Syrian nationals continued arriving at Mitiga airport in Tripoli with valid documentation, they appeared to be genuine labour migrants intending to reside and work in Libya, rather than transiting to Europe. While it does not appear that Mitiga was regularly used for hybrid smuggling in 2024, some limited activity cannot be ruled out.

Following the conclusion of the war for Tripoli in 2020, travelling overland from Benghazi to the west became easier and more reliable. As open conflict between Libya's eastern and western regions subsided, the main coastal highway through Sirte reopened as a key transport corridor. Detours to smaller roads or tracks further inland were occasionally required to avoid sensitive checkpoints. By 2024, several companies were offering regular bus services, and private hire cars and minibuses were readily available. This ease of movement established the overland segment as a standard component of the hybrid journey.

Networks offering integrated packages provided these transport services alongside accommodation. Migrants interviewed in 2024 who had undertaken this sort of journey reported being housed in Benghazi hotels for several nights before travelling west by minibus or car to Tripoli, Zuwara or Zawiya, where they were hosted before the sea crossing. Those choosing to stay in Libya to work for a period could easily arrange independent travel west using public transport, taxis or informal services offered by smugglers.

The maritime smuggling aspect of hybrid journeys also remained relatively constant in 2024. The vast majority of sea crossings were made from the west coast. There was also a small but notable rise in small boat embarkations from Tobruk (these two trends are discussed in greater detail below).

The cost of a hybrid journey varies significantly based on the services included, the migrant's nationality and how much they are willing or able to pay. In 2024, prices typically ranged from €4 500 to €6 350. However, some migrants reported paying considerably more due to disputes between intermediaries or because they believed they were receiving a higher-quality service. A Lebanese man interviewed by the GI-TOC in late 2024 claimed to have paid US\$13 000 (€11 780). By contrast, migrants who had worked in Libya for a time before arranging the maritime crossing generally reported paying between €900 and €1 360.

Narratives of hybrid journeys

Syrian male who undertook a journey in September 2024

In September 2024, I was expelled from Lebanon and given only one month to leave. I couldn't return to Syria due to my mandatory military service, so a friend put me in touch with a smuggler. I paid US\$13 000 (€11 780) for my entire journey to Italy, including US\$4 800 (€4 350) for the flight from Beirut to Benghazi. The payment was arranged in a small office in Lebanon: US\$3 800 (€3 440) in cash and the rest by cheque. My wife and I flew with Cham Wings Airlines, arriving at Benina International Airport in Benghazi. At the airport, our passports were taken, and we had to pay US\$20 (€18) per passport to get them back. We waited two hours before a representative arrived and took us to a hotel in Benghazi for the night. The next morning we were transferred to Zawiya. The journey took 17 hours by bus and taxi, costing us LYD240 (€40). Along the way, we passed through multiple checkpoints, but we were only asked if we were a family and where we were heading.

Upon arrival in Zawiya, we were taken to al-Anwar Hotel for the first night. The next day, we were moved to a safehouse, where about 50 people were gathered, separated into men's and women's rooms. We didn't know exactly when we would leave. The smuggler only informed us five hours before the trip. I had already paid for the crossing by this point, which included transport from Zawiya to the departure point. On the night before the journey, we were moved to a gathering point in Gergarish, an hour away. We stayed there for a few hours before being transported in a large vehicle, which was covered to prevent us from seeing out.

We arrived at a sandy beach surrounded by rocks, with the lights of Tripoli visible in the distance. There were 57 of us waiting to board. Among us were eight women, two children (around 14 years old), and the rest were men, mostly Syrians. The boat crew – the driver and his assistant – were Egyptian. Five armed men were present, organizing the boarding process. Three wore civilian clothes, while two wore security guard uniforms and stood near a small patrol boat.

The boat itself was a 10-metre fibreglass vessel, white in colour, equipped with two 300-horsepower engines. It looked new, but inside there was nothing: no safety equipment, no satellite phone, no life jackets, except for those a few people had brought with them.

Pakistani male who undertook a journey between February 2023 and August 2024

In February 2023, I took a plane from Islamabad airport to Dubai and then to Benghazi. I used an agent [that] my friend in Libya connected me with. They issued and arranged the flight. The whole trip cost me around €1 720, which I paid through *hawala*.

The idea to take a boat started with a WhatsApp group. Someone posted about a €900 sea journey from Libya to Italy, claiming he knew people who could guarantee a safe crossing. At first I was sceptical, but when I saw others reach Europe successfully, I decided to take the risk.

I met the smuggler in Tripoli, where we finalized the deal: €450 upfront, €450 before boarding. I was first sent to Zuwara, but at the last minute they changed the departure point to Sabratha. I spent two days in Zuwara, then four days in a Sabratha hotel, before being told to head to the beach at 11 p.m.

There were 30 Pakistani migrants waiting when I arrived, but something felt wrong. The smugglers were arguing and shouting into their phones. Suddenly, gunfire erupted from the beach – two rival smuggling groups were fighting over control. A rival gang intercepted our boat. They forced us back to shore, took our money and phones, and held us hostage. We were beaten and detained for 10 days, until we each paid LYD3 000 to LYD5 000 (€510–€860) to be released.

Pakistani male who undertook a journey in 2023

I arrived in Libya on a work contract in 2023. My employer covered my costs of €1 630, including flights and accommodation. At first I worked, but over time I became frustrated with life in Libya. A friend convinced me to migrate illegally. He knew someone nicknamed 'Zebra' who arranged crossings for €1 360.

Before departure, I stayed at a Pakistani's house in Zawiya. At midnight, a Libyan man in a white Hyundai picked us up and drove us to the coast. When we arrived, six armed men were waiting with two Toyota trucks. Around 30 of us – Pakistanis, Egyptians and Syrians – were told to board a rubber boat.

We travelled for 15 hours, stopping to refuel multiple times. Just before reaching international waters, the Libyan Coast Guard fired warning shots, forcing us to surrender. They took us back to Zawiya port, where aid organizations gave us basic food and medical help before we were detained. I spent four months in detention, only securing my release after paying LYD10 000 (€1 700) through a friend.

West coast remains core for hybrid smuggling sea crossings

In 2024, Libya's west coast was the core departure zone for hybrid smuggling operations. Migrants who had used overland routes from southern and eastern Africa also departed from this area, albeit in much smaller numbers. While there were fluctuations between specific hubs, which are discussed below, the overall pattern was one of consistently high departure levels across the area. This largely compensated for the decline in departures from Tobruk.

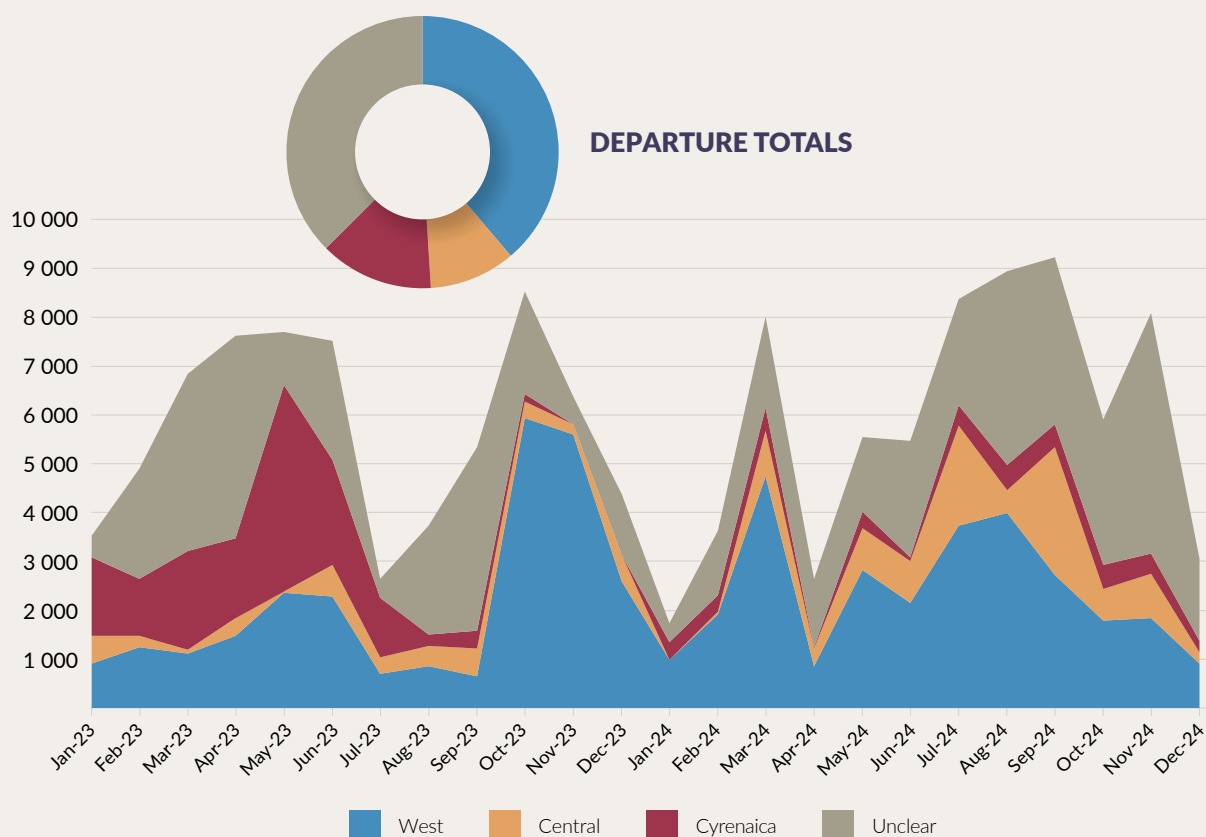


FIGURE 3 Estimated departures per zone by month, 2023–2024.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

The concentration of activity on the west coast is a long-term characteristic of human smuggling in Libya, reflecting the depth of the ecosystem in this region. Networks here have often been involved in this activity for generations, giving them unparalleled knowledge and contact with intermediaries. Their reputation for reliability and relative safety makes them popular with migrants. Furthermore, chronic political instability and fragmentation on the west coast prevent law enforcement from becoming sustainable or coordinated, despite localized efforts. Smugglers can move between hubs to avoid temporary security improvements.

Maritime smugglers operating on the west coast work within a flexible and adaptive ecosystem that incorporates foreign migrant recruiters (*manadib*) and armed actors who provide protection, some of whom also hold roles within official security forces. Departures shift between key hubs, such as Sabratha, Zawiya and Zuwara.⁴² Rather than being fixed to a single location, smugglers move between these cities as demand dictates, exploiting political instability, local protection networks and fluctuating enforcement levels. Their operations are clandestine and small scale, and often involve the use of private accommodation, hotels or farms to house migrants before departure. While these activities are not openly tolerated, they are not heavily policed, enabling smugglers to continue working with relative freedom.

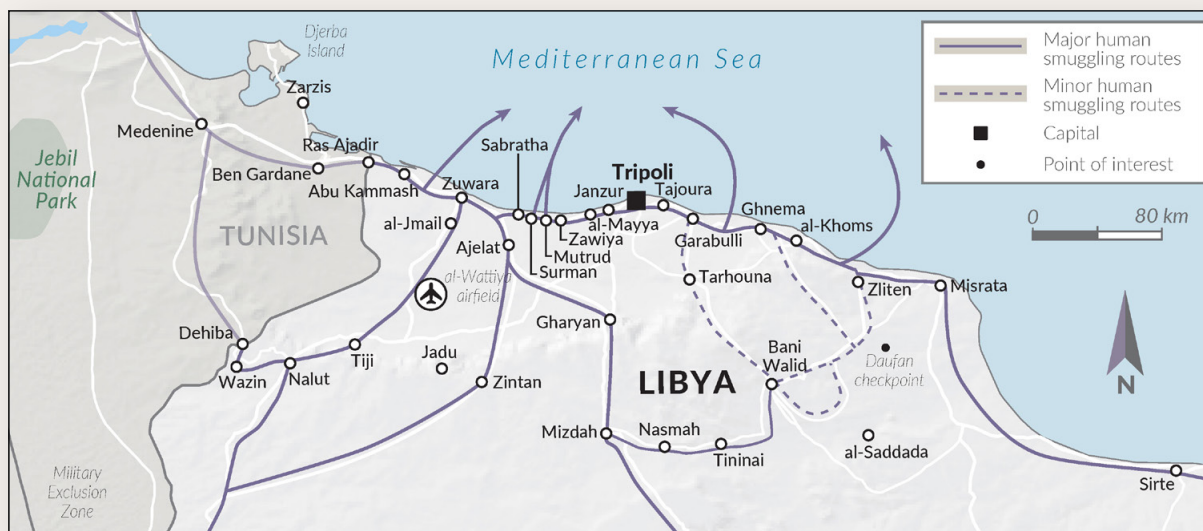


FIGURE 4 Libya's west coast, showing main human smuggling routes.

The movement of migrants to departure points is carefully managed to avoid detection. Instead of large convoys, small groups are transported discreetly in private cars, minibuses or covered trucks, usually at night or in the early hours of the morning. Upon arrival at secluded coastal sites, migrants are quickly transferred to rubber or wooden boats, frequently under the supervision of armed individuals. Smugglers also maintain connections with facilitators, including drivers, accommodation providers and corrupt officials. This ensures that, despite occasional enforcement crackdowns, those willing to pay can continue operating.

Smugglers exploit instability in Zawiya and Sabratha

Zawiya and Sabratha have long been at the heart of Libya's west coast human smuggling ecosystem. These cities have well-established networks and play a pivotal role in shaping the region's security dynamics. This continued in 2024, with most of the area's major armed actors being directly or indirectly involved in smuggling, including those with formal roles in law enforcement. Notorious figures from the post-revolutionary period, such as Ahmed al-Dabbashi, the UN-sanctioned smuggler from Sabratha, retained significant local influence and often remained actively engaged in smuggling.

Against this backdrop, the authorities in Zawiya and Sabratha were unable to deter human smuggling effectively. The most dramatic setback to local security and anti-smuggling efforts came with the assassination of Milad in September (discussed above). The Zawiya refinery LCG struggled to appoint an effective replacement, creating a significant power vacuum. GI-TOC monitoring indicates that the operational capacity of the force declined significantly in the immediate aftermath, with recorded interceptions dropping. Contacts in Zawiya confirmed that the force had struggled to overcome the loss of its commander.⁴³

In response, the Counter Terrorism Force (CTF), led by Mukhtar Jhawi, increased its presence in Zawiya through its local branch at the Marsa Della port. This move was intended both to fill the security gap left by Milad's death and to secure greater funding and resources. However, despite this boost, the CTF's Zawiya branch remains largely composed of local fishermen from the Gmamba tribe, most of whom lack formal naval training. Reports indicate that some elements have been involved in illicit activities, such as accepting bribes to allow migrant boats to pass through the area. Over the course of 2024, rates of interception on the west coast recovered. The data collected by the GI-TOC is not able to accurately parse between CTF interceptions and those conducted by the Zawiya refinery LCG; however, a contact reported that the latter force continued to struggle with capacity and the CTF was instrumental in this recovery.

The assassination of Milad also had a major impact on the fortunes of Bahroun, who plays a pivotal role in the Zawiyan security landscape. During the first half of 2024, the GNU reportedly pressured Bahroun to halt departures from the area under his control between al-Harsha and the edge of Mellitah – a section of coastline west of Zawiya associated with human smuggling. Despite his history of involvement in criminality, Bahroun was politically isolated in Zawiya due to his conflict with the Busriba network. This left him dependent on the GNU and therefore liable to respond to their requests. Given the importance of this location to human smuggling, this move had the potential to significantly reduce departures from the west coast.

However, after Bahroun handed himself over to the authorities on suspicion of ordering Milad's killing, this potential was not realized. Following his release, Bahroun returned to Zawiya, where he kept a low profile while looking to gradually rebuild his network. Subsequent to his return, the GI-TOC received reports that men loyal to him were reportedly engaged directly in human smuggling activities in the coastal area between Surman and Sabratha.⁴⁴ This is yet another example of how Zawiya's chronic instability undermines the central government's ability to impose sustained law and order.



Libyan security forces launch an operation in western Libya to combat human trafficking and illegal drug and fuel smuggling in the coastal city of Zawiya. © Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images

A further illustration of how the weakness of the Tripoli government and the political fragmentation of the west coast have compromised law enforcement came at the very start of 2025, when Salah al-Namroush – a Zawiyan officer who commands the West Coast Military Zone – led a security mission in Zawiya.⁴⁵ The operation was initially intended to target Zawiyan groups opposed to the GNU, particularly the Busriba network.⁴⁶ However, following opposition from factions within the GNU, who feared it would trigger a wider conflict, it was scaled back and rebranded as a generic anti-crime campaign. Ultimately, the exercise was conducted entirely by Zawiyan forces, including those that would likely have been the target of genuine law enforcement efforts, and was widely derided on Libyan social media as being staged.

Some low-level arrests were made, for example of African immigrants involved in drug dealing, and a shop belonging to Sifaw was raided. More significantly, a building linked to Kushlav, located near the Zawiya refinery, was accidentally set alight, and a nearby marina suspected of being used for human smuggling was raided.⁴⁷ There were also some air strikes.

A similar operation was conducted in 2023, and had minimal long-term effect on the criminal or security landscape in Zawiya. This time, however, the consequences have been more substantial. On 7 January, forces linked to al-Namroush assumed a security role at the Zawiya refinery. The facility has been under Kushlav's control since the revolution, and is a major financial and political asset for the Busriba network. It has also caused friction with other Zawiyan factions and the government in Tripoli. As such, this is a potentially significant political development. However, the presence of al-Namroush's forces has not fundamentally altered the operation of the refinery or had a notable impact on fuel smuggling.⁴⁸

Following the Zawiya operation, a similar show of force was conducted in Zuwara in mid-February. This was another stage-managed affair negotiated with the local authorities and only involved approved Zuwaran forces.⁴⁹

The fragmented security situation on the west coast and the weakness of the state are factors that determine the dynamics of human smuggling in the country generally. Under the hybrid smuggling system, the key means of arrival in Libya – by air to Benina airport – remained robust in 2024. However, without a reliable maritime component to organize sea crossings, the system would have collapsed. The resilience of the ecosystem at the west coast hubs was therefore vital for the overall stability of this activity in 2024.

Zuwara departures reflect fluctuating law enforcement levels

Notably, Zuwara has achieved a modicum of success in suppressing human smuggling locally. However, this progress, and the foreign financing that helped drive it, was undermined in 2024 by resentment from certain elements in the community and occasional external shocks.

Attempts to counter smuggling in Zuwara are not uncommon. In 2015, a law enforcement campaign succeeded in reducing the scale of these activities. Since then, security forces have continued to try to maintain control, with the Western Border CID being the most powerful and effective.

In 2024, there was a significant increase in the number of actors targeting human smuggling. A local civil society member estimated that around 27 vessels were being used for this purpose in the final quarter of the year, operated by the following groups:

- Stabilization Support Apparatus – Zuwara branch
- 62 Brigade
- Directorate for Countering Illegal Migration – Zuwara branch (previously the Jabal Nafusa Brigade)
- Zuwara Security Directorate Support Force
- General Administration for Coastal Security (GACS) Support Force
- Counter-Terrorism Force located in the commercial port
- Internal Security Agency

This growth was reportedly driven by competition for a share of the funding from foreign countries. Some forces were also said to exploit patrols to detain migrants and demand payment for their release.

The surge in activity produced mixed results. Several major setbacks were caused by tensions between Zuwara and either the central government or neighbouring communities (see above for the political context). These disruptions are clearly visible in the departure data. While this data should be treated with some caution, given that granular locations are often unavailable, GI-TOC monitoring provides a good approximate guide to relative levels of activity.

Figure 5 shows two significant spikes in departures from Zuwara. The first occurred from October to December 2023, with the monthly average jumping from just below 500 to 3 600, 4 200 and 1 250, respectively. This followed the Western Border CID suspending activities due to anger over an apparently politically motivated drone strike by the GNU on a water sports club. Numbers slowly eased to around 500 departures or below in the first two months of 2024, after lobbying by outside powers and local public opinion prompted the Western Border CID to clamp down on smuggling again.⁵⁰

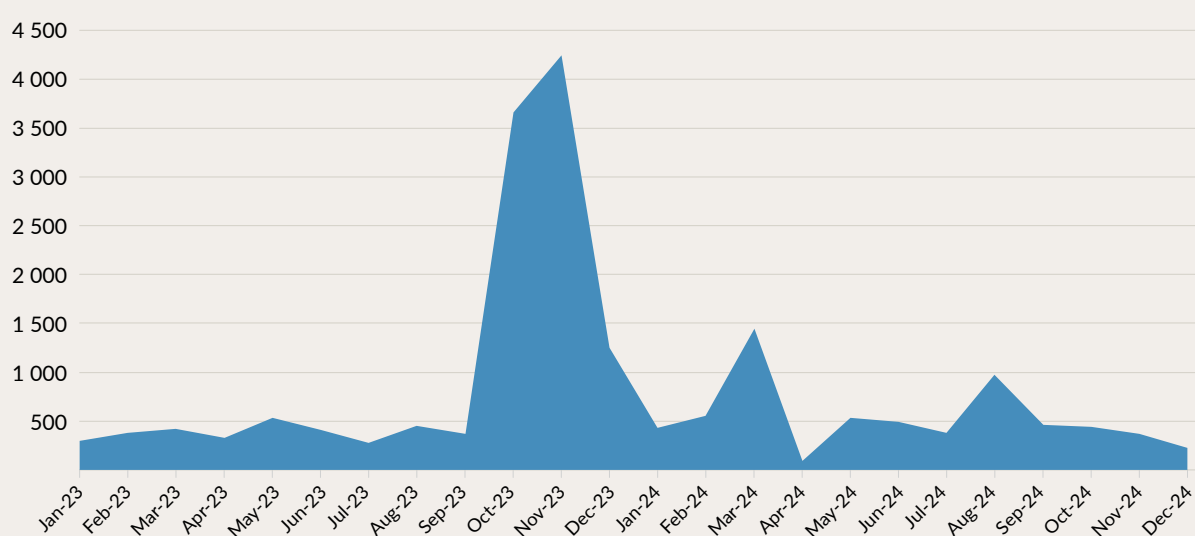


FIGURE 5 Estimated departures from Zuwara, 2023–2024.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring



Departures rose sharply again in March 2024, reaching 1 500. While this was due in part to seasonal factors, it was also driven by a major escalation in tensions between Interior Minister Trabelsi and the local community concerning the former's attempt to assert control over the Ras Ajadir POE. The resulting chaos and political unrest created conditions that allowed smugglers to ramp up their activities dramatically.

Although the Western Border CID quickly brought the situation back under control, internal conflict over law enforcement gradually increased during the rest of 2024, impeding their anti-smuggling efforts.⁵¹ While only partially visible in the data for Zuwara, the broader trend of rising departures from the west coast is partly a consequence of these local dynamics (see Figure 3).

These tensions are deeply rooted in Zuwaran community politics, with the custodians of law and order often being accused of prioritizing outside interests at the expense of local people. This grievance has become more acute in recent years, as leaders in rival cities such as Zawiya and Zintan have increased their international and domestic standing while allowing smuggling to continue unabated.

Another factor that contributed to local conflict in 2024 was the alleged direct funding of Zuwaran security forces by foreign actors to combat human smuggling. This created competition for resources and undermined the legitimacy of law enforcement in the eyes of the wider population.

These rivalries came to a head in October, when the Western Border CID and the GACS Support Force exchanged fire during a maritime operation. Frustrated by the mediated solution imposed by the Zuwara Operations Room, the Western Border CID declared a strike on 20 October, halting all of its activities in the city.⁵²

Hubs in Tripoli and the central region

While the west coast remained by far the busiest area for maritime smuggling in 2024, there was a significant increase in activity levels in the central region, stretching from Sirte to the western suburbs of Tripoli. Although data on specific embarkation points should be treated with caution, due to gaps and inaccuracies, GI-TOC monitoring provides a clear picture, supported by anecdotal evidence, that total departures more than doubled to 10 000 in 2024, up from an estimated 4 300 in 2023 (see Figure 6)

The central region comprises several distinct hubs, including the coast around al-Khoms; the coast around Sirte; Tajoura, a large suburb east of Tripoli; and Janzur, a suburb west of Tripoli. This is a sizeable, socially diverse and fragmented range, and these hubs do not operate as an integrated system but rather as isolated silos. The number of departures from this region in 2024 was not as high as on the west coast. However, the growth appears to reflect a similar underlying dynamic, which is significant for the overall human smuggling system in Libya.

At the most general level, the continuous arrival of migrants at Benina airport appears to be generating demand for embarkation zones. While the west coast remains the main area for this activity, actors elsewhere have sought to take advantage of the situation. Some reports also suggest that law enforcement in Zuwara, while inconsistent, was sufficient to encourage local smugglers with extensive expertise to temporarily relocate their operations to more favourable locations. While they primarily moved to nearby west coast hubs, research suggests that some shifted to Tajoura, due to more permissive security conditions, causing a localized spike in activity.⁵³

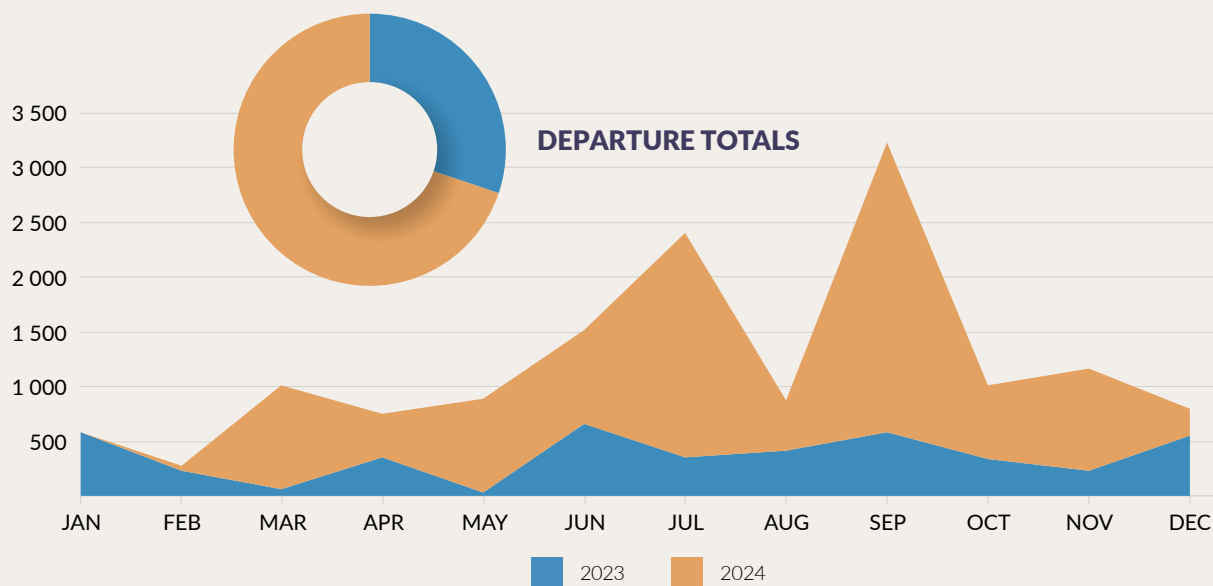


FIGURE 6 Estimated departures from the central region, 2023–2024.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

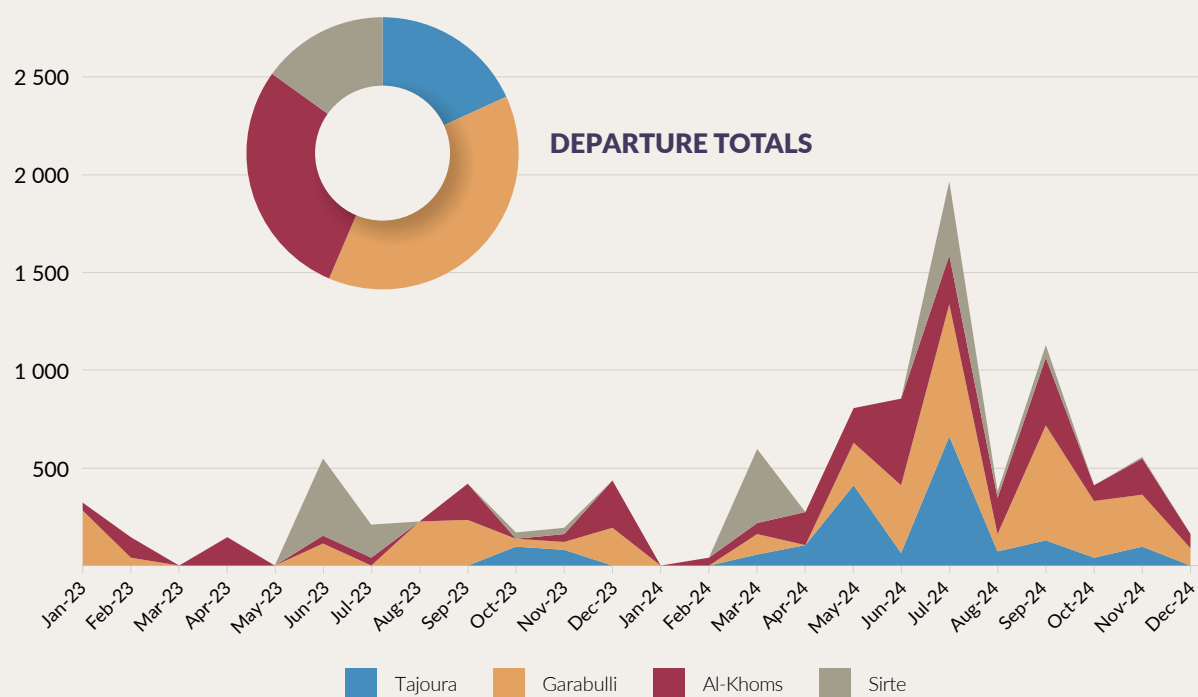


FIGURE 7 Estimated departures from the central region by hub, 2023–2024.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

The rise and fall of Tajoura

Tajoura, a large suburb to the east of Tripoli, is controlled by Bashir Khalfallah, commander of the Law Enforcement Force (also known as the Rahbat al-Duru Battalion). While it does not have a long history of major human smuggling activity, in 2024 it became an increasingly important departure point. Multiple accounts suggest that elements within Khalfallah's forces are directly or indirectly involved in smuggling operations. Reading the data with due caution, GI-TOC monitoring indicates that departures surged from a very low base to near or above 500 per month from May to July, before dropping again (see Figure 7).

The migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC who were departing from Tajoura had all arrived at Benina airport and were undertaking hybrid journeys. In some cases, these were integrated arrangements involving an upfront payment to cover the whole trip to Europe, with the migrants spending relatively little time in Libya. For example, a Pakistani national who departed from Tajoura and subsequently disappeared at sea had been in the country for approximately 10 days.⁵⁴ This indicates that at least one network operating in Tajoura had strong links with those organizing flights and transport to Benina airport. According to a contact, one local smuggling network had connections within a travel company with branches in eastern and western Libya that recruited potential migrants and arranged travel to Tajoura.⁵⁵

Migrants described relatively well-organized smuggling services in Tajoura. Some stayed in hotels close to embarkation points before being transferred to farms or safehouses on the coast. One Syrian national recounted staying in a hotel on Omar al-Mukhtar Street in central Tripoli before being moved to a farm in Tajoura.

Departures took place from Tajoura port as well as al-Shatt fishing port, located to the east of the Abu Sitta naval base in Tripoli. According to contacts in Tripoli, a group began operating from Tajoura in the second half of 2024. This activity was reportedly initiated by an unidentified officer from the Rahbat al-Duru Battalion, who partnered with a low-level local smuggler.⁵⁶ This individual owned a boat registered at the port and had been using it to trade subsidized diesel for alcohol with Tunisian and Maltese fishermen.

According to these accounts, the group began to attract attention, and came under pressure from local fishermen to cease operations, as they feared human smuggling would affect the port's viability. In October 2024, the operation was relocated to the al-Shatt port. However, after only a few embarkations, activity there also came under scrutiny and was shut down.

Many residents of Shatt al-Hansheer, the area behind Abu Sitta, work for the Rada Special Forces and have a background in fishing. They quickly became aware of the smuggling activity at the al-Shatt port and launched a small, unofficial investigation, eventually identifying a local man as the key player. This was enough to prevent further departures.

The allegation that a member of the Rahbat al-Duru Brigade was overseeing smuggling activities in Tajoura is consistent with the testimony of a migrant claiming that members of this group were present during their embarkation.⁵⁷ However, the GI-TOC has no evidence of the systematic involvement of Rahbat al-Duru leadership. It should also be noted that the Law Enforcement Unit, which Khalfalla indirectly controls, has played a prominent role in anti-smuggling efforts in this area since 2020. For example, the unit was responsible for the arrest of al-Khoms smuggling boss Abdullah Hneidi in November 2020.⁵⁸

As departures from the central coast increase, migrants intercepted at sea in this area are being disembarked at the Hamadiya port in Tajoura and held at the Tajoura detention centre.⁵⁹ From 2019 to 2020, this facility was notorious for corruption and the abuse of migrants, including payment-for-release schemes carried out in coordination with smugglers.⁶⁰

Oscillations in Sirte

In addition to the more sustained shifts to newly favoured departure areas, the central region also experienced transient surges in some key hubs. This further emphasizes the dynamism of the local human smuggling ecosystem, which is characterized by opportunistic movement towards zones of opportunity. However, this flexibility can also lead to the rapid abandonment of departure points if and when security pressure increases.

Sirte provided a notable example of this adaptability in 2024. On 17 March, a large fishing vessel carrying over 380 Bangladeshi and Pakistani men arrived in Italy after departing from the city. This boat, along with other smaller vessels from the area, contributed to making March the busiest month for the coast east of Tripoli since at least January 2023 (the GI-TOC does not hold granular monthly data from earlier than this). Before this, the bodies of drowned migrants had been recovered from beaches near Sirte, indicating that further unregistered departures had taken place.⁶¹

The departure of such a large vessel from this area was highly anomalous. It may be linked to the reported relocation of two smuggling operations from the Cyrenaica to Sirte, after Tobruk embarkations were shut down. These networks were seeking to service the same customer base: Pakistani, Syrian and Bangladeshi migrants flying into Benina airport.⁶² Another local smuggler profiled in the area specialized in transporting African migrants, often employing them on farms ahead of their sea crossings. He claimed to have learned his trade in Zuwara.

Sirte is located between eastern and western Libya, and the Coast Road can reliably be used to transport migrants directly from Benina airport to the city, provided they have LAAF-issued security clearances. Given these factors, there was a risk that the smugglers who had relocated to Sirte after the shutdown of Tobruk could have driven a steep rise in departures in mid-2024, similar to Tobruk's growth in 2022/23.

However, this did not happen, which may suggest that the LAAF wished to prevent smuggling activity from Tobruk being displaced to another location in its jurisdiction. This highlights the extent of the force's control, as well as its ability to prevent large-scale, overt smuggling in its territory when it wishes to do so (the resumption of clandestine smuggling operations from LAAF territory is discussed below). Again, this is a critical distinction from the authorities in western Libya, who lack the capacity to achieve this even when incentivized to do so.

Small boat departures resume from Tobruk

Despite the overwhelming dominance of maritime smuggling in western Libya, it is important to note that activity also continued in areas under LAAF control in 2024, mainly in and around Tobruk. While highly visible, high-passenger-load operations remained suppressed, there was an increase in small-boat departures in this area from December 2023, primarily to Crete.

Overall, the data clearly shows a significant reduction in activity between 2022 and 2024, with a decline from 17 500 to 6 900 (see Figure 8). However, the monthly breakdowns indicate a gradual recovery to a consistent level of between 400 and 600, with spikes to just under 1 000 in August, October and November. This trend continued into 2025, and in fact accelerated dramatically. The average passenger size for 2024 was 50, indicating a definite shift to a new smuggling model.

Another key distinction is the favoured route. In 2023, almost all vessels departing from Tobruk sought to land in Italy. As previously noted, in 2024, crossings were almost exclusively destined for Crete.

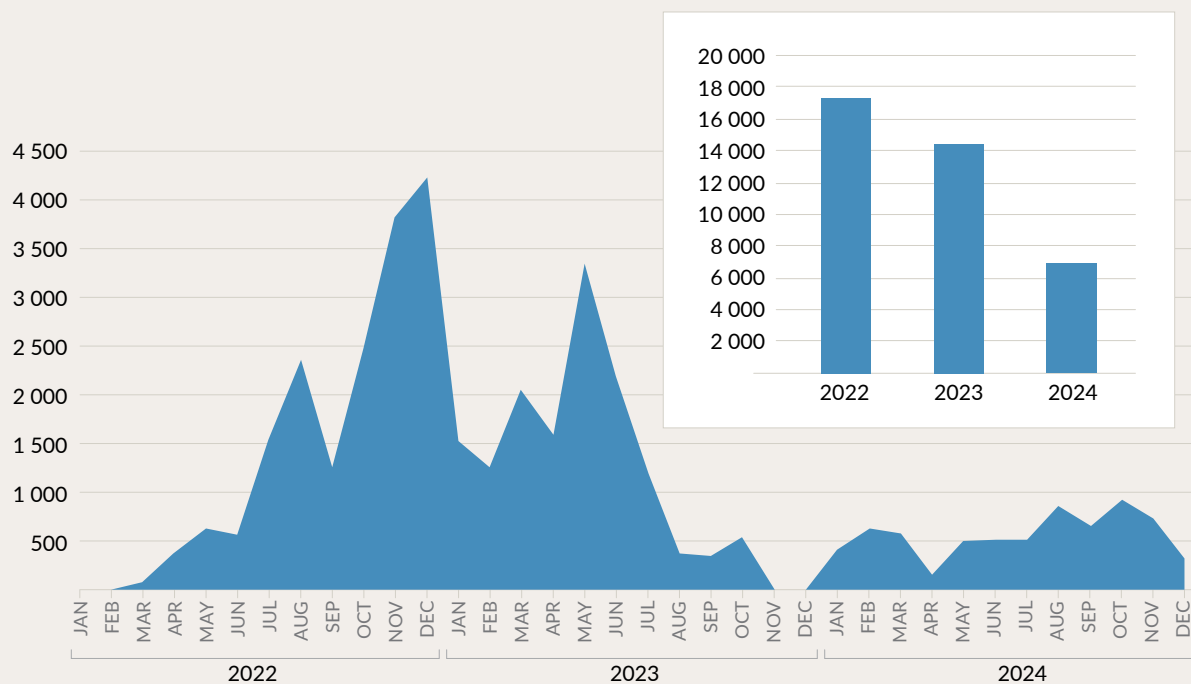


FIGURE 8 Estimated number of migrant departures from the Cyrenaica, 2022–2024.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

The majority of migrants taking this route in 2024 were Egyptian. The total cost of a journey from Egypt to Crete ranged from 250 000–300 000 Egyptian pounds (€4 650–€5 580⁶³). However, the amount varies significantly depending on whether migrants travel to Libya by air or land, and can be significantly lower. Some migrants pay upfront, while others defer payment until arrival, likely through family arrangements.

Interviews carried out by the GI-TOC indicate that migrants typically have little knowledge of Crete before departure. Its choice as a destination is dictated by smugglers, who favour it due to the relative ease of access and lower interception risks compared to other European destinations.

I left Minya [in Egypt] because there were no opportunities at home. My father arranged my travel through a local smuggler, and I joined a group heading to Europe. We travelled through Alexandria, Marsa Matrouh and then al-Salloum, where we prepared to cross into Libya. From Salloum, we walked across the desert on foot, 24 of us, carrying only a small supply of water. After we crossed the border, Libyan smugglers picked us up and transported us to Bir al-Ashhab, where we were placed in a safehouse. I stayed there for several weeks while we waited for the right time to leave. Several smuggling attempts failed. During one attempt, as we tried to reach a boat, the Libyan army spotted us and opened fire. We had to turn back. After that, I was moved to Tobruk, where I am still waiting for another chance to leave.

Interview with a 17-year-old Egyptian migrant, January 2025

Some Egyptians aiming to reach Crete fly into Benina, using established routes and thus fitting into the hybrid smuggling scheme described above. However, GI-TOC research suggests that a growing number are opting to travel overland. This is an arduous journey, often involving a drive of several hours to remote border areas, followed by a three-hour walk using desert tracks – avoiding Egyptian and Libyan security – before collection on the Libyan side.

Although it is more dangerous and difficult, this is a significantly cheaper option, at LYD1 000 (€163) per person. The higher cost of air travel means that land routes are preferable for many young migrants. The GI-TOC also believes that the land crossing is being used to transport children, to avoid Egyptian travel restrictions on unaccompanied minors entering Libya. There are indications that the cost of the crossing has fallen considerably in 2025, but this is yet to be confirmed.

Once in Libya, many Egyptian migrants intending to travel to Crete are held in remote safehouses and farms near Tobruk. These are controlled by tribal networks with generational knowledge of smuggling. Departure points are primarily located in Tobruk and the areas to the east, which were large-scale hubs in 2022 and 2023. Ajdabiya has also been used for embarkations. Departures typically involve small boats carrying fewer than 100 people. These are often old, poorly maintained fishing vessels sourced from Egypt.

Some reports suggest that certain elements within the security forces in the east are complicit in these small-boat departures, as well as in the abuse of detained migrants for profit. As noted earlier, the sharp decline in large-scale departures from Tobruk was the result of a politically motivated crackdown by the LAAF, intended to demonstrate control and enhance diplomatic relations, particularly with Italy. The resurgence of small-boat departures to Crete in late 2023 and 2024 indicates that some within the LAAF saw this covert approach as a means of tolerating limited smuggling without antagonizing the Italian authorities. However, as numbers have surged in 2025, it has become increasingly provocative to the Greek government – and the wider European authorities – and clearly signals a shift back to more open toleration.

Sudanese displacement to Libya surges

In late 2023, a growing number of Sudanese refugees began arriving in Kufra, driven by the intensification of the war in that country, particularly in Darfur. The exact number of arrivals is difficult to ascertain due to the remote location and varying official estimates. By the end of 2024, local sources placed the number of Sudanese refugees in Kufra at around 100 000. By January 2025, the estimate had increased to over 150 000.

The main entry point into south-east Libya is at the Ain Kaziya POE, with adjacent smuggling routes providing additional access. Refugees with Sudanese passports or other identity documents could cross the border freely and travel to Kufra. The cost of this journey was low, typically ranging from LYD250 to LYD600 (€42 to €100).

In Kufra, Sudanese refugees with identity documents could register with the Emergency Committee and receive a medical certificate, which served as proof of displacement. This allowed the holder freedom of movement in areas under LAAF control and was essential for further travel north. The certificate could be obtained for LYD130 (€18), although the process usually took several weeks. In May 2024, the health certificate began to be augmented with a security clearance card.

The Emergency Committee, which falls under the GNS Ministry of Health, was chiefly responsible for managing the displacement crisis in Kufra. In April, however, the GNS formed a new, higher-level crisis committee under the control of Interior Minister Essam Busriba. On 28 April, this committee established a joint security room, commanded by Salah Howeidi, the head of the local branch of the CID.

These measures ensured that most Sudanese people were able to travel and live freely. However, some refugees without the correct identity documents were unable to obtain the necessary displacement paperwork and had to travel clandestinely using smuggling services. This included paying bribes to enter Kufra and to arrange onward transport north. This cohort, although small, faced a significant risk of detention and deportation.

Despite the rapid growth of the Sudanese refugee population in Libya in 2024, very few attempted to cross the Mediterranean. According to Italian government data, just over 2 000 Sudanese nationals arrived by sea that year, making them only the seventh most common migrant nationality, despite being among the largest displaced populations in Libya. This is a well-established pattern, likely driven by two key factors. First, many Sudanese, particularly those with some financial resources, intend to eventually return home, which reduces their incentive to risk a sea crossing. Second, many Sudanese from Darfur and other impoverished regions lack the funds or strong diaspora connections required for a safer, more expensive journey. Supporting this, Sudanese nationals are consistently overrepresented in interception and return statistics, indicating that they often rely on cheaper, riskier routes.

In the second half of 2024, reports emerged indicating that migrants from the Horn of Africa, including Eritreans, Ethiopians and Somalis, had begun using the high volumes of refugee flows from Sudan as cover to enter Libya. Without official documentation or legal travel options, these groups were dependent on smugglers, who exploited the situation by raising their prices. This led to an increase in human rights abuses, including extortion, kidnapping and forced labour, particularly in smuggling hubs such as Kufra and Ajdabiya. In late 2024, reports of mass graves containing the remains of migrants from the Horn of Africa began to surface, particularly in remote desert areas near Kufra. Investigations suggested that many of these individuals had died from abuse, starvation or execution at the hands of smugglers after failing to meet ransom demands.

Nevertheless, the flow of migrants from the Horn of Africa continued to increase significantly in 2025. Unlike the figures for Sudan, this trend was clearly reflected in the data on arrivals in Italy, with Eritreans rapidly becoming one of the largest cohorts recorded.

Libya's emergence as a transit point for Latin America-bound smuggling

Hybrid migration in Libya is almost entirely focused on accessing Europe, reflecting the ideal combination of proximity, established networks and international airports controlled by weak or corruptible actors. However, in the first six months of 2024, a series of anomalous aircraft movements suggested that smugglers were exploring alternative uses for Libyan territory.

These five flights, which operated between February and early June, connected airports in eastern and western Libya to Nicaragua in Central America. They all involved a Boeing 777-246, which had been exported from the US to Libya in October 2023. It was leased by Ghadames Airlines, a little-known Libyan airline based in Tripoli.⁶⁴

Two distinct itineraries were reportedly used. Three flights departed from Mitiga – the de facto international airport for Tripoli – to destinations in Central Asia, such as Tashkent, Uzbekistan, or Almaty, Kazakhstan, before returning to Tripoli. After a brief stop in Mitiga, the flights headed to Managua, the capital of Nicaragua.

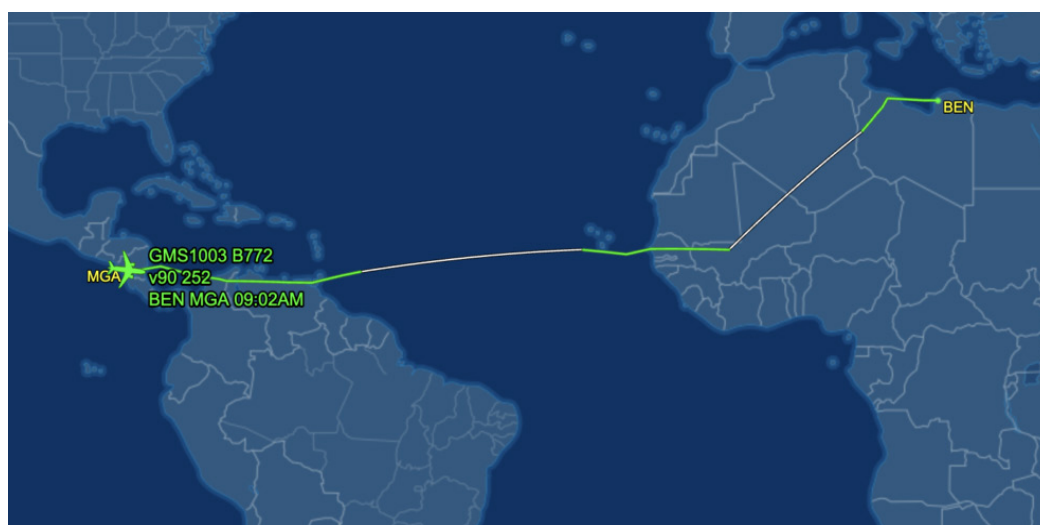
Two other flights transited from Benina airport, the main aviation hub in eastern Libya, to Managua. In both these instances, the 777 took off from Mitiga and landed in Benina, where it remained on the ground for several hours before departing for Managua.

Information on who, or what, was on the flights from Mitiga and Benina to Nicaragua is incomplete. However, reports from Central America suggest that there were South Asian migrants on the Benina flights, who reportedly paid US\$18 000 (€16 300) for the journey.⁶⁵

It is likely that migrants from Central Asia were also on the Mitiga-origin flights, given that there has been a sharp rise in migrants from that area seeking to reach the US. According to reports, over 13 000 Uzbek nationals were intercepted at the US–Mexico border between October 2021 and October 2023.⁶⁶

Notably, all of these flights took unusually circuitous routes. They made a sharp turn south around the Tunisia–Libya border, then routed south to Mali, before heading west over Senegal and the Atlantic. Once in the Western Hemisphere, they moved across Venezuelan airspace before landing in Managua. According to Central American media reports, during a flight on 23 May, the aircraft's transponder was switched off over the Atlantic and reactivated over Venezuelan airspace.⁶⁷ Together with the distinctive flight patterns, this suggests that the intention was to avoid jurisdictions that might cooperate in combating irregular migration to the US.

This would make particular sense in light of recent decisions to ground or block flights to Nicaragua carrying migrants intending to enter the US irregularly. For example, in December 2023, French authorities forced down an aircraft carrying a group of people from India. This flight was destined for Nicaragua, where the migrants were to be transported to the south-west border of the US.⁶⁸ Similarly, in May 2024, Jamaican authorities refused entry to a charter flight carrying irregular migrants intending to reach the south-west US border.



The flight path of one of the flights between Libya and Nicaragua. Photo: Screenshot from FlightAware published in *La Prensa*

Given the increasing challenges associated with this form of travel, Libya may have been perceived as a favourable location for evading detection or grounding. Although this is a new development, it builds on the infrastructure and networks that have evolved within Libya's Europe-bound hybrid smuggling systems.

The well-established hybrid smuggling networks centred on flights into Benina airport appear to have motivated at least some of the Nicaragua flights. According to a French media report, a Cham Wings Airbus A320, which can carry between 150 and 180 passengers, landed at Benina from Damascus shortly before the flight to Managua on 18 May.⁶⁹ The same movement occurred again on 23 May. This flight path, linking Damascus and Benina, was closely associated with hybrid smuggling before the fall of the Assad regime. More broadly, the recruitment of migrants through travel or labour agencies and the use of Libyan air transport facilities are clearly based on the country's domestic hybrid smuggling systems, in both conceptual and logistical terms.

The cost of the trip through Nicaragua, reported at US\$18 000 (€16 300), is high when compared with Libya's hybrid offering; however, these prices can vary considerably and there have been reported cases approaching this price. Pakistani migrants have reported costs as high as US\$16 000 (€14 500) for a complete package in previous years, with US\$8 000 (€7 250) paid upon arrival in Libya and an additional US\$8 000 (€7 250) for the sea crossing. Those with better connections often pay less.

The US government is well aware that Managua is used as a hub for inbound human smuggling routes, and has issued guidance to airlines.⁷⁰ However, the use of Libyan airports is a new strategy. This development highlights the challenges smugglers face when navigating highly regulated airspace, and indicates that they are experimenting with indirect routes that obscure the origins of passengers and avoid jurisdictions inclined to cooperate with the US.

In the case of the Libya flights, the trend was recognized and addressed by western authorities. The arrival of a flight on 3 June reportedly led to tensions between the Internal Security Agency and other Libyan bodies. In mid-July, Attorney General al-Sour and the Internal Security Agency arrested a man named Mohammed Bin Aiyad, reportedly the commercial director of Ghadames Airlines, in connection with the Nicaragua flights.⁷¹

There have been no further flights of this kind from Mitiga or Benina since June 2024, demonstrating that focused pressure and coordinated oversight can curtail even the most sophisticated hybrid smuggling innovations. However, attempts to repurpose global airport infrastructure for irregular migration are likely to recur, as traffickers seek new ways to evade detection and circumvent interdiction.



CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

In 2024, Libya resumed its role as the main migrant gateway between Africa and Europe, a dynamic that has continued in 2025. However, unlike the 2010s, when overland migration from West Africa and the Horn of Africa drove departures, the current wave is driven by migrants coming from South Asia and the Levant.

This points to the centrality hybrid smuggling systems in Libya, which have become firmly established due to a combination of relative stability and ease of movement. Flights into the country have proven to form part of a reliable route to Europe, as chronic political fragmentation has prevented the development of coordinated policing. In the absence of a credible state-building project to lead Libya out of its long post-revolutionary crisis, many local power holders – both large and small – face little real pressure or incentive to prevent human smuggling. Indeed, as the case of the LAAF shows, the opposite is more often the case.

Nonetheless, there are indications that overland smuggling is rebounding as an important factor in 2025. Notably, Eritrean migration and linked human smuggling activity are accelerating substantially, after nearly a decade of limited numbers. The ability of Eritrean nationals to pay the high prices demanded by the most successful smugglers on the Libyan coast heightens the likelihood of arrival to Europe, raising the probability that Eritrean migration will emerge as a major policy issue for European governments in 2025 and 2026.

To the west, worsening instability across the Sahel region, coupled with legal changes in Niger, could lead to a significant increase in the number of people making the journey to Libya in the coming years. In turn, this would have a major impact on the development and operations of human smuggling networks and linked criminal groups, particularly in southern Libya.

As detailed in this report, human smuggling in Libya is not just demand driven, but equally enabled by the divided nature of the state, weak institutions and the substantial power enjoyed by armed groups and constituencies linked to them.

Much of the actual power in western Libya is held by local actors deeply rooted in their communities and will endure regardless of who rules from Tripoli. With political prizes potentially up for grabs if a new government is formed, factional competition is likely to consume most political energy. Security reform and improvements to law enforcement may be used as rhetorical positions in this context, but real progress will be difficult to achieve. The May 2025 killing of al-Kikli, and the subsequent takeover of the SSA by Hassan Busriba, is a case in point: the most consequential developments often emerge from intra-elite rivalries rather than formal political negotiations, and they directly affect dynamics on the ground, including in the human smuggling sector.

While the competing governments in Libya are currently at peace, a key uncertainty is whether that will continue. It is impossible to predict whether or when a war between the LAAF and the western alliance that supports the GNU may occur, or what the implications for Libya would be. However, any conflict would result in a substantial impact on human smuggling and migration. The impact of instability on migrant mobility between east and west would almost certainly destroy the hybrid smuggling systems that currently dominate the sector. On the other hand, worsening instability in Libya could further boost overland smuggling routes from East Africa if the push factors in source countries continue to be severe enough.

In the absence of war, there are few obvious factors that could alter the current trajectory of rising human smuggling through Libya.



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