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LIBYA

HUMAN SMUGGLING SHIFTS EAST

Matt Herbert | Rupert Horsley | Henry Harbottle

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OF DENMARK

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Matt Herbert is the GI-TOC's thematic lead on human smuggling and head of research for North Africa and the Sahel. He researches and writes extensively on human smuggling and trafficking, as well as the use of innovative solutions to counter the phenomena, such as targeted sanctions and smart strengthening of border security.

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

Henry Harbottle is an analyst with the GI-TOC. His work focuses on human smuggling and trafficking, as well as illicit financial flows. He has previously conducted research on illicit finance and drug flows in Africa, among other areas.

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

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ASTA	Anti-Security Threats Agency
CTF	Counterterrorism Force
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
GNS	Government of National Stability
GNU	Government of National Unity
ISA	Internal Security Agency
LAAF	Libyan Arab Armed Forces
MIA	Military Investment Authority (LAAF)
MOI	Ministry of Interior
RSF	Rapid Support Forces (Sudan)
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SSA	Stabilization Support Apparatus
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



INTRODUCTION

Between 2025 and the middle of 2026, Libya remained the most important embarkation hub for human smuggling across the Mediterranean. Over these 18 months, at least 140 000 migrants departed the country for Europe, with roughly 70 per cent arriving successfully.[1]

Beneath this headline figure, however, Libya's smuggling ecosystem has undergone substantial changes. Shifts in the geography, scale and organization of departures altered established patterns of movement and reshaped the country's role within the wider Mediterranean smuggling system.

Departures saw a sharp acceleration in 2025, when maritime movement from Libya reached levels not seen since 2017, extending and substantially intensifying a three-year upward trend. The surge was overwhelmingly concentrated along the west coast, particularly the corridor between Tripoli and Zuwara that has been at the heart of Libya's maritime smuggling economy, particularly since the 2011 revolution.

At the same time, however, a second and potentially more consequential shift took shape in the east. Departures from eastern Libya towards the Greek island of Crete increased fivefold during 2025, signalling the rapid expansion of a route that had previously been peripheral to Libya's Mediterranean smuggling system.

In absolute terms, this movement was still overshadowed by the much larger volume of departures from the west coast, but the significance of the development lay in the fact that the east had not been associated with coastal departures. Now, maritime smuggling from Libya was becoming less concentrated on the long-established central Mediterranean corridor to Italy and Malta as eastern embarkation points and routes to Greece gained momentum.

In the first half of 2026, the situation changed further. Irregular migration from the west coast dropped sharply as the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU) enlisted local armed groups to counter the illicit market. Smugglers have sought to adapt to these new operating conditions, including the adoption of increasingly dangerous techniques involving the 'forced overboarding' of migrants. However, the broader trend has been a sharp limitation in the market in the west.

Meanwhile, increasing departures towards Greece from the east acted as a counterbalance. Between January and June, roughly 48 per cent of all Libyan departures occurred from the east of the country, with the ratio rising over 50 per cent during the summer months. The market is also showing signs of increasing maturity, with reports of vessel construction and structured smuggling operations expanding from the Tobruk area.

Several intersecting trends in human smuggling also emerged in 2025 and 2026. They include the growing prominence of movement to Libya by Horn of Africa migrants and a diversification of hybrid smuggling into Libya using commercial airlines. These are transnationally managed irregular journeys that combine regular or semi-regular air travel with irregular onward journeys and sea crossings.

The most important factors shaping human smuggling in Libya are political. The country remains politically fragmented, with the west under the internationally recognized GNU and the east and south under the Government of National Stability (GNS) and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF).

The GNU was in a precarious position for much of 2025, when fighting in Tripoli challenged government control and worsened its relationship with key armed groups on the west coast. With few effective tools to control coastal security, human smuggling surged. However, in late 2025 and 2026, key GNU figures began to build a détente with key western armed group actors, fashioning them into an effective, though fragile, counter-migration coalition. While the long-term durability of this coalition remains unclear, it is a critically important factor in human smuggling trends in western Libya.

In the east, 2025 saw the growing empowerment of Saddam and Khalid Haftar, sons of LAAF commander Khalifa Haftar, who increased their control over land and maritime security units amid a broader military reorganization.[2] Saddam's growing prominence seemed designed to elevate him as his father's successor, amid increasing questions about Khalifa's health. For all the Haftar brothers, the succession question seems to have dominated their focus, and to a degree their operational actions.

In part due to succession issues, the LAAF also sought to limit the power of senior commanders viewed as too independent or powerful. As part of this push, the 128 Brigade, led by Hassan al-Zadma and operating mainly in the southern Fezzan region, was dismantled. While this happened mostly peacefully, clashes between mercenaries affiliated with the 128 and other LAAF units broke out in February 2025 in Qatrun.

The real fighting, however, started in January 2026 when a new insurgent group calling itself the Revolutionaries of the South, drawing in part on former 128 members, began staging lightning raids into the Fezzan. The attacks reshaped the security situation in the south and the operations of cross-border smugglers and traffickers. They also reshaped attitudes among southerners, potentially presaging further instability.

How these political dynamics play out in the west, east and south of Libya in the coming year will directly affect how the human smuggling market develops.

This report is the latest Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) monitoring report on human smuggling in Libya. It builds on the series of annual reports issued by the GI-TOC since 2017 that track the development of human smuggling in Libya and the political, security and economic dynamics that influence it.[3] It first details the politics, including security dynamics salient to human smuggling in western and eastern Libya, then it examines human smuggling dynamics in western Libya, focusing on shifting enforcement trends. It assesses the smuggling ecosystem in eastern Libya, including maritime embarkations from the Tobruk area, diversifying hybrid migration via Benina airport in Benghazi, and the rise and fall in the prominence of overland movement from Sudan. The report ends with a brief look at potential trends in the coming year.

Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2025 and the first half of 2026 – 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 weekly. This data was used to formulate questions and areas of inquiry for field research and to validate field interviews 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 part of a long-term GI-TOC reporting series, designed to capture rapidly changing dynamics in Libya and the wider region.

Key points

- Libya remains the most important embarkation hub for human smuggling across the Mediterranean. However, smuggling levels changed substantially between 2025 and mid-2026. Departures sharply accelerated in 2025, when maritime movement from Libya reached levels not seen since 2017. In contrast, irregular migration decreased in the first half of 2026, mainly driven by a sharp fall in embarkations from western Libya.
- The most important factors shaping human smuggling in Libya remain political. The 2025 surge smuggling in western Libya was enabled by the GNU's precarious position that year, with fighting in Tripoli challenging government control and precarious relationships with armed groups on the west coast. However, in late 2025 and 2026, key GNU figures began to build a détente with key western armed group actors, fashioning them into a counter-migration coalition. This arrangement has been the critical factor in suppressing departures along the west coast, but remains fragile and vulnerable to political and security shifts.
- As human smuggling declined on the west coast, the centre of gravity for the market moved east to the Cyrenaica. This region is also the primary entry point for irregular migrants transiting Libya, with overland smuggling routes from Sudan, Egypt and Chad increasingly complementing hybrid smuggling orientated around Benghazi's Benina airport. This shift east has major political implications for the GNS/LAAF, which control the region, and for the European Union and member states attempting to address rising flows.
- As with western Libya, human smuggling dynamics in the east played out against a complicated political landscape. The major dynamic in 2025 was the growing empowerment of Saddam and Khalid Haftar, sons of LAAF commander Khalifa Haftar, who increased their control over land and maritime security units amid a broader military reorganization. Saddam's growing prominence seemed designed to elevate him as his father's successor, amid increasing questions about Khalifa's health.
- In part due to succession issues, the LAAF also sought to limit the power of senior commanders viewed as too independent or powerful, notably as Hassan al-Zadma , commander of the 128 Brigade. The sidelining of al-Zadma and elimination of his unit in turn sparked unrest in the Fezzan, leading to the emergence of a new insurgent group in the Libya–Niger borderlands. Over the course of 2026, insurgent attacks have reshaped the security situation in the south and the operations of cross-border smugglers and traffickers, sharply constraining smuggling through the region.



POLITICAL DYNAMICS SHAPING HUMAN SMUGGLING

The dynamics of human smuggling and trafficking in Libya are inseparable from the country's fractured and contested political order. Since the 2014 Fajr Libya war, Libya has been functionally divided between rival centres of power, but the east–west split masks a considerably more fragmented landscape of authority at the local level. In the west, the Tripoli-based GNU led by Abd al-Hamid Dabaiba is Libya's internationally recognized government. In practice, however, its authority is confined to the Tripolitania and is heavily qualified even there.

Power is dispersed among a constellation of armed groups, many rooted in communities, cities or tribal constituencies. Most have been formally incorporated into state structures – including the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Interior (MOI) and Stabilization Support Apparatus (SSA) – but retain substantial operational autonomy and frequently place personal or local interests ahead of centralized authority. Many also have long-standing links to illicit economies, including human smuggling.

This fragmented security architecture shapes and constrains the GNU's ability to impose policy from the centre, including on human smuggling. Rather than exercising control through a coherent chain of command, successive governments have been forced to manage a constantly shifting balance of power through a combination of political accommodation, financial and institutional inducements, negotiation and, periodically, military force.[4] Consequently, counter-smuggling policy is shaped not only by decisions taken in Tripoli but by the interests, alliances and rivalries of the armed actors expected to implement it.

Dynamics differ somewhat in Libya's eastern Cyrenaica region and the Fezzan, in the far south. These regions are nominally controlled by the GNS led by Osama Hammad. However, effective power rests with the LAAF under Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. During the 2010s, the LAAF progressively consolidated control across eastern and southern Libya through a combination of military conquest and negotiated accommodation with local armed groups, tribal constituencies and elite networks.

After failing to seize Tripoli and the Tripolitania in the 2019–2020 war, the LAAF shifted tactics. In a bid to gain a dominant role in a future unity government, it sought to build international influence and support by projecting an image of centralized authority and greater stability in the areas under its control. However, this image obscures a more complicated political reality. Its control, as with that of the GNU, in a context of objectively greater centralization still depends on managing relationships

with local armed actors and tribal constituencies, particularly in the Fezzan.[5] At the same time, the increasing concentration of power within the Haftar family has brought the question of succession into sharper focus. In other words, how the system will manage the transition when age or infirmity eventually force 82-year-old Haftar to relinquish his role.

These political dynamics are not merely the backdrop to Libya's human smuggling and trafficking markets; they help determine how those markets function, which actors can operate, and when and where state pressure is applied against them. This section details some of the main political dynamics salient to human smuggling and trafficking in Libya in 2025 and the first half of 2026. It begins by assessing three key trends in GNU areas: rising xenophobic protests and language, the outbreak of major clashes in Tripoli, and a reconciliation between the GNU and key armed groups on the west coast that has set the stage for a sharp increase in counter-human smuggling activity. Next, the report details three dynamics in the GNS/LAAF-controlled Cyrenaica and Fezzan, including growing questions around succession, efforts by the Haftar family to limit the power of senior commanders, and the resulting outbreak of a new insurgency in the Fezzan.

Protests, clashes and rapprochement in the Tripolitania

In 2025, the Tripolitania faced substantial instability, driven by growing popular frustration with foreigners and their instrumentalization, accompanied by the most violent fighting in Tripoli since the 2019–2020 war, which challenged the GNU's control over much of the west coast. While anti-migration campaigns and their instrumentalization continued into 2026, the GNU has substantially strengthened its position, forging a reconciliation with armed groups that were key opponents in 2025.

Anti-foreigner sentiment grows and becomes political

At a popular level, the most important dynamic over the reporting period was the sharpening of anti-foreigner sentiment. While such sentiments have a long history in Libya, they emerged as a potent issue that has been instrumentalized by political actors and by less visible networks involved in coordinated mobilization on social media.

Four key developments have fuelled the intensification of anti-foreigner sentiment. The first relates to a perception of growing populations of sub-Saharan migrants living and working in the Tripolitania in 2024 and early 2025, particularly Sudanese asylum seekers and West Africans. Interviewees and contacts across the region consistently noted the growing visibility and presence of migrants and refugees in their communities during this period. Reliable data on migrant and refugee numbers in Libya is lacking, with international actors often offering divergent figures. However, there is a consistent trend of a large rise in migrant and refugee numbers. The International Organization for Migration's displacement tracking matrix surveys identify an increase of about 126 000 in migrant population numbers throughout Libya between December 2024 and June 2026.[6] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates of the number of Sudanese refugees indicate a similar surge, increasing from 210 000 to 566 000 in the same period.[7] These estimates align with reports by contacts that note a growing influx of refugees fleeing the war in Sudan during this period. Between 1 000 and 3 000 arrivals per week were reported in the south-eastern city of Kufra in mid- to late-2024 and early 2025. Some of these refugees later transited to Tripoli, with most opting to stay rather than departing for Europe, potentially contributing to the perception of an increase.



Libyans protest in front of the International Organization for Migration in Tripoli to demand that action is taken to resettle irregular migrants and refugees, June 2026.
© Mahmud Turkia/AFP

Second, economic conditions have deteriorated steadily, placing growing pressure on Libyan households and businesses.[8] State finances have been strained by substantial off-the-books diversion of oil revenues.[9] The appointment of Naji Issa as the governor of the Central Bank of Libya in October 2024 raised expectations that trends could be reversed; however, the situation has worsened.

This was particularly evident in the sharp depreciation of the Libyan dinar on the black market, where it traded at 11 Libyan dinars to the euro on 18 September 2026, well beyond the rate of 7 Libyan dinars to the euro generally regarded as a sign of significant pressure. The currency's weakness has pushed up the cost of imported goods, including food and other basic commodities, while contributing to shortages of some products.

Meanwhile, recurrent power cuts, which re-emerged as a major problem in 2025, worsened during the summer of 2026. Combined with fuel shortages, the power cuts have forced some businesses to lay off employees.[10] Although these are not new issues for Libya, their intensification has been a visceral signal to many citizens of the worsening situation, fuelling tensions.

While economic competition between foreigners and Libyans is limited, these socio-economic tensions have created fertile ground for anti-foreigner agitation, particularly around claims that migrants receive benefits from the UN and international organizations that Libyans do not.

The third dynamic driving events was geopolitical, as the US and EU increasingly focused on return hubs or third-party countries for deportations. While Libyan authorities have rejected these initiatives, there are growing popular concerns that international actors could seek to settle or resettle foreign migrants in Libya. In March 2025, for example, claims emerged in a US media source that many Palestinian refugees from Gaza would be resettled in Libya.[11] While the GNU quickly denied the claim, it sparked a firestorm of criticism on social and traditional media, connecting with broader concerns about the presence of foreigners. Violence erupted in some cities, and a Sudanese refugee was killed in the western coastal city of Sabratha.[12]

Finally, anti-foreigner sentiment has been instrumentalized for political purposes by figures within the GNU and its opponents in the Tripolitania and the GNS. Emad Trabelsi, the GNU's interior minister, progressively built his political profile by pushing back on foreigner presence, emphasizing the need for large-scale deportations then moving to put such programmes into operation.

In GNS areas, Hammad directly denounced Dabaiba's claimed promotion of migrant settlement and sought to position the GNS as the protector of Libyan sovereignty and border protection. LAAF commander Khalifa Haftar has pushed a similar narrative.

Online campaigns recurrently emerged alleging the GNU had accepted or was complicit in the resettlement of foreign migrants in Libya. While anonymous, these seemed designed to undermine the GNU and Dabaiba.

The GNU and Dabaiba pushed back on political criticism, strongly rejecting claims that Libya is Europe's border guard and emphasizing sovereignty. Dabaiba also argued that weak border controls in southern territories controlled by the GNS constituted a major gap in migration governance.

Nonetheless, anti-foreigner rhetoric became an increasingly pervasive issue throughout GNU-controlled territories during the reporting period. A vocal 'No to resettlement' online campaign rose to prominence in 2026, driving citizen action against migrants and fuelling an anti-migrant shift by key political actors on the west coast.

Notably, rising anti-foreigner sentiment also targeted international organizations – including the UN and NGOs – that provide support or services to migrants. In March 2025, for example, the GNU Internal Security Agency (ISA) – the domestic intelligence apparatus – acted against nine NGOs and UN agencies, closing some organizations' offices and detaining local staff.[13] While this campaign ended, broader pressure on international actors has continued, with incidents growing at the time of writing.

For foreigners living in Libya, this climate has sharply increased physical risks and constrained freedom of movement. Mass arrest operations have targeted migrants on the street, at work sites and in their homes. While statistical data is unavailable, the GI-TOC has received numerous reports of violence against foreigners, including sexual violence, physical assault and kidnapping for ransom. These deteriorating conditions have made life in Libya more precarious, and movement through and departure from the country substantially more difficult and dangerous. In particular, movement restrictions have complicated migrants' ability to reach and gather at embarkation points, probably contributing to the decline in west coast departures in 2026.

At the same time, growing public hostility has further incentivized increasingly securitized responses by the authorities, creating a volatile and rapidly changing environment for foreigners that is likely to be an important factor shaping migration and smuggling dynamics over the coming year.

Killings and clashes in Tripoli upend west coast stability

Political tensions in western Libya and the fragmentation between the numerous armed groups in the area came to a head in early May 2025 with the assassination of Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli (aka Ghnewa).[14] Al-Kikli was a powerful militia leader in Tripoli and the head of the SSA, a state-authorized security body that wielded considerable influence in western Libya's broader migration management, security and intelligence architecture, as well as in economic power.

Al-Kikli's assassination followed a progressive breakdown in his relationship with Dabaiba and the prime minister's cousin and national security adviser, Ibrahim Dabaiba. Al-Kikli reportedly opened communications with LAAF-affiliated actors, opposed the Dabaibas during the 2024 central bank leadership crisis, and sought to expand his influence in the telecoms sector. Relationships were reportedly further strained by the ISA's targeting of international NGOs working on migration in early 2025, as the intelligence body was under al-Kikli's influence.

These latent tensions escalated on 7 May, with Misrata's Joint Force and the 111 Brigade, both aligned with the Dabaibas, attacking an SSA office in al-Khoms, killing and detaining members. In response, the SSA raided the Libyan Post, Telecommunications and Information Technology Holding Company and kidnapped several prominent Misratan businessmen.[15] By 12 May, al-Kikli's forces, those of his allies, and Misratan forces linked to Dabaiba had begun to mobilize in Tripoli.

To prevent fighting, a mediation meeting was organized at Tikbali Camp, a military camp in the Salahaddin area of southern Tripoli, attended by senior GNU officials and al-Kikli.[16] The GNU insisted that al-Kikli stand down and remain in Abu Salim, the core Tripoli area associated with his control. According to several sources, al-Kikli was furious at the ultimatum and refused. The confrontation then escalated, shots were fired, and al-Kikli and several other militiamen were killed.[17]

After al-Kikli's death, the SSA functionally collapsed and pro-Dabaiba units – including the 444 Brigade, 111 Brigade and MOI units – seized SSA-controlled areas in Tripoli, including Abu Salim. Incidents of looting, mainly involving forces linked to the MOI, were reported, fuelling local frustrations.

The following day, clashes escalated as pro-Dabaiba units moved against another rival bloc in Tripoli consisting of the Rada Special Forces and the Judicial Security Apparatus. This proved a miscalculation, leading to a mobilization by anti-Dabaiba groups that feared they could be targeted next.[18] Overnight between 13 and 14 May, Rada and the Judicial Security Apparatus staged a counteroffensive in Tripoli, while armed groups from Zawiya – including actors normally antagonistic to each other – seized parts of several western suburbs. This was the most intense urban combat in the city since the end of the 2019–2020 LAAF war. A truce was forged between the two sides on 14 May, with armed groups from Zuwara and Nalut initially deployed to separate them.



Irregular Egyptian migrants are processed at the headquarters of the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration in Tripoli before being sent back to their home country, September 2025. The GNU interior minister has emphasized the need for deportation programmes. *© Muhammed Semiz/Anadolu via Getty Images*

The clashes left Dabaiba politically weakened, with many in western Libya assessing that he had misjudged the balance of power. The alliance of several of his foes – particularly in Zawiya – suggested that the prime minister and his allies faced heightened risks to their control. However, as detailed below, between mid-2025 and mid-2026 Dabaiba slowly shifted the situation, forging consensus and mutual support with actors who militarily opposed him in May 2025.

Nonetheless, the shift has had an enduring impact on migration management in western Libya. In the immediate aftermath of al-Kikli's death, Dabaiba removed the head of the Directorate for Combating Irregular Migration, Mohammed al-Khoja (an ally and protégé of al-Kikli) and imposed greater MOI control over it. Empowered by this move, Trabelsi and Zintani actors linked to him continued to bolster their control over the GNU's migration management infrastructure, including detention centres, borderland and interior enforcement, and deportation programmes, a major change to a previously fractured approach.

Reconciliation between west coast factions and Dabaiba

For much of 2025, the GNU faced challenges in projecting influence into major west coast cities and key embarkation hotspots such as Zawiya, Sabratha and Zuwara. These areas have a dense patchwork of powerful, locally organized armed groups, historically complicating efforts by central authorities to maintain a presence. Many of these groups have been linked to human smuggling and, sometimes in the same case, efforts to counter the illicit market. For this reason, armed group dynamics, regional politics and organized crime have often substantially overlapped.

Before the May clashes, the GNU began trying to exert greater influence on the west coast, particularly in Zawiya. In January 2025, a GNU coalition under the control of the Western Military Zone staged a security operation in the city, seizing several infamous sites linked to human smuggling and migrant exploitation, such as al-Nasr detention centre.[19] While officially framed as an effort to counter human smuggling and drug trafficking, the operation was more highly focused on the Busriba network, a politically powerful armed group in the city linked to the LAAF. The operation had limited impact on the Busribas but it underscored the extraordinarily complex politics facing the GNU in building control in the region.

The GNU efforts on the west coast were functionally reversed during the May clashes, as Zawiyan forces, including previously pro-Dabaiba groups, turned against the prime minister. Moreover, after the fighting, the Busriba network was further empowered, with Hassan Busriba appointed head of the remaining elements of the SSA. The move had limited immediate security impact but it underscored the entrenchment of a Dabaiba foe.

The GNU changed tack, progressively seeking to rebuild connections with and court Zawiyan actors. By November 2025, a new municipality had been created in Zawiya and Hamza Kushlav – with familial connections to the Busriba network – was elected mayor. Notably, Hamza is the elder brother of Walid Kushlav, a discreet but powerful cousin of Hassan Busriba, who had begun working to bring both sides together. Other key notables in Zawiya also helped by working to establish a reconciliation framework between the two sides.

On 4 March, an iftar – a meal taken after sunset by believers during Ramadan – was held in Tripoli between key Zawiyan figures, including Busriba, and senior GNU leaders including Dabaiba and deputy defence minister Abd al-Sallam al-Zoubi. This public event signalled that the Busriba network and the GNU had forged a reconciliation. Though the terms of the agreement are unclear, contacts suggest that it includes political and financial inducements.



GNU Prime Minister Abd al-Hamid Dabaiba (eighth from left) with key Zawiyan figures and senior GNU leaders at an iftar in Tripoli, 4 March 2026. This event signalled that the Busriba network and the GNU had forged a reconciliation. *Photo: Facebook*

Notably, it is unclear to what degree the reconciliation affects the Busribas' connections to the LAAF and GNS. Hassan's brother Essam is the GNS interior minister, while another brother, Ali, is a member of the House of Representatives, which has provided the GNS with political legitimacy. Nonetheless, the reconciliation may be the first part of a long-term effort to draw the Busribas away from the LAAF and GNS orbit.

Migration enforcement increases in the west

The reconciliation between the GNU and the Busribas formed part of a broader effort led by al-Zoubi to gain control of or influence western Libya's maritime security and counter-migration architecture. This was arguably the most sustained and effective attempt in years to structure suppression efforts in the region, and its success in 2026 was a key reason for the dramatic reduction in west coast departures.

However, al-Zoubi's efforts started well before 2026, and al-Kikli's killing in mid-2025 created an opening for him to expand his influence over maritime security. He first established the 80th Special Operations Battalion, a maritime unit operating under the 111 Brigade, and subsequently reportedly reached an agreement with the Zuwara Operations Room that allowed the 80th to establish a presence in the city. This marked the beginning of a broader consolidation of al-Zoubi's influence over Zuwara's security landscape, as several previously competing actors came to operate under, or accept, his authority and patronage. The shift coincided with the continued suppression of departures from Zuwara.

In late 2025 and early 2026, al-Zoubi began focusing on the Zawiya–Sabratha corridor, historically Libya's busiest departure zone. His negotiations focused mainly on key Zawiyan actors, including Busriba and Mohammed Kushlav, a UN-sanctioned actor in the Busriba network; Mohammed Bahroun, the head of the Anti-Security Threats Agency (ASTA); and Muaz Kurrah, the head of the Counterterrorism Force (CTF) 60th Company. These outreach efforts reportedly involved a mix of financial or equipment inducements and implicit threats of coercion, such as drone strikes.

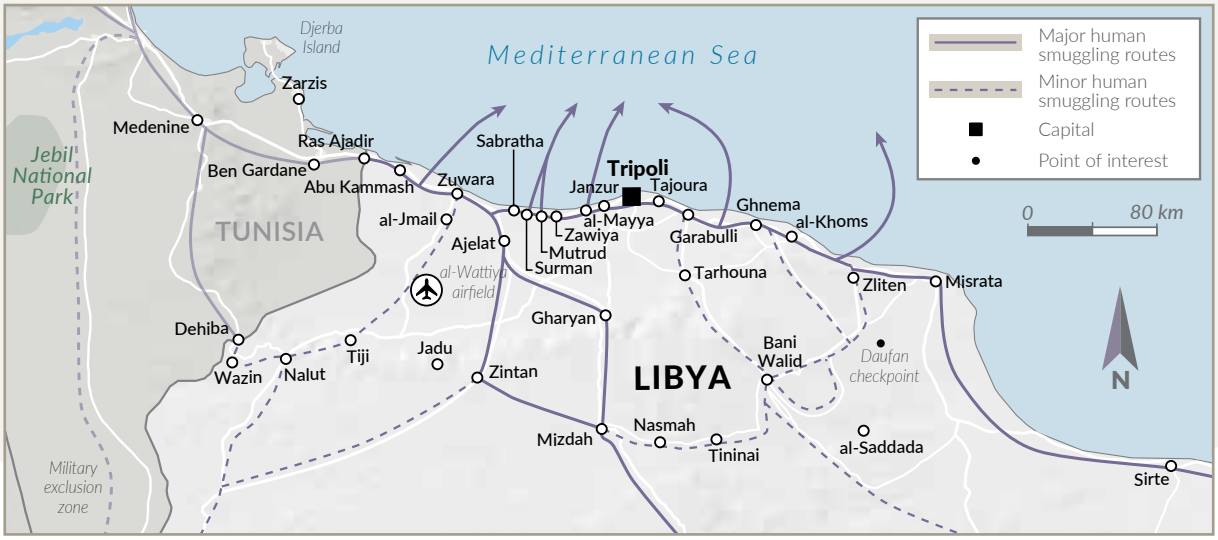

FIGURE 1 Libya's west coast, showing main human smuggling routes.

It quickly became clear that these engagements were bearing fruit, substantially aided by the broader reconciliation between Dabaiba and the Busriba network. Even before this, Kushlav had signalled his willingness to support al-Zoubi's efforts, and now the deputy defence minister reportedly created a new Ministry of Defence unit, the 904 Brigade, controlled by a close Kushlav associate and meant to encompass Kushlav's forces, elements of which were deeply involved in facilitating smuggling.

Another force that allegedly included elements involved in facilitating human smuggling in 2025, the CTF 60th Company, reportedly partially changed behaviour and cracked down on internal corruption. Combined with a halt in facilitation by elements in the Busriba network, this appears to have been a major factor in the decline in departures from Zawiya.

The final major actor on the west coast operating outside al-Zoubi's control was Bahroun, the de facto head of ASTA. Previously a key GNU supporter on the west coast, he had reportedly become alienated from and sidelined by the GNU throughout 2025. During this period, he also became notably more powerful, progressively displacing and finally killing the UN-sanctioned smuggler Ahmed al-Dabbashi in December 2025 (this is discussed in more detail below).

Initially, Bahroun indicated interest in joining the emerging counter-human smuggling coalition on the west coast, but eventually he rejected cooperation for the first half of 2026. This appears to have stemmed largely from his estrangement from the GNU and his need for financing after its funding was curtailed. During this period, elements within the forces under Bahroun's control were linked to facilitating smugglers organizing departures from nodes west of Zawiya, notably around al-Harsha, Mutrud and Surman.

A significant share of the relatively limited departures from the west coast in the first half of 2026 probably left from territory controlled by Bahroun. However, emerging signs of rapprochement between Bahroun and the GNU by mid-year raise the potential that his forces could change their approach, further tamping down human smuggling from the west coast.

While al-Zoubi's anti-smuggling campaign has had a substantial impact, it is inherently fragile due to the often-volatile interests of armed groups on the west coast that have historically swung between

suppressing smuggling and facilitating it. Changing economic and political conditions with the GNU and GNS could undermine different militiamen's willingness to participate in the coalition al-Zoubi built.

However, growing anti-migrant sentiment probably poses a broader challenge to al-Zoubi's efforts. By constraining departures from western Libya and limiting migrants' ability to depart quickly for Europe, the crackdown has probably increased the number and visibility of migrants in western coastal areas. At a time of high public frustration, with vocal calls for foreigners to leave Libya, these efforts may prove to be politically toxic. In Zawiya and Zuwara, interceptions at sea are reportedly increasingly seen as worsening the crisis. In turn, social media discussions have reportedly emerged calling for heightened migrant embarkations to reduce numbers. These sentiments could easily accelerate at the local or national level.

Much of the west coast smuggling infrastructure remains in place, with enforcement having largely targeted departures rather than smuggler arrests. This increases the risk that the lull in departures could change sharply if politics shift.

LAAF succession planning drives dynamics in the Cyrenaica and the Fezzan

Over the past five years, areas controlled by the GNS/LAAF in the Cyrenaica and the Fezzan have been far more centralized than GNU territories in the Tripolitania. LAAF commander Khalifa Haftar has suppressed most challenges to his control, either through violence or negotiated agreements. As a result, the sort of fractious armed group dynamics detailed in the Tripolitania have until 2025 and 2026 been rare in LAAF-controlled areas.

Instead, the main competition has been within the Haftar family, mainly over who will succeed Khalifa. The main contenders have been three of his sons: Saddam, Khalid and Belqasim. During the reporting period, succession questions have become more acute as reports suggest Khalifa's age and health will lead to a formal or de facto leadership change in the near term.[20]

Over this period, Saddam, Khalifa's youngest son, has been promoted into roles that strongly signal he might succeed his father. In August 2025, he was appointed deputy commander-in-chief of the LAAF after assuming the role of chief of staff of the ground forces a year earlier. During this time, he has had an increasingly prominent public role, including meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio.[21]

The other two brothers have also amassed power, though in different areas. Khalid has mainly focused on military issues and was promoted to chief of the general staff in August 2025. While subordinate to Saddam, his role has given him greater operational control and command authority over the LAAF's naval and coast guard forces, with the navy chief of staff answering to him. His control over the eastern naval apparatus coincides with a rapid expansion of the LAAF's maritime capabilities, including the acquisition of vessels and the establishment or reinforcement of naval units. The growing volume of departures from eastern Libya means Khalid's control of naval forces also positions him at the centre of an increasingly political and diplomatically important issue set.

Belqasim has mainly focused on political dynamics. He is director-general of the Libya Development and Reconstruction Fund, which oversees reconstruction projects across GNS/LAAF-controlled areas. Contacts have flagged his high degree of influence over the GNS through his control of the fund and regular engagement with ministers. Belqasim is reportedly close to Aguila Saleh, speaker of the

House of Representatives, and this has led him to push for the legislative body not to be sidestepped in negotiations between the GNU and GNS/LAAF.

Saddam's elevation has reportedly led Khalid and Belqasim to work together more closely. There are no signs of open conflict but actors viewed as their proxies are increasingly at odds, including in public media. The brothers have also each sought to build out their respective support bases, including through the promotion of supportive officers, cultivation of partners in the GNU, and outreach to influential tribal figures in the east and south. It is difficult to assess whether or how this manoeuvring will affect the succession process, whether it will lead to a dispute, or whether the brothers can forge an agreement.

LAAF restructuring fuels tensions in the Fezzan

Other elements at least partly linked to succession issues have had a more direct impact on security and instability in GNS/LAAF areas. Beginning in 2024, the Haftar family progressively sought to limit the political risk of senior LAAF commanders perceived to wield military and social influence. In some cases, this has involved moving commanders or units outside their tribal areas, instead deploying them to areas where they lacked a social base. In others, it has entailed purging senior commanders and eliminating entire units. The most dramatic instance of this involved Hassan Maatoug al-Zadma and the 128 Brigade, which had been a major power in the Fezzan.

The 128 Brigade had been deeply involved in security operations in the Fezzan since the LAAF took over the region in 2019.[22] Although most commanders and a substantial number of soldiers came from the Cyrenaica, the group cultivated social support through its tribal composition. Al-Zadma, other commanders and many fighters were Awlad Suleiman, the region's traditional ruling tribe, and the 128 also recruited heavily among other ethnic groups in the south. This localization of forces was a key tool in the LAAF's governance strategy in the Fezzan, as it helped in managing often complex local power dynamics across a sparsely populated and large geography, and the LAAF heavily relied upon the 128 to exercise control.

The 128's dominant military position in the south, coupled with al-Zadma's personal and organizational support from key southern communities and direct connections to external backers – including the United Arab Emirates – made it noticeably more independent than other major LAAF units, such as the Tariq Bin Ziyad Brigade. Probably because of this, the LAAF began targeting the unit in January 2024, with persistent reports that al-Zadma had either been purged or placed under house arrest. By February 2025, the purge took effect and the LAAF disbanded the 128.

The unit's demobilization was mostly peaceful, though brief but violent clashes occurred in the town of Qatrun on 12 February and in the Kilinje goldfield, an artisanal mining area near the border with Chad and Niger, on 21 February. In both cases, LAAF units prevailed, though in Qatrun the unit involved – a Chadian mercenary group led by Saleh Anakazi –withdrew into Niger rather than surrendering.[23]

Notably, Tebu-majority units in the LAAF, such as the Um al-Aranib Martyrs' Brigade, broadly refused to engage in the fighting and withdrew to remote areas. Reportedly, this emanated from concerns among Tebu groups that they could be disarmed or redeployed, underscoring lingering distrust of the LAAF. The Haftars had exacerbated this perception in early 2025 by progressively weakening Tebu control over key borderland areas, such as Kilinje and al-Sarra airbase, affecting their control over illicit economies.

To replace the 128 and Tebu groups, the LAAF dispatched several existing or newly created Cyrenaican forces, in keeping with the aim of basing units outside their tribal areas. Initially, these units faced little local pushback, but the 128 dissolution and action against the Tebu sharply increased tensions between key southern tribes and the LAAF. By late spring 2025, a discreet tribal conference of Tebu, Tuareg, Gaddadfa and Awlad Suleiman took place to discuss a collective response and the possibility of switching allegiance to the GNU.

Initially, the LAAF seemed to have mitigated the issue. In early May, Saddam Haftar made an unannounced visit to Sebha after the tribal conference and appeared to head off the challenge. He made further visits to the region throughout 2025, touring sensitive border areas and publicly telegraphing the LAAF's – and his – control over the situation.

However, tensions in the Fezzan continued to worsen. Contacts in the region flagged growing reports of mistreatment and arbitrary arrests by Cyrenaican forces aimed at local tribesmen, fuelling frustrations and resentment. As one Tebu contact noted, it was widely assessed that pushing back on mistreatment by LAAF personnel was impossible. Effectively, the force had created an entrenched perception in the south of its power and the futility of acting against it.

Other tensions also emanated from disruptions in the illicit economy. Events in the first months of 2025 reshaped which LAAF units controlled illicit economic activity in the south and, more broadly, changed smuggling and trafficking ecosystems, including curtailing the activities of, or excluding, a number of smugglers. This created a pool of disaffected armed actors and smuggling networks in the border region who could potentially form the basis of a future challenge.

Insurgency erupts in the southern borderlands

This volatile situation in the Fezzan tipped into active violence on 31 January 2026 when coordinated attacks were launched against Toummo port of entry, the main crossing point on the Libyan border with Niger; Bograra checkpoint (a small border post 50 kilometres north-west of Toummo); and a border berm at the mouth of the Salvador Pass, the desert bottleneck in northern Niger near the border with Algeria and Libya. The attackers seized control of Toummo before withdrawing later in the day.

This marked the emergence of a new insurgent group, the Revolutionaries of the South (also known as the Southern Liberation Operations Room). The group is led by Mohamed Wardago, younger brother of Barka Wardago, the deceased revolutionary Tebu commander.[24] His authority derives largely from his family's long-term participation in Tebu armed group activities and the continuity this offers with the tribe's martial traditions. Wardago's leadership is reportedly buttressed by several highly experienced field commanders.

While the fighting strength of the Revolutionaries of the South is fluid, at the time of the group's emergence it was reportedly able to mobilize around 500 men, including a cross-section of tribal groups from across the south. Most are Tebu, with Awlad Suleiman also reportedly prominent, with smaller numbers of Tuareg, Gaddadfa and other smaller southern tribes. Reportedly, many of them had previously been linked to the 128 or other armed groups affected by the LAAF's purges and reshuffling in the south.

The group is reportedly well armed with military equipment acquired during the demobilization of the 128, including vehicles and mounted heavy weaponry. Other weapons have reportedly been procured from, or with the financial support of, external backers.

The Revolutionaries of the South have further buttressed their capabilities through links to two Chadian insurgent groups, the Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic (Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République, CCMSR) and the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad, FACT). Both were previously based in southern Libya but were driven out after the rapprochement between the LAAF and Chadian authorities.[25] Reportedly, both groups have been willing to provide fighters and other forms of military support in exchange for cash or supplies.

Officially, the creation of the Revolutionaries of the South was spurred by economic hardship caused by corruption and the LAAF's diversion of subsidized goods to support Sudan's paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). A Revolutionaries of the South commander noted: 'Before our operations of January 31, the economic and social situation in the south was extremely fragile. For more than two years, all subsidies intended for the south – food supplies, fuel, gas, etc. – have been systematically diverted by Haftar's militias to neighbouring countries, leaving the population of the south abandoned and suffering.'

Economic deprivation is a chronic challenge in the Fezzan, but it has become noticeably more acute over the last two years, in line with Libya's broader economic and social challenges. This has allegedly been worsened by the growing volume of supplies, notably fuel, transported overland from major cities in the Fezzan, such as Sebha, to depots in Darfur belonging to the RSF.[26] This supply channel has existed since the start of the Sudan conflict, but it has progressively become more professionalized and important as Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) drone strikes in north-western Sudan have affected the use of supply corridors in south-eastern Libya, such as those via Ain Kaziet or Mataan al-Saraa.[27] While strategically logical for the LAAF and RSF, heightened use of the Fezzan has become politically problematic, allegedly leading to local supply shortages and exacerbating long-standing southern grievances.

Interviews conducted in February 2026 suggest these grievances are only one part of what drives individual Revolutionaries of the South fighters, however. Other motivations include frustration over being cut out of illicit markets or profiteering from them. The dissolution of the 128 and loss of status linked to it is also a reported driver, with one Revolutionaries of the South member noting, 'Since the dissolution of the 128, many of us found ourselves without a clear role or prospects.'





The Libyan Arab Armed Forces display materiel seized from the Revolutionaries of the South and detain a combatant. *Photos: Facebook*

Since its initial assaults on 31 January, the Revolutionaries of the South have maintained a steady stream of attacks on LAAF positions. They included an ambush of a 676th Battalion patrol on 24 February in which prisoners were taken. This prompted a fierce LAAF counterattack on a base belonging to the goup in Wadi Achélouma, Niger, about 130 kilometres south of the border. Though several Revolutionaries of the South members were killed or captured, and equipment seized, the group was reportedly able to make a fighting retreat and preserved most of its strength.

In May, it began to stage raids, including the first attack further inland, near Qatrun, which reportedly destroyed a new drone system. It also proved increasingly capable of fending off armed attacks, ambushing a Nigerien force sent to confront it in mid-June, leading to substantial Nigerien casualties and prisoners. In early July, the Revolutionaries of the South staged an attack on the LAAF's Arandega checkpoint west of al-Wigh airbase, killing and capturing several LAAF fighters. These two incidents were the first Revolutionaries of the South attacks on an interior positions, and they underscored the group's growing reach and threat. After the latter attack, Saddam Haftar reportedly flew to Sebha and convened southern security commanders to review their posture, a gathering that underscored the LAAF's growing concern about the Revolutionaries of the South.

Since the insurgent group's emergence, the LAAF has tried several different approaches to deal with the immediate security threat and the broader southern frustrations that have fuelled it. On the military side, the LAAF closed the Libya–Niger border in February, aiming to curtail supply lines from southern Libya to Revolutionaries of the South bases in Niger. It also launched cross-border assaults on Revolutionaries of the South positions such as Wadi Achélouma, and redeployed units such as the 173rd Commando Brigade, the 628th Border Guard Battalion and the 87th Rapid Intervention Battalion to the border area, leading to a sharp increase in patrolling, particularly in strategic areas near the Salvador Pass, Bograra checkpoint and Tommou crossing. A Tebu unit, 129 Brigade, was allegedly deployed to Tommou, probably to leverage tribal dynamics and limit Revolutionaries of the South offensive action at the crossing.

Meanwhile, the LAAF also intensified its outreach to southern tribes, particularly the Tebu. Interviewees claimed that financial inducements and offers of fighter inclusion in LAAF military units were also made. This was confirmed when a new unit, the 18th Light Infantry Brigade, was created in Murzuq, allegedly to provide financing and status to disaffected fighters in the south.

However, a broad tension existed between the LAAF's efforts to address the security threat and its efforts to quell popular frustrations. In May, for example, the LAAF prohibited the use of Toyota Tundra and Hilux vehicles in the Fezzan, probably because the Revolutionaries of the South used them in the Qatrun attack that month. However, these vehicles are widely used by the civilian population in the south and the wave of LAAF confiscations largely affected ordinary civilians, fuelling local anger.

Conflict curtails smuggling on Niger–Libya border

The closure of the Niger–Libya border and the LAAF's aggressive patrolling have affected cross-border smuggling in fuel, food, drugs and people. Brigades such as the 173 have intercepted smuggling convoys, with several smugglers dying in efforts to escape. In some cases, smuggling networks initially attempted to reroute their operations; migrant and drug smugglers, for example, shifted from routes around Toummo to routes further west, near the Salvador Pass. However, these have become increasingly difficult for most smugglers to access without close LAAF connections.

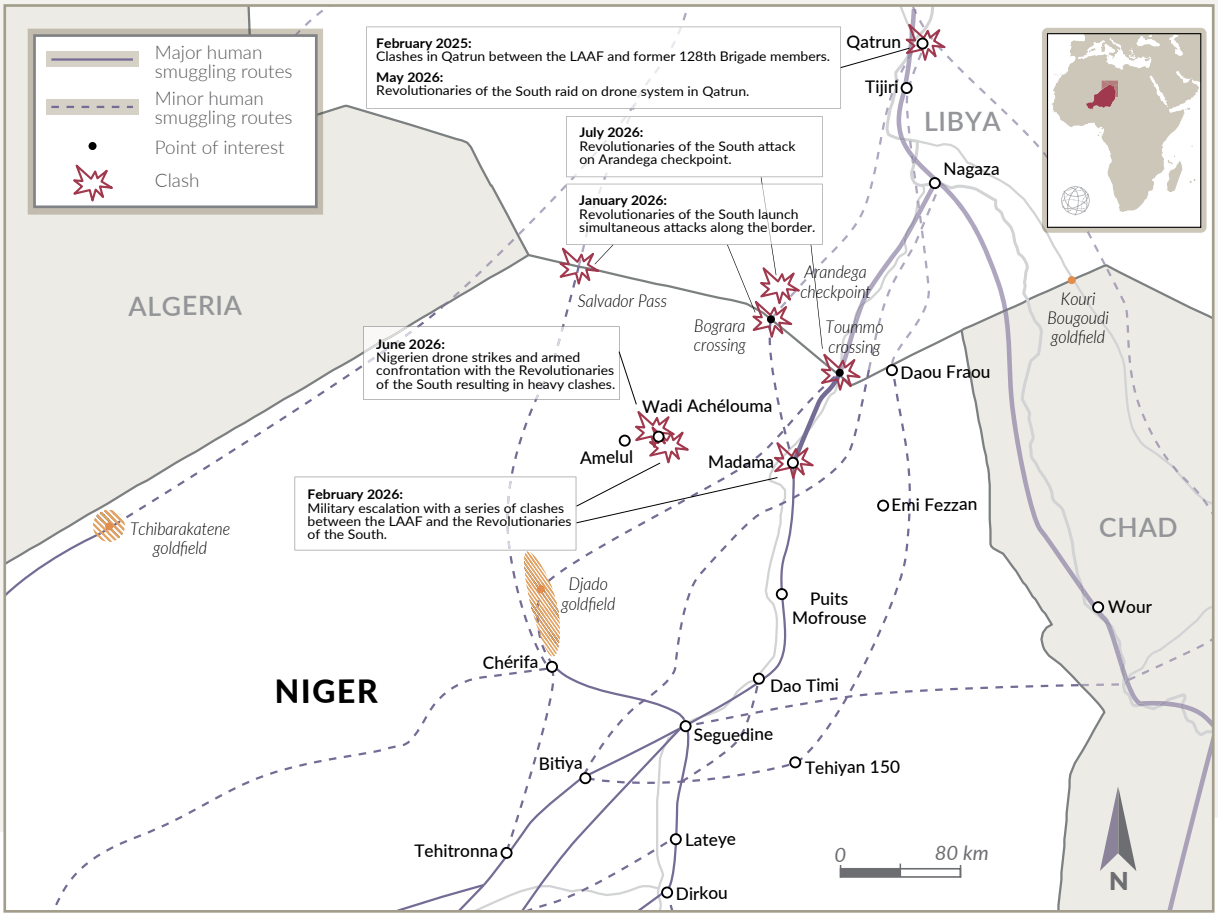

FIGURE 2 Human smuggling routes and conflict at the Niger–Libya border, January 2025 to June 2026.

It is important to note that the Revolutionaries of the South have also sought to enforce a blockade along the border, and has intercepted drug convoys allegedly sanctioned by the LAAF heading through the Salvador Pass into Libya, as well as fuel convoys heading south into Niger. However, locally the LAAF is seen as the main barrier to cross-border smuggling.

As a result of this, smuggling between Niger and Libya, particularly involving foreign migrants and fuel, has been sharply curtailed. The local economic impact has been substantial. Spot shortages of fuel, for example, have been reported in Niger, where several migrant smugglers have exited the market and shifted towards provisioning illicit gold mining. Similar economic fallout has been experienced in southern Libya, given the region's dependence on cross-border trade. The result has been a progressive rise in frustrations with the LAAF.

Finally, while the Revolutionaries of the South pose a limited direct military threat to the LAAF in the Fezzan, its ability to withstand LAAF pressure and keep launching attacks has subtly changed attitudes in southern Libya. Contacts say locals have begun to push back, sometimes violently, on what they view as mistreatment or abuse by LAAF forces. While anecdotal, an incident in Qatrun in February underscored the change in attitudes. An LAAF officer from the Furjani tribe – to which the Haftars belong – was killed by an angry Tebu man after the officer allegedly confiscated his car and drove it around the town. Further similar incidents have emerged in recent months.

This change in attitudes could further worsen an already fragile and volatile situation in the region, driving more volunteers to the Revolutionaries of the South or leading to the emergence of other insurgent groups. It could also make the broader region increasingly difficult and expensive for the LAAF to govern as it approaches a delicate transition period between Khalifa Haftar and his successor.



HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING

The changing political situation detailed above has produced a particularly unbalanced human smuggling dynamic during the reporting period. Migrant departures first surged in 2025 to highs not seen since the end of the 2010s migration crisis, with more than 110 000 people attempting the sea crossing during the year, a marked increase from the 70 000–75 000 annual departures recorded between 2022 and 2024.[28]

This then fell by 32 per cent in the first half of 2026, when roughly 31 600 migrants departed for Europe, compared with about 46 400 in the same period in 2025.[29] This was the lowest total recorded since 2020 and reversed trends recorded between 2023 and 2025.[30]

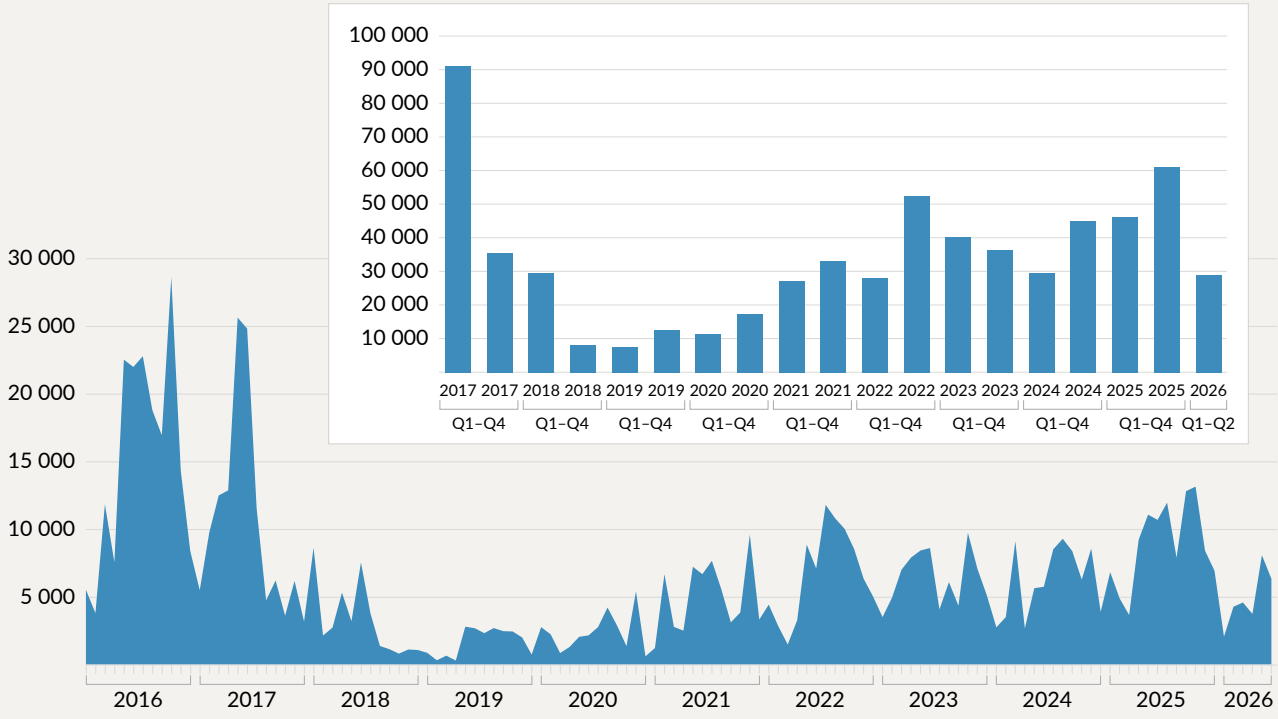

FIGURE 3 Estimated monthly departures from the Libyan coast, 2016–2026.

NOTE: Data for 2026 covers January to June.

These topline trends obscure other critical changes in Libyan human smuggling during this period. Most notably, the centre of gravity for human smuggling shifted definitively into GNS territory in 2025 and 2026, with departures from the Cyrenaica to Tobruk surging, migrant arrivals through Benina airport in Benghazi robust, and overland routes in the southern Cyrenaica reinvigorated.

This section charts those trends. It first details dynamics in the Tripolitania, including departure levels and smuggler behaviour. It then turns to dynamics in the Cyrenaica and to a lesser degree the Fezzan, charting embarkation dynamics in GNS/LAAF territory as well as migrant entry patterns.

Tripolitania departures surge then recede

Historically, the west has been the epicentre of human smuggling from Libya to Italy. This was especially the case for the stretch of coast between Zawiya and Zuwara, reflecting the region's proximity to Italy's Pelagie Islands and Sicily and the deeply entrenched smuggling economies that developed in the area, particularly towards the Tunisian border.

After the revolution, persistent political instability, limited central government control and the entrenched smuggling networks protected by legal armed groups further cemented the region's position as Libya's primary embarkation hub.

Following the 2019–2020 war, this system was also facilitated by a generally peaceful environment within Libya that helped with the establishment of new markets. Migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt and Syria, most of whom arrived on commercial flights, could relatively safely and easily transit to the west coast, where smugglers waited to embark them.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics was a steady rise in departures from the west coast between 2020 and 2024, then a sharp acceleration in 2025. The GI-TOC estimates that around 83 500 migrants embarked from the Tripolitania that year, up from approximately 66 600 in 2024.

In part, this appears to have been driven by a rise in nationalities that were already moving through Libya in large numbers. Bangladeshis, for example, have been one of the major nationalities arriving in Italy from Libya since 2021. For most of this period, their numbers were high but relatively stable, oscillating between 12 000 and 15 000 arrivals between 2022 and 2024.[31] In 2025, arrivals to Italy jumped to about 20 000, underscoring a growing demand and supply of smuggling options for the group.[32] The movement of Egyptians via the west coast increased almost as much, though their numbers were well below Bangladeshis.[33]

Growing smuggling along the west coast during this period also hinged on nationalities whose recent movement through the country had been far more limited. In particular, there was a surge in departures by migrants from the Horn of Africa – Eritreans, Somalis and Ethiopians – with arrivals to Italy tripling between 2024 and 2025. These nationalities had embarked from Libya in large numbers in the 2010s, with just over 140 000 migrants from this sub-Saharan region arriving in Italy and Malta between 2013 and 2016.[34] However, their movement fell sharply, reaching a nadir in 2019. While some migrants from the Horn continued moving between 2020 and 2024, with a gradual increase, levels jumped noticeably in 2025, particularly among Eritreans.

Rising migration by these cohorts via Libya, and on the west coast, is important beyond simple arrival levels. Heightened movement by these nationalities, most of whom travel overland, has altered human smuggling and trafficking ecosystems in the Cyrenaica and the Fezzan.

On the west coast, the primary impact of this change was economic. Interviews suggest that smugglers' prices for Horn of Africa migrants in 2025 ranged between €1 320 and €4 400, with many payments at the higher end of the spectrum. Generally, these fees were charged by professional smuggler networks whose fast boats and established connections to armed groups meant they could reliably deliver migrants to Europe.

Migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Iraq also paid increasingly high prices. Notably, in the case of Iraqis – whose numbers grew noticeably in 2025 – payments were extraordinarily high, with one smuggler claiming to have received US$9 000 (€7 670) per Iraqi Kurdish passenger. As a result, smugglers' profits rocketed, with a contact noting that a single vessel carrying 70 migrants could net about US$300 000 (€256 000).

Smugglers adapt as maritime enforcement intensifies

During 2025, smugglers' experience and sophistication became increasingly important as maritime enforcement efforts grew. In some places, such as Zuwara, this was directly linked to al-Zoubi's growing campaign for control. However, the maritime space also became crowded as more security units expanded or resumed maritime operations. These included outfits such as the CTF 60th Company, the Zawiya Refinery unit of the Libyan Coast Guard, the Zawiya branch of the General Administration for Coastal Security, the Zawiya unit of the Libyan Navy Special Forces, and Mohammed Bahroun's ASTA. Al-Zoubi's 80th Special Operations Battalion also began operating around the middle of the year. As a result, search-and-rescue activity in 2025 surged, with the GI-TOC calculating that about 450 migrant boats were intercepted and returned to Libya, compared with 370 in 2024 and 245 in 2023.

Caveats are required, however. Some armed groups involved in maritime security operations in 2025 also facilitated departures by smugglers who had paid protection money. This largely explains why west coast maritime security and successful migrant arrivals to Italy increased simultaneously. These dynamics also fuelled competitive chaos at sea, as units worked aggressively to intercept boats that had not paid them, even if they had paid others, while also aggressively ensuring that vessels linked to smugglers who had paid them could pass unmolested by rival maritime security units. In some cases, this led to firefights at sea between rival security units.



Migrants wait to be rescued in the search-and-rescue zone off the international waters of Libya, January 2026.
© Sameer al-Doumy/AFP

Nonetheless, the increasingly complex maritime security maze drove a shift in smuggler tactics. With bribery no longer offering predictable protection, as paying off one maritime actor did not protect against interception by others, smugglers with the financial means moved to faster boats, investing heavily in fibreglass hulls and powerful outboard motors. Such equipment is particularly expensive, however, with a fibreglass boat and two 240-horsepower engines costing around US$150 000 (€127 800), far more than the formerly dominant wooden or rubber vessels. Growing smuggler expenses drove up prices and led smugglers to go to increasing lengths to protect or recover equipment.

In some cases, this entailed smugglers piloting migrant vessels just outside the Libyan search-and-rescue zone before removing one of their engines and returning to Libya on an escort vessel. Smuggler convoys have also been reported, with slower migrant vessels being escorted into international waters by one or more armed smugglers.

However, efforts to evade maritime security patrols and preserve equipment also led to the emergence of what the GI-TOC terms 'forced overboarding' events. In such operations, smugglers target NGO rescue vessels, steering close to them and forcibly ejecting migrants into the water, triggering rescue operations. Smugglers appear to use this method to complete migrant smuggling operations quickly, without risking their vessels or engines. While no migrants are known to have been seriously injured or killed, the tactic carries high risk.

Al-Zoubi's coalition curbs departures

Despite the changing tactics, the sharp rise in human smuggling from the west coast in 2025 was unsustainable as enforcement conditions changed in 2026. Departures over the first six months of the year collapsed. The steepest contraction was in May, historically the beginning of the summer surge, when the west coast recorded just 534 departures, compared with more than 3 350 in 2025.

The decline is largely attributable to al-Zoubi's increasingly successful enlistment of west coast armed groups to counter migrant departures. This resulted in part from a shift in operational posture, and in some cases by a move away from protecting favoured smugglers at sea and on land, and it further closed the window for migrants to embark in key hotspots.

However, a stretch of coastline from west of Sabratha to central Zawiya fell under the control of ASTA, which was not part of al-Zoubi's alliance. Bahroun's control of this area deepened in 2025 and early 2026 with the elimination of Ahmed al-Dabbashi (see below) and the installation of allied smugglers to oversee the operations of his network. Smugglers from areas under Bahroun's control and from neighbouring municipalities, such as Zuwara, remained active in these areas, probably accounting for many of the departures recorded in the first half of 2026 from this region. In this context, the reportedly warming relationship between Bahroun and al-Zoubi could dramatically affect departure levels in the second half of 2026, potentially further limiting the feasibility of embarkations from the area.

Signs suggest that smugglers continue to adapt to the new situation. Tactics developed in 2025, particularly forced overboardings, remain in regular use. Furthermore, many migrants who reached Europe were mostly from nationalities that pay high prices. Over half of arrivals to Italy, for example, were Bangladeshis, Somalis and Pakistanis. This suggests that operationally capable, highly connected smugglers who charge high prices can still subvert the strengthening maritime security environment.

Finally, some reports suggest that west coast smugglers have relocated their activities to areas east of Tripoli. Evidence supporting this includes increased activity on the al-Khoms–Misrata corridor in 2026, with about 1 300 departures in April and May, compared to an average of around 280 in 2025. Nonetheless, this displacement is unlikely to fully offset the sharp reduction in smuggling in the west coast area.

Alongside the rise in human smuggling in eastern Libya detailed in the next section, changing dynamics on the west coast have contributed to the shift in the centre of gravity of Libya's human smuggling ecosystem from the Tripolitania to the Cyrenaica. This is likely to have major implications on the international and domestic politics of irregular migration from Libya in the coming year.

Al-Dabbashi's demise

The killing of Ahmed al-Dabbashi (aka al-Amu) on 12 December 2025 ended a smuggling career spanning more than a decade. From Sabratha, al-Dabbashi rose to criminal prominence through his leadership of the Anas al-Dabbashi Brigade, which controlled significant parts of western Sabratha. Between 2014 and 2017, he leveraged this territorial control to become one of the most important human smugglers on the west coast. Driven out of Sabratha in 2017 in a major battle for control by rival smugglers, he was sanctioned by the UN Security Council the following year.[35]

Al-Dabbashi returned to Sabratha in 2020, quickly re-establishing himself with the support of Bahroun as an important actor in west coast illicit markets. By 2022, he and Bahroun had helped to catalyze a resurgence in human smuggling in Zawiya through networks controlled by al-Dabbashi and smaller smugglers operating alongside him. During this period, al-Dabbashi also reportedly became increasingly involved in the trafficking of drugs, particularly cocaine.

While a major smuggler, al-Dabbashi's operational activity and his focus on cocaine trafficking versus human smuggling oscillated. By 2024–2025, however, he was again active in human smuggling. Several interviewees from the Horn of Africa, particularly Somalis, flagged the al-Dabbashi network in 2025 as one of the main smuggling groups catering to those nationalities, underscoring his deep involvement in some of the year's main trends. This cohort has always been an area of specialization for his network.

On 5 June 2025, fighting erupted between al-Dabbashi and his former ally Bahroun. The factors leading to the conflict are disputed, though it appears al-Dabbashi or his forces killed Mohamed al-Khadrawi, a Zawiyan militant linked to Bahroun. Claims have also emerged that al-Zoubi put pressure on Bahroun before the attack to end al-Dabbashi's smuggling activities, which, given al-Dabbashi's UN sanctions and high level of activity, were particularly egregious.

During the fighting, members of ASTA reportedly targeted al-Dabbashi's home, forcing him to flee, and his migrant smuggling network, storming several holding facilities and seizing about 600 migrants.

Reportedly, the network's infrastructure was taken over by former associates of al-Dabbashi who had become allied to Bahroun. This transition limited the overall impact of al-Dabbashi's expulsion from Sabratha.

Between June and December, he maintained a low profile, moving between rural areas around Sabratha, Zintan and potentially Sabratha. During this period, he sought to ensure personal protection, largely by leveraging clan networks, and to re-establish his position in Sabratha through intermittent attacks on ASTA forces.

On 11 December, one of these attacks targeted an ASTA checkpoint in Sabratha, leading to six ASTA casualties. This prompted a raid the next day on a hideout linked to al-Dabbashi, and a relative was captured. Under interrogation, the relative reportedly provided information on his location, leading to a series of raids, a shootout and al-Dabbashi's death.

With his smuggling network already in the hands of others, al-Dabbashi's death had little impact on departure levels. Coupled with the major changes in west coast maritime enforcement and departures in 2026, his death symbolized the fading of an era of human smuggling in Libya that involved high volumes of migrants moved by highly visible and powerful smugglers in direct command of militias.

Despite this, it remains too soon to tell whether the smuggling of migrants on the west coast has definitively ended or is simply paused. While al-Zoubi's efforts to suppress departures have achieved substantial results, they are inherently fragile. Local or national political shifts, the tension between enforcement and anti-migrant sentiment, and fractious armed group dynamics could all cause al-Zoubi's alliance to break down in part or in full. Should this happen, much of the latent smuggling infrastructure on the west coast remains in place and could rapidly facilitate a sharp rise in migrant departures.

Centre of gravity shits to the Cyrenaica

During 2025 and 2026, the Cyrenaica has increasingly emerged as the centre of gravity for human smuggling in Libya. For international actors, the most dramatic marker of this is surging maritime smuggling from far eastern Libya towards the Greek island of Crete. Coupled with the decline in west coast departures, an expansion of the Tobruk route led to an estimated 51 per cent of all departures from Libya occurring there in May 2026.[36]

Other less visible elements also contribute to the Cyrenaica's importance for human smuggling. Benina International Airport in Benghazi is a key node in hybrid smuggling networks that facilitate legal or semi-legal arrivals to Libya by air and clandestine departures on maritime routes. Hybrid smuggling is the main means by which some of the dominant groups arriving in Europe – Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Egyptians – reach Libya. Overland routes into the Cyrenaica, mainly via the south-east, also became increasingly important in 2025. While these seem to have declined in use between mid-2025 and mid-2026, a diversion of routes into Egypt and across the Cyrenaica's eastern border may be under way.

These separate dynamics could reinforce each other, with migrants who fly into Benina or arrive overland choosing to depart from Tobruk rather than heading to the west coast as most have in the past. This could fuel a further increase in departures and affect the international and domestic politics around human smuggling in Libya, which for the last decade and a half have overwhelmingly centred on dynamics in the Tripolitania.

Departures from the Tobruk region surge

Throughout 2025 and the first half of 2026, at least 38 000 migrants embarked from the Tobruk region in the eastern Cyrenaica and routed towards Greece. May 2026 saw an estimated 5 200 departures, a monthly record for the region.[37]

While some human smugglers used routes from eastern Libya to Greece or Italy before the revolution, traffic was sporadic. After the revolution, smuggling in the region remained low, with most migrants gravitating towards the west coast.



A temporary hosting site for refugees and migrants on Crete. Departures from eastern Libya to Greece increased during 2025 and early 2026. *© Gene Medi/ NurPhoto via Getty Images*

This began to change from 2022, when departures surged to at least 17 600, up from slightly below 1 900 the year before. This accelerated in 2023, with about 12 800 departures between January and June. The migrants mostly routed towards Italy, particularly Sicily or Calabria. They were generally transported in large vessels, often carrying 200–400 migrants and sometimes more.[38] The surge was reportedly linked to elements within the LAAF signalling a toleration for a ramp-up in smuggling activities, as well as the use of large boats.[39]

However, the LAAF's posture shifted substantially in May and June, in part driven by the sinking on 14 June of the *Adriana*, a fishing vessel believed to have been carrying up to 750 migrants.[40] At least 600 drowned, causing an uproar. The LAAF clamped down on smuggling in the Tobruk region, and between July and December only just over 1 900 departures were recorded. This sharp suppression further underscored the LAAF's ability to counter smuggling in areas under its control, particularly when such activities risked becoming political liabilities. However, it also pointed to a substantial change in the region's smuggling ecosystem, with smugglers able to move more migrants in the latter half of 2023, even under the LAAF crackdown, than in all of 2021.

In 2024, levels began to tick back up, with around 6 300 departures, but smugglers switched migrant routes away from Italy and towards Crete and the small island of Gavdos to its south. Smuggling also became more clandestine and involved smaller boats carrying about 60 passengers on average. Relatively small passenger loads kept arrivals to Crete low, with the total number of vessels reportedly slightly higher than in 2023.

These trends accelerated in 2025, with departures spiking to at least 24 500, including around 4 400 in July. This continued into the first half of 2026, which saw nearly 14 000 departures. While numbers rose sharply, the trends in vessel size and routes that emerged in 2024 remained the norm, and passenger loads in most vessels were low. Among the 439 vessels identified on the route in 2025, the average number of passengers was 58. While five boats with 400 passengers were launched, they were the exception. In 2026, this trend became more pronounced, with average passenger loads falling to about 45 among the 311 vessels identified, and only six boats carrying between 100 and 200 passengers.[41]

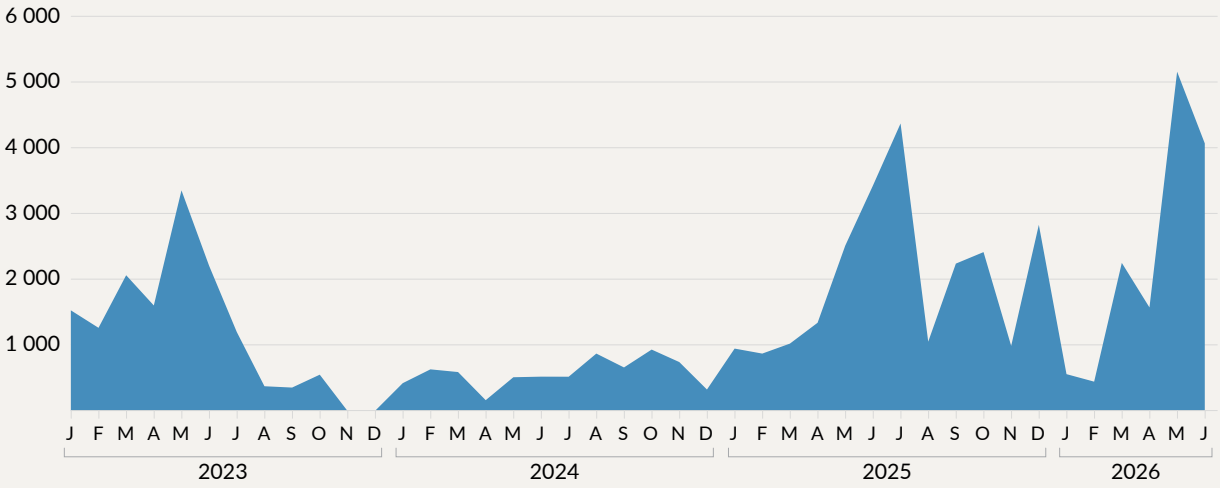

FIGURE 4 Estimated departures from the Cyrenaica, January 2023–June 2026.

Nearly all departures from the Cyrenaica routed towards Greece, with movement towards Italy seemingly suppressed. In a notable incident in late 2025, an LAAF vessel chased and attacked a migrant vessel heading towards Italy, suggesting a willingness to use force to prevent use of the Cyrenaica–Italy route.

Notably, the nationalities being smuggled from eastern Libya have begun to shift. In 2023, a substantial number of those departing were Egyptian, though other nationalities – mainly Pakistanis – also featured in departure data. While Egyptians continue to be a main nationality on the route, accounting for 37 per cent of arrivals to Crete in 2025, the number of Sudanese nationals has surged, comprising another 37 per cent of the total.[42] Pakistanis no longer use the route in large numbers, potentially due to the fallout from the *Adriana* sinking, in which Pakistani victims featured prominently.[43] Bangladeshis have become increasingly common, however, with around 3 500 arriving in Crete in 2025.[44]

Prices charged by smugglers for departures reportedly declined between 2024 and 2025, probably further driving the surge. In 2024, GI-TOC monitoring indicated that prices generally ranged between €2 100 and €3 500. By late 2025, they had reportedly fallen to between €425 and €1 278, where they appear to have stabilized, with Greek authorities noting that prices in the spring of 2026 ranged between €340 and €1 450.[45]

Most current smuggler embarkations originate in the Cambot area east of Tobruk or in the Bay of Bomba, roughly between Tobruk and Derna. Departures from Tobruk itself, which were reported in 2022 and 2023, reportedly no longer occur.

The smuggling networks involved in these routes involve a mix of actors, but a small cluster of well-known Tobruk families reportedly play central roles. The families are deeply embedded in local tribal systems, have strong influence with the LAAF and security forces, and have operated in smuggling landscapes for decades, building substantial organizational knowledge and capacity. In some cases, they own land along the coastline, offering direct access to departure sites.

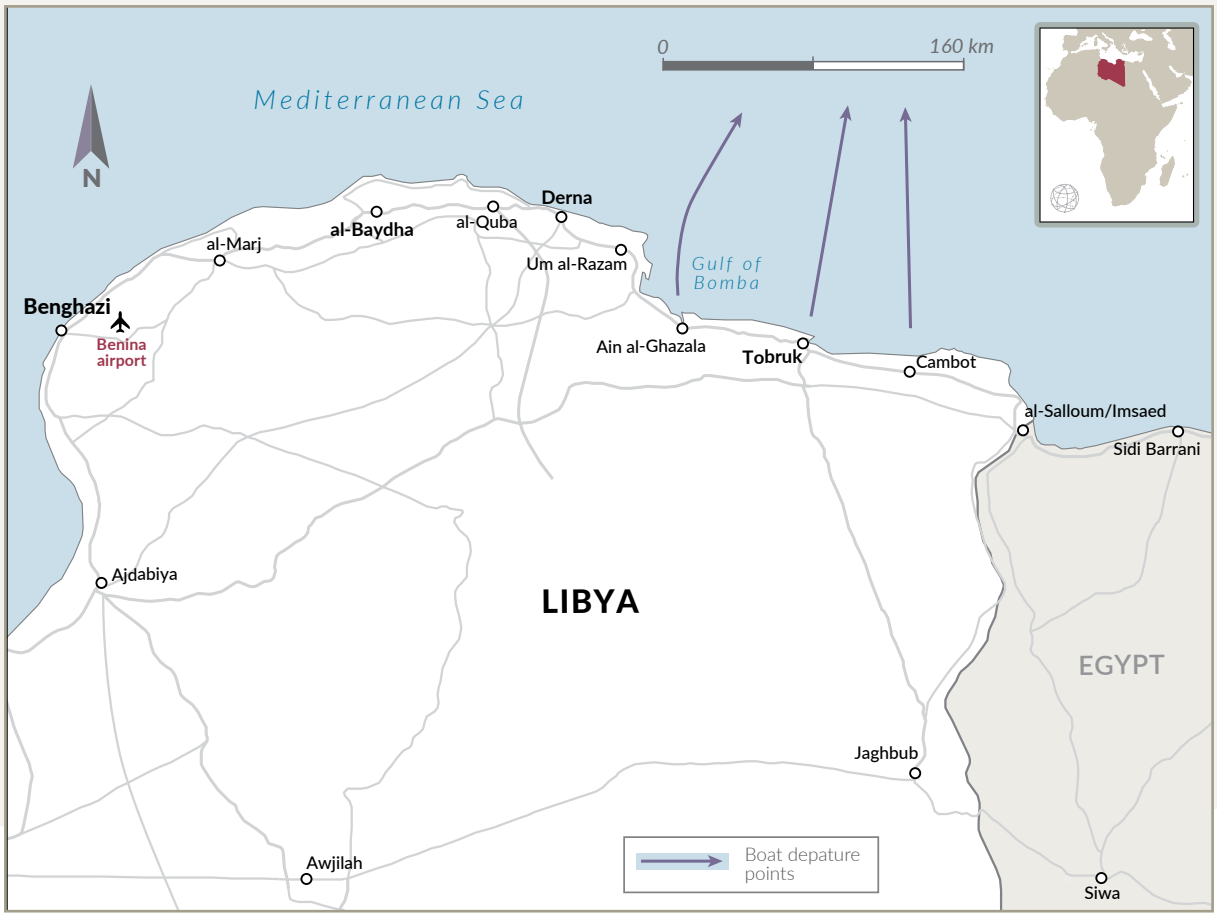

FIGURE 5 Main departure zones on the Cyrenaican coast.

There are signs that the regional smuggling ecosystem is becoming increasingly advanced. For example, contacts reported that local boatbuilding for the smuggling industry has been increasing.

Migrants reportedly contact smuggling networks in the Tobruk area in different ways, responding to referrals by family and friends and social media outreach, or relying on intermediaries who broker the connection.

For migrants arriving who often prepay for package deals that include commercial air travel and a maritime journey, these connections are often established before they leave their home country. Migrants already living or working in eastern Libya describe a relatively straightforward process of contacting smugglers.

For both groups, interviewees report waits of weeks or months in eastern Libya before they embark, and the growing volume of departures from the region has reportedly led to overcrowding and worsening conditions at smuggler holding sites. A contact reported in 2025: 'The situation in Tobruk can now be described as out of control, with houses and apartments in the city centre being used to shelter migrants in preparation for their journeys. There is no longer any space in the warehouses outside the city due to overcrowding and increased demand for journeys.'

Immediately before departing, migrants are moved towards the embarkation site. The GI-TOC has received reports of abusive or intimidating behaviour during this process, with phones confiscated and migrants blindfolded. Armed men are reportedly present, creating an atmosphere migrants have

described as menacing. There have also been reports of violent threats against migrants who will not embark, including in situations where the weather is poor.

While high-profile shipwrecks such as the *Adriana* have not taken place on the Tobruk–Crete route, deaths and disappearances have occurred with alarming regularity and appear to be accelerating. Throughout 2025, at least 268 confirmed deaths occurred on the route, and 230 were recorded during the first six months of 2026.

In part, this reflects the length of the transit, which is substantially longer than between the west coast and Lampedusa. However, smugglers' operational choices have also played a role. Greek officials have claimed that vessels are provisioned with just enough fuel to reach Crete, increasing the risk that even a slight course diversion could cause migrants to run out of fuel.[46] Further, smugglers have recurrently enlisted migrants – disproportionately Sudanese nationals – to steer and man vessels, including undertaking the navigation, in turn heightening the risk of vessels becoming lost or mechanical faults leading to breakdowns.

It is unclear how maritime smuggling will develop in eastern Libya. In June 2026, signs emerged suggesting the LAAF was adopting a more aggressive posture against migrants, with 500 detained in one operation. Saddam Haftar issued a statement on 5 June claiming direct personal oversight of the security campaign, framing it in terms of law enforcement, public security and the regulation of foreign labour.[47] This occurred during the same period the anti-migrant campaigns in western Libya were erupting, strongly suggesting that the roundups were driven by domestic political considerations. There has been little sign of targeted action against smugglers in the Cyrenaica.

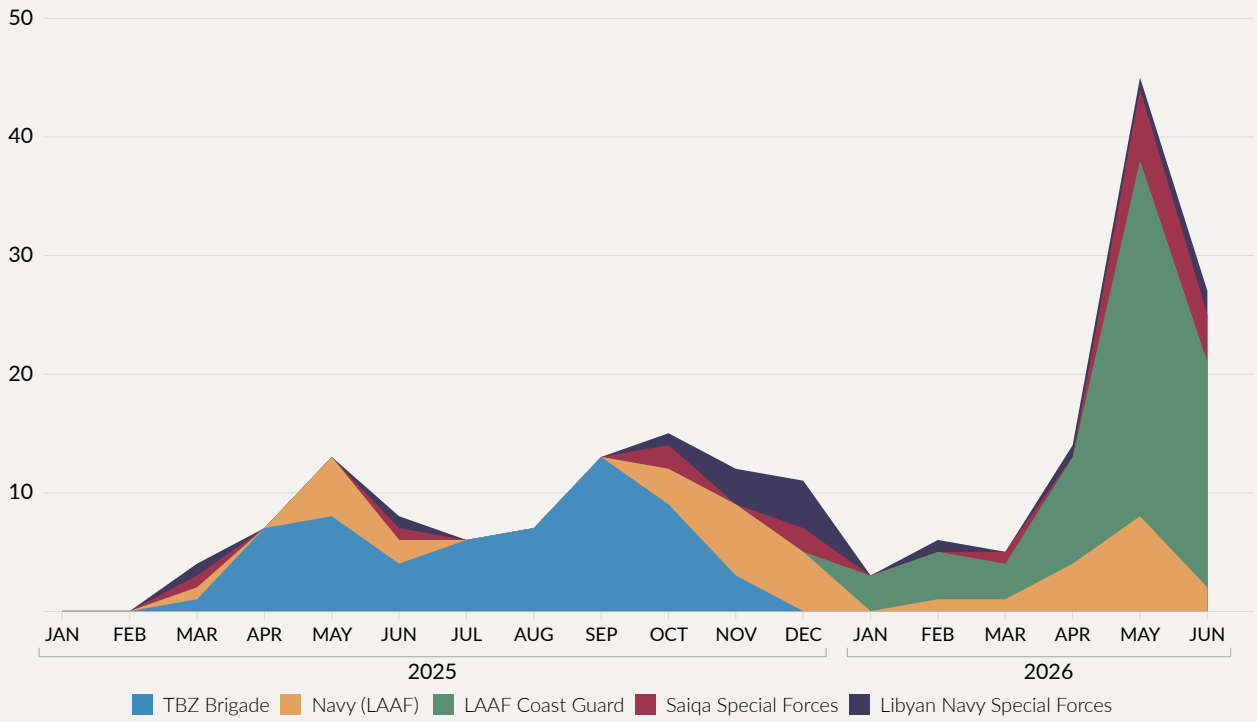

FIGURE 6 Reported search-and-rescue operations off the Cyrenaica, January 2025–June 2026.

Further, the LAAF has progressively been building up its maritime enforcement infrastructure. Over the past few years, it has acquired several vessels and created new units, including an LAAF Coast Guard. This led to a surge in maritime enforcement activity off the Cyrenaican coast in 2026, underscoring that the LAAF has more capacity than before to intercept maritime departures. As noted, much of this maritime infrastructure is under Khalid Haftar's control, placing him in a politically sensitive position.

However, counter-smuggling in LAAF areas has historically hinged less on capacity gaps than on political considerations. Tacitly allowing surges in human smuggling then launching highly visible crackdowns has been a useful tool for building influence with European stakeholders. Notably, the Tobruk surge has endured despite several high-level political and diplomatic engagements between the Haftar brothers and senior European officials. It is unclear why such engagement has not translated into a decline in departures.

While the coming months could see a drop in maritime smuggling from the Cyrenaica, there is also a substantial possibility that it will accelerate, particularly if the west coast crackdown displaces migrants to the east in search of embarkation options. The way the situation develops will not only affect dynamics on the coast but also how the GNS/LAAF handle other critical human smuggling nodes in the Cyrenaica, particularly around Benina airport.

Hybrid smuggling at Benina airport remains robust

Another node in the Cyrenaica critical to Libyan human smuggling is Benghazi's Benina International Airport. This is the main entry point to the country for migrants engaged in hybrid smuggling journeys.[48] Used by Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Egyptians, and increasingly Iraqis and Somalis, hybrid smuggling is a major feeder to maritime departures in the east and the west, and a major factor enhancing the resilience of smuggling systems.

During the reporting period, hybrid smuggling was robust. About 64 000 migrants from nationalities historically associated with such smuggling arrived in Italy and Greece, accounting for a substantial percentage of total arrivals.[49] South Asian nationals – overwhelmingly Bangladeshis, with smaller numbers of Pakistanis – form the most significant cohort of hybrid migrants arriving in Benina and the largest group making the sea crossing from Libya. However, other nationalities – particularly Somalis and Iraqi Kurds – have increasingly gravitated towards such approaches.

In large part, the continued robustness of hybrid migration is interlinked with the growing systemization and predictability of the process, which has given movement via Benina the appearance of a normal labour migration route.

In contrast, GI-TOC interviews conducted in the early 2020s detailed a much more chaotic and clandestine process. Migrants then frequently described difficult or unpredictable experiences at immigration. Most reported being asked to pay cash on arrival to men in security uniforms, who in some cases then guided them through the airport.[50] One migrant interviewed during this period noted: 'All the procedures [for our arrival] were guaranteed by officers from the Libyan army, and we were about 120 people, and each person paid the army US$500.'

That pattern has largely disappeared. Arrivals are now described as unremarkable, with Libyan or diaspora representatives typically meeting migrants and driving them to accommodation in Benghazi or on to Tripoli. This systematization is aided by the growing veneer of bureaucracy around the GNS/LAAF-issued security clearance form, which functions as a de facto entry visa, undercutting the need for migrants flying to Libya to go through official processes for entering the country.

The clearance system operates in legally and institutionally murky territory; it is not codified into law, GNU officials have never recognized its legitimacy, and there have been recurrent complaints that it violates Libyan regulations. When the LAAF's Military Investment Authority (MIA) set it up in 2018, its aims seemed focused primarily on profit generation. Over the past two years, however, the MIA has introduced a quasi-bureaucratic clearance process that has given the system a veneer of formality and legality.

A set of documents must now be provided before a migrant's journey, including a letter from a Libyan company or individual guaranteeing sponsorship, a passport copy, in some cases a medical clearance or blood test result, and a copy of a travel ticket. A formal employment contract is not required. Contacts have also detailed allegations that people can avoid the requirement for a letter of sponsorship through bribes.

Intermediaries, labour agencies or travel agencies familiar with the process have sprung up either in key origin countries – such as Bangladesh or Pakistan – or in countries hosting large origin country diasporas, such as Doha or Dubai. These entities assemble the paperwork and work with travel agencies in eastern Libya, some of which are reportedly run by or linked to human smugglers

Migrant applications for a security clearance assembled in an origin or intermediary country are sent to Libyan agents or travel agencies, who submit them in person to two MIA-linked companies in Benghazi. The MIA does not accept direct applications. Fees for the security clearance are paid at this time, with foreigners already resident in eastern Libya charged US$500 (€430) and new applicants US$700 (€605). All fees are paid in cash in US dollars.

The total cost for movement to Benina – including agent costs in a migrant's origin country, those for Libyan agents, and airline tickets – depends on nationality and departure point. However, for South Asians, the largest set of nationalities arriving through the airport, the cost without the sea crossing ranges from about US$3 500 to US$4 900 (€3 000–€4 230).

Once granted the security clearance, migrants can fly to eastern Libya, often routing via Dubai, Cairo or Türkiye. Arrivals are reportedly smooth, with straightforward movement through security checks and representatives awaiting migrants in the reception area.

Entry into eastern Libya now enjoys a veneer of professionalization, meaning origin-country agents can openly advertise and present themselves as legitimate labour migration service providers, with plausible deniability about what comes next. It also provides the GNS/LAAF with a layer of deniability that insulates them from public association with smuggling; because entry appears formally regularized as a labour migration route, the fact that Benina airport is the key node feeding sea crossings is obscured, particularly since most migrants linked to hybrid smuggling have departed from the west coast.

The long-standing Benina–west coast itinerary appears to be changing, however, with hybrid migrant groups increasingly taking the Tobruk–Crete route. In 2025, the route was used relatively modestly by Bangladeshis, with 3 740 arrivals in Crete, significantly overshadowed by Sudanese and Egyptian cohorts.[51] In 2026, this has changed, with 3 848 arriving between January and June, just behind Sudanese arrivals.[52]

The factors driving this shift are probably mixed, and include the increasingly mature smuggling ecosystem in Tobruk and the growing knowledge of it among key nationalities associated with hybrid migration. However, it is likely that the decreasing feasibility of departures from the west coast has also played a role. If al-Zoubi's counter-smuggling efforts continue, this shift could become even more pronounced, with other nationalities gravitating towards the more predictable and proximate smuggling system in the Cyrenaica over the growing risks in the Tripolitania.

Overland routes across southern borders rise in importance

While overland smuggling to Libya is not new – it was a major factor in the 2013–2016 migration crisis – it has noticeably changed. For most of the 2017–2023 period, overland smuggling was highly concentrated in the south-western Fezzan, with arrivals mainly coming from the Sahel and West Africa. However, rising tension in the Fezzan in 2025 and the outbreak of the Revolutionaries of the South insurgency in 2026 have sharply compressed this route, with GI-TOC contacts in Niger noting a major decline in smuggling through Niger.

Simultaneously, however, there is growing evidence that human smuggling routes across Libya's south-eastern borders have expanded substantially. This has largely been driven by rising arrivals to Libya by Somalis, Eritreans and Ethiopians for onward maritime movement to Europe, and continued movement of substantial numbers of Sudanese refugees seeking safety in Libya.

The most unexpected shift involved Horn of Africa migrants, and 2025 saw the largest surge since 2016 of such nationals embarking from Libya. There were 13 000 arrivals in Italy, 3 300 interceptions by Libyan authorities and several hundred arrivals in Crete.[53] While some of these migrants, notably Somalis, arrived using hybrid means, interviews in Libya and the Horn of Africa point to a reinvigoration of overland smuggling routes, which probably encompassed the vast majority of such migrants.

After being heavily used between 2013 and 2016, routes between the Horn of Africa and Libya were believed to have sharply declined from 2017 after concerted international efforts to target key smugglers and intermediaries.[54]

Interviews with migrants from the Horn of Africa in 2025, however, underscored that while seemingly suppressed, the underlying infrastructure – the complex set of relationships between brokers, intermediaries, transporters and maritime smugglers – had never fully disappeared. As conditions in the Horn of Africa changed, heightening demand, and as smuggling actors identified an opportunity, increasing active outreach, the result was a reconstitution of the system. It is important to note that while some interviewees in 2025 referenced relatively rapid movement from Eritrea, for example, to Libya, the surge in movement probably also encompassed many migrants from the Horn who had set out in 2024 or earlier, suggesting a more gradual rise in smuggling.

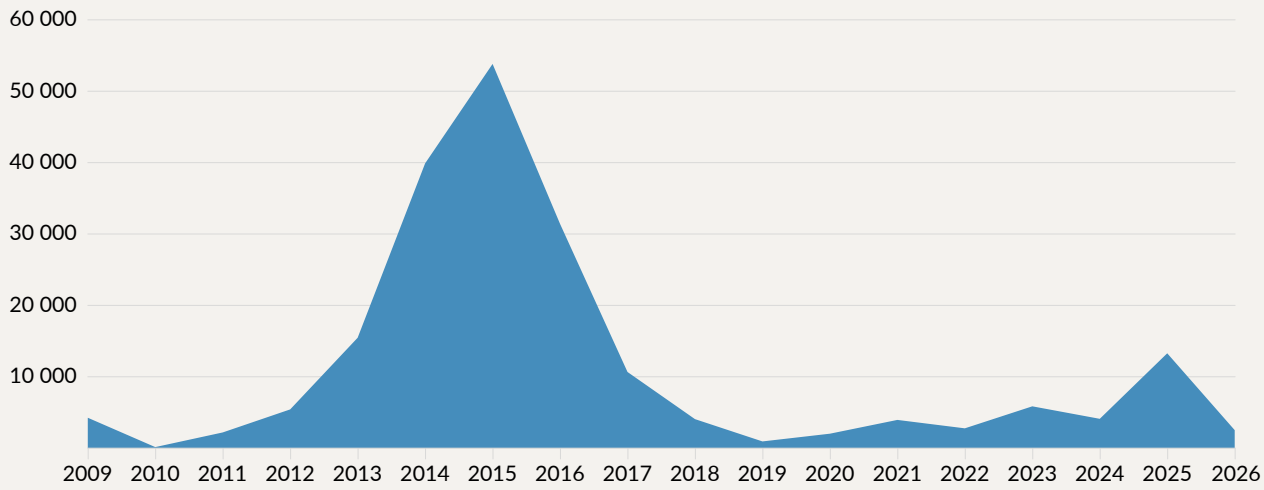

FIGURE 7 Recorded Horn of Africa arrivals in Italy from Libya, 2009–2026.

NOTE: Data for 2026 includes January to June.
SOURCE: Frontex

The GI-TOC is undertaking research to more fully profile the Horn of Africa smuggling ecosystem, including components in Libya, with an in-depth report planned for 2027. Preliminary work suggests that the reconsolidated ecosystem involves intermediaries from Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia who coordinate travel to and through Libya. Horn of Africa diasporas in Europe and Libya also play important roles in making payments, providing introductions and helping coordinate the process. Logistical services are provided by a deep pool of well-established overland and maritime smugglers, including actors such as the al-Dabbashi network.

This relatively complex ecosystem is made possible by the relatively high fees that migrants from the Horn can pay, often by tapping family or diaspora resources. Interviews with migrants suggest average payments from Eritrea or Somalia to the Libyan coast ranging from US$2 200 to US$3 300 (€1 870–€2 810), with about half of the costs linked to transportation within Libya. Payment of US$1 200–US$1 500 (€1 020–€1 280) to move from Kufra, via Sebha, to Tripoli is much more than lower-income refugees from Sudan or migrants from West Africa can afford in southern Libya.

While a small number of Horn of African nationals (mainly Somalis) departed from the Cyrenaica in 2025 and the first half of 2026, in most cases departures occurred from the west coast. As such, the GNS/LAAF faced few diplomatic costs for increased movement by migrants from the Horn through its territory. However, the financial resources of migrants from the Horn of Africa – and their reputation within Libya for being 'wealthy' – have had an impact on broader criminality dynamics in the Cyrenaica and the Fezzan. In particular, there has been an increase in reports of extortionary trafficking targeting Somalis, Eritreans and Ethiopians, involving Libyan and foreign actors who hold migrants and extort ransoms from their families, often using torture or sexual violence to exert pressure.

GNS/LAAF authorities made repeated raids on trafficking sites throughout 2025 and 2026, uncovering large numbers of detained migrants, including many who were injured, and mass graves suspected of holding victims of kidnapping. In one raid, on Zella in March 2025, 164 migrants were rescued, 71 of whom had reportedly been forced to pay ransoms of around €8 625, and 10 bodies were found. These dynamics underscore the violence of the criminal ecosystem operating in the area and the stark human rights risks for migrants placing themselves in its hands.

Sudanese civil war fuels surge in refugees

The other major dynamic influencing overland smuggling in southern Libya was the Sudanese civil war, which drove an extraordinarily high level of movement by refugees into south-eastern Libya. The surge began in 2023 and accelerated throughout 2024.[55] As of January 2025, the refugee population of Kufra, the closest urban area to the Sudan–Libya border, was estimated by a local official at 150 000, with about 1 000 new arrivals weekly.

Rising arrivals are reflected in UNHCR estimates for Libya, which trace a rise from 210 000 Sudanese refugees in December 2024 to 467 000 a year later.[56] By June 2026, the number stood at slightly more than 562 000.[57]

During the reporting period, movement corridors used by Sudanese refugees, as well as by migrants from the Horn, shifted. In the first half of 2025, the main entry point to Libya was Ain Kaziet and adjacent areas. The Libyan side of the border was controlled by the LAAF-affiliated Subul al-Salam Brigade, a Zway armed group from Kufra. The Sudanese side was under the control of the Joint Force, a set of Darfuri armed groups fighting with the SAF. Despite tensions, Sudanese and Libyan actors

broadly created a conducive environment for Sudanese refugee movement across the border, as well as movement by Horn of Africa nationals.

This changed in April, when Subul al-Salam shut the border after the abduction of three Libyans in Sudan. This did not end arrivals but sharply limited them, with contacts estimating that only 500 refugees arrived in May 2025. In June, the Sudanese side of the border was seized by Sudan's RSF, allegedly with the tacit assistance of the LAAF. Once control shifted, both sides moved to restrict civilian access to the border, reportedly to use it as a logistical supply corridor to the RSF.

As a result, beginning in mid-2025 there was a sharp curtailment in direct human smuggling and refugee movement across the Sudan–Libya border. Nonetheless, lower levels of smuggling reportedly persisted in the region in the latter half of 2025 and first half of 2026. A contact in Kufra explained in November 2025: '[Smugglers use] random desert locations marked by GPS coordinates as pickup and drop-off points that are changed every time. Migrants are collected from the deep desert and taken to near Point 3.3, the southernmost entrance to Kufra, then move north towards the Tazirbu road.'

The net effect of the border closure was to drive down total refugee arrival numbers and shift the main arrival points to the Libya–Chad border. Sudanese refugees moving via Chad mostly came from Darfur and had first sought safety in refugee camps along the Chad–Sudan border. Growing numbers, however, sought out smuggler services to reach gold mines on the Libya–Chad border or inland cities in Libya such as Kufra or Sebha. GI-TOC contacts in eastern Chad estimated that 300–600 refugees per week were travelling with smugglers from Tine in eastern Chad to northern goldmines or Libya in August 2025, a number that reportedly rose as violence in North Darfur spiked towards the end of the year.

There has reportedly also been a slight increase in Sudanese refugees attempting to reach Libya via the eastern border with Egypt. This is said to involve established members of the Sudanese refugee community in Egypt as well as refugees who left Sudan aiming to reach Libya.

Smuggling routes on the Libya–Egypt border are relatively well developed and mainly run by Awlad Ali tribesmen. Costs typically range from US$400 to US$1 000 (€340–€850) per person, though they can be considerably lower. This well-developed infrastructure raises the likelihood that movement could heighten further movement by Sudanese and migrants from the Horn along the route.



A makeshift classroom in Tajoura, east of Tripoli, Libya. Sudanese refugees displaced by war are living in harsh conditions with limited access to food, water and healthcare. *© Hazem Turkia/ Anadolu via Getty Images*

Growing numbers of Sudanese embark for Europe

In 2023 and 2024, while the number of Sudanese refugees in Libya grew substantially, comparatively few sought to reach Europe. Slightly more than 3 800 Sudanese disembarked in Italy and Greece in 2024, out of the 210 000 estimated by the UNHCR to be in the country.[58] Interviews with Sudanese refugees in Libya suggest that the limited number of departures hinged mainly on hopes that Sudan's internal conflict would end, enabling refugees to return home. Additionally, even among refugees who expressed interest in reaching Europe, few could afford the fees charged by smugglers, particularly those offering safer and more successful routes to Europe.

This situation changed in 2025, when the number of Sudanese arrivals to Europe more than tripled to around 13 500. While departures from the Tripolitania and the Cyrenaica surged, the latter route saw the most traffic, with 9 330 arrivals.[59] By number, Sudanese were one of the main nationalities driving the sharp increase on the Tobruk–Crete route, accounting for 37 per cent of arrivals to Crete (with Egyptians, the other main nationality, also standing at 37 per cent).[60] This contrasts with 2024, when more than half of Sudanese arrivals departed from the Tripolitania.[61]

Over the first six months of 2026, departure levels fell somewhat but remained substantially above 2024 levels. Slightly more than 5 000 Sudanese arrived in Italy or Greece, with 72 per cent arriving in the latter.[62]

Several interlinked dynamics appeared to be driving departures. First, hopes that the Sudanese conflict would end dissipated as fighting between the RSF and the SAF ebbed and flowed throughout the country. While the SAF retook Khartoum and southern regions along the Nile, the RSF seized the Sudan–Libya border in June 2025 and al-Fashir, the capital of North Darfur, in October. With the conflict in a violent stalemate, refugees in Libya – particularly those from western Sudan – saw few good and safe options for going home.

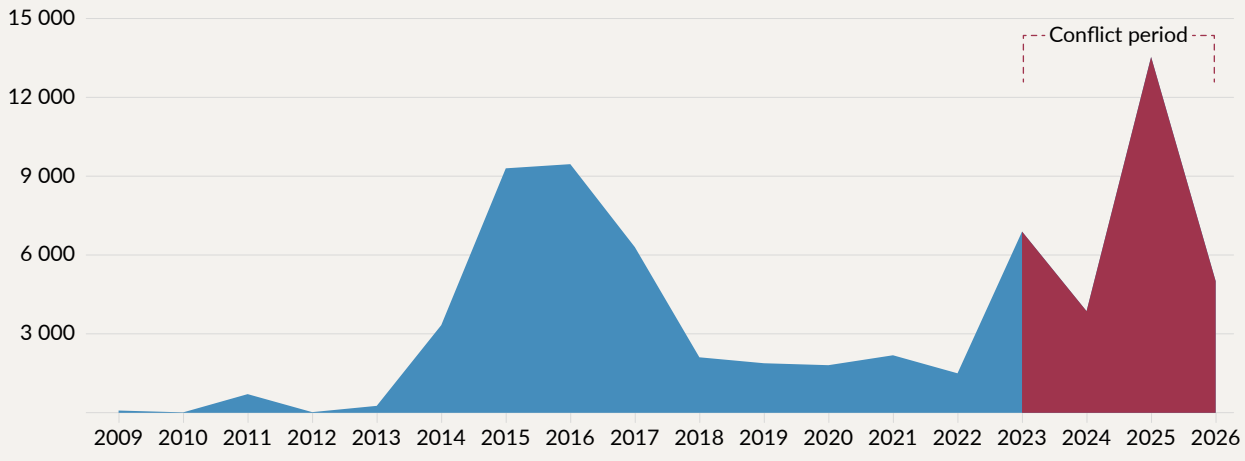

FIGURE 8 Recorded Sudanese arrivals to Italy and Greece from Libya, 2009–2026.

NOTE: Data for 2026 includes January to June.
SOURCE: Frontex

Second, the situation in Libya for Sudanese refugees became increasingly inhospitable. The intensifying xenophobic campaigns against foreigners in 2025 and 2026, acute in the Tripolitania but also present in the Cyrenaica, were indiscriminate, leading to the targeting of Sudanese refugees alongside economic migrants. The campaigns affected access to jobs, healthcare and education, making life in Libya far more difficult for Sudanese and pushing some to move on.

Finally, refugees who had arrived earlier – and who had been able to find work – could in some cases afford smugglers' prices by 2025 and 2026. The general decline in prices on the Tobruk–Crete route probably aided this, as did a growing trend by smugglers of using Sudanese as vessel pilots, often in return for discounted passage. The GI-TOC received reports of Sudanese pilots on the Crete route paying €1 000–€1 300, and in one case as little as €285.

It is important not to overstate the degree to which Sudanese refugees in Libya are embarking for Europe. Even in 2025, only around 3 per cent of the estimated refugee population in Libya successfully arrived in Europe.[63] The majority – particularly those with families – have chosen to remain in Libya.

However, worsening dynamics for foreigners in Libya mean it is likely that the trend of heightened Sudanese departures will continue and could well expand. Given both trends seen in 2025 and the first half of 2026, and al-Zoubi's counter-smuggling campaign on the west coast, it is likely that most Sudanese movement will be concentrated on the Tobruk–Crete route.



Migrants line up for processing at the Port of Lavrio, Greece, 10 July 2025. Deteriorating conditions for foreigners in Libya could drive more Sudanese departures to Europe. *© Nicolas Koutsokostas/NurPhoto via Getty Images*



CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Libya was the principal hub for cross-Mediterranean irregular migration throughout 2025 and the first half of 2026, even as the market's geography and organization changed substantially. Its resilience rests on adaptable, highly functional smuggling systems, sustained demand among nationalities with established migration routes through the country, and fragmented political and security environments on both sides of Libya's institutional divide that complicate sustained enforcement.

Over the 18 months covered by this report, however, Libya's smuggling ecosystem underwent significant reconfiguration. A sharp surge in departures from the west coast in 2025 was followed by a pronounced decline in 2026, as al-Zoubi's security-consolidation programme increasingly altered the incentives of actors facilitating the trade. His approach combined engagement with key players – including elements of the Busriba network and security bodies such as the CTF – with financial inducements and the implicit threat of coercion. These efforts appear to have contributed substantially to the decline in west coast departures. Yet Bahroun's continued operation outside this emerging system exposed its limits: individual spoilers retained sufficient autonomy to frustrate attempts to impose more comprehensive control over the smuggling market.

However, the sustainability of suppressing west coast departures is uncertain. Western Libya's political landscape is deeply unstable, and the alignment of interests between the GNU and west coast actors that has underpinned al-Zoubi's consolidation effort is fragile and could unravel rapidly.

More immediately, the growing anti-foreigner movement could upend the politics driving al-Zoubi's campaign. Successful suppression of departures has forced migrants who wish to reach Europe to stay in Libya, heightening the sense in the Tripolitania of a growing foreigner population, and driving heightened grievance. While some actors have connected the two issues and called for foreigners to be allowed to leave for Europe, such calls have not yet become common. To date, the movement has helped further constrain foreigners' movement on land and driven arrests. However, interdiction of irregular migration could become too politically risky for the GNU to sustain, raising the prospect of a sharp snap-back in departures.

The other major change in 2025 and 2026 was the increasingly central role of the Cyrenaica in Libya's human smuggling ecosystem. The three dynamics detailed in this report linked to the Cyrenaica – rising Tobruk–Crete movement, the durability and increasing professionalization of hybrid smuggling systems, and the broad increase in overland movement into the Cyrenaica – intersect and reinforce each other, collectively contributing to a recentring of Libyan human smuggling in areas controlled by the GNS/LAAF.

The eastern Libyan leadership has proved capable of suppressing movement in the past, halting large Tobruk–Italy departures in 2023 and closing the Libya–Sudan border in 2025. Analysts and diplomatic actors generally believe that given the right guarantees or inducements, the GNS/LAAF could do so again.

However, the GNS/LAAF probably faces challenges in systematically addressing human smuggling. In part, this reflects the reality that the medium- to long-term systemic impact of these efforts has been limited: Tobruk smugglers switched to smaller boats and routes to Greece, while Sudanese refugees and migrants from the Horn have partially diverted their movement to Chad or Egypt before heading into Libya. Smuggling systems are now more mature, resilient and deeply embedded than ever before in eastern Libya. They are also operating along a particularly long stretch of coast, with the zone from the Bay of Bomba to Emsaed stretching around 300 kilometres. This makes suppression more complicated operationally than along the shorter west coast.

Moreover, human smuggling to and from the Cyrenaica is growing just as other political and security challenges increase. The Haftar succession issue is likely to draw substantial political attention in the east, with the human smuggling file potentially instrumentalized by different brothers to support their personal goals. Further, rising instability in the Fezzan could demand a growing number of LAAF security forces, particularly if the Revolutionaries of the South insurgency spreads or sparks the emergence of other groups. A weakened security presence in key parts of the Cyrenaica, such as coastal areas or the borders with Egypt, Sudan or Chad, could limit the rigour and impact of even a concerted crackdown effort.

The dynamics outlined above could change, and eastern authorities could enact a crackdown on areas under their control. At present, however, events and activities in eastern Libya – rather than the west – will heavily determine the trajectory of Libyan human smuggling in the coming months and years, underscoring the importance of closely monitoring changes unfolding there.



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