

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
- NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

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**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

LIBYA

STABILITY FUELS
REBOUND IN HUMAN
SMUGGLING

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INTRODUCTION

The year 2021 saw a sustained increase in departures from the Libyan coast compared to recent years, with just over 60 000 migrants leaving the Libyan coast for Europe. This is, by a wide margin, the highest total since 2017. The year also witnessed a revival of the kind of complex, sophisticated networks that drove human smuggling in Libya to such great heights during the crisis of 2014–2017, following a period in which human smuggling in Libya was suppressed. In order to understand why human smuggling has seen such an expansion in 2021, it is first necessary to briefly outline the recent history of these dynamics, from the crisis years of 2014–2017 through to the post-crisis years of 2017–2020, an era that has now come to an end.

The context for this overview is best provided by a series of reports published by the GI-TOC covering the evolution of the political economy of human smuggling in Libya since the crisis of 2014–2017.

In 'The Human Conveyor Belt',¹ it was illustrated how the tremendous increase in the number of migrants departing Libya's coast for Europe during the crisis resulted primarily from the integration of Libyan armed groups along with Libyan and foreign smugglers into complex, transnational networks that were capable of transporting huge numbers of migrants from East and West Africa to the Libyan coast, and from there embarking them for Europe.

The background to this is the failure of the post-revolutionary transition and the outbreak of civil war in Libya in 2014, which led to the fragmentation of the country into territorial fiefdoms. These fiefdoms – essentially coalitions of locally rooted armed groups that had gradually emerged as the most stable entities in the chaotic and unstable aftermath of the revolution – had to secure resources or face annihilation at the hands of their rivals. This need for resources, combined with their territorial dominance, created the opportunity for pre-existing smuggling systems to massively expand in both scale and sophistication. While the west coast was the most powerful engine of this emergent system, similar processes took place right across Libya.

'The Human Conveyor Belt Broken' described the collapse of this system starting in mid-2017, under the pressure of multiple stressors.² While some of this collapse was attributable to policies enacted in other transit countries, the key story in Libya was a general strategic shift by a plethora of armed groups away from a naked scramble for resources in an anarchic free-for-all and towards legitimacy and long-term survival. This is an extremely complex process, rife with contradictions, countervailing forces and cynicism. There has not been a great reform or clean-up moment. Rather, the process might best be characterized as the gradual ossification of a new class of elites; the winners who managed to seize weapons, facilities or institutions during the post-revolutionary chaos and kept hold of them



Irregular migrants after being intercepted at sea and ahead of detention in Tripoli, 24 April 2022.

Photo: Mahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images

long enough to become part of a fragile, contested status quo. One of the strategies that proved most successful in this competition for endurance was to seize the mantle of law enforcement and designate rivals as criminals.

This did not usher in a rule-of-law regime in Libya. Corruption and criminality remained pervasive and, in some ways, intensified. A contest for the control of state resources and assets led to embezzlement on a far grander scale than what was seen previously.³ But the days of overt tolerance of – or participation in – such a visible and toxic crime as human smuggling were over.

Despite the turmoil of the following years, created at least in part by the intensity of the contest to steal the nation's wealth, levels of human smuggling remained suppressed between 2018 and the end of 2020. The most recent report in the GI-TOC series, 'Conflict, coping and covid', discusses the factors that contributed to this somewhat surprising outcome.⁴ In part, the outcome reflected the resilience of the law-enforcement architecture that emerged from the strategic tilt of armed groups towards legitimacy and long-term survival. Because these tended not to be textbook and good-faith policing arrangements, but rather self-interested strategies adopted by dominant and politically skilled armed leaders, they were able to survive all manner of upheaval and ensure that smuggling remained a clandestine affair.

Another critical factor was the determined expansion of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) into the Fezzan and Tripolitania over 2018 and 2019, which culminated in the attack on Tripoli in April 2019. This attack failed and led to a destructive stalemate that lasted for over a year. The intense social, and at times physical, fragmentation that this crisis created across Libya was an impediment to mobility and all forms of cooperation, including the cooperation that is vital to all forms of smuggling.

In the wake of the war for Tripoli, relative stability prevailed across western Libya throughout 2021. The approach of the Government of National Unity (GNU), under Prime Minister Abd al-Hamid Dabaiba, was accommodating, prioritizing this stability over the politics of law enforcement and anti-corruption. A negative externality of this approach, and the relative peace it bought, is that the resulting improvements in mobility and reduction in social tensions fostered the revival of human-smuggling networks and drove a surge of departures from the Libyan coast. This report focuses on how these dynamics played out in different parts of Libya during 2021.

Since 2018, the GI-TOC has undertaken monthly monitoring of human smuggling and trafficking in North Africa and the Sahel. This brief is part of the latest round of publications emerging from GI-TOC research on human smuggling and trafficking in Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Niger, Chad and Mali.

Rather than a single report covering trends and dynamics in 2021, the GI-TOC is publishing a series of briefs, each covering a single country as well as a regional overview brief. This brief offers a survey of developments in the political economy of human smuggling in Libya in 2021. However, its aim is not to provide an exhaustive, chronological account of events from January to December; rather, the GI-TOC hopes to identify key trends and provide an analytical overview of the current state of human smuggling and irregular migration in Libya. The brief, and others in this series, builds on the previous research mapping smuggling and trafficking, as well as the political and security dynamics that impacted and influenced the irregular transport of migrants in 2021. The series underscores the rebounding importance of smuggling from and through Libya, Tunisia, Niger, Chad and Mali and the ways in which dynamics are intensifying as the COVID-19 pandemic ebbs and a rough peace is maintained in Libya.

Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2021 – the reporting period for this study – local field researchers spread across Libya, Niger, Chad and Mali collected data through semi-structured interviews with smugglers, migrants, community members, security-force officials, politicians, NGO personnel, international observers and others.

Activity by field monitors was supplemented with fieldwork by GI-TOC analysts in the territories covered, though these visits were curtailed in 2020 due to COVID-related travel restrictions.

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

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



Photo: Nada Harib via Getty Images



POLITICS PRIORITIZES STABILITY OVER LAW ENFORCEMENT

At the start of 2021, the GNU was established in Tripoli under the prime ministership of Abd al-Hamid Dabaiba. This met a key aim of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) process, which was to create an accepted political basis from which to move beyond the military ceasefire that ended the war for Tripoli in August 2020. As such, the GNU was always envisioned as transitional; in theory, Dabaiba's term as prime minister would last until national elections could be held in December 2021, and he would not be able to stand in these elections himself.

Although there was widespread scepticism and uncertainty from the start – that elections could take place in December and that Dabaiba would not stand in them if they were – the establishment of the GNU did lend a certain clarity to Libya's political trajectory. The creation of a government with representatives from all sides, led by a prime minister who was clearly more interested in accommodating and co-opting than confronting, made a return to active fighting between east and west very unlikely. In fact, the early part of the GNU's mandate saw unprecedented moves towards reunification of eastern and western institutions and outreach by Tripoli to the Egyptians, a key step in long-term reconciliation.

On the other hand, although war was temporarily taken off the table, the December 2021 deadline set a very short horizon for the GNU, ensuring that it could not be seen as a lasting settlement to Libya's conflicts.

Caught in this limbo – between war and potentially lasting peace – the law-enforcement agenda of former Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha became almost irrelevant during 2021. This agenda had been one of the dominant political forces in western Libya in the years between Bashagha's appointment in October 2018, and his failure to secure victory at the LPDF talks in Tunis at the end of 2020. The agenda was essentially political and pragmatic, being a bid for the leadership of Libya. However, it was based on technocratic and progressive rhetoric about the need to dismantle the mafia-like armed groups that had come to dominate Tripoli and other towns since the 2011 revolution, alongside building the law-enforcement capacity of the state.

Bashagha clearly signalled that he intended to take possession of this political platform when he became Interior Minister in October 2018. He was obstructed at every turn by rivals – chiefly, the so-called Tripoli cartel – and was then distracted by the priority of defending Tripoli against the LAAF.⁵

Following the end of the war for Tripoli, Bashagha aggressively revived his campaign for the top job on the same basis of dismantling the power of mafia-like armed groups, most controversially under the banner of Operation Snake Hunting.⁶ The main targets of this were once again some of Tripoli's most powerful and infamous militias, along with the Awlad Buhmeira network in Zawiya.

At the end of 2020, in a desperate effort to fend off the challenge from Bashagha, the serving prime minister and Presidential Council (PC) President Fayez al-Sarraj created the Security and Stabilization Apparatus (SSA). The SSA was established as an agency with a sprawling mandate sitting directly under the PC and incorporating Bashagha's bitterest enemies and the targets of his rhetoric: Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli (Ghnewa), the head of the Abu Salim Central Security Forces, was appointed to command it; while Hassan Busriba, a leading member of the Awlad Buhmeira network in Zawiya, was made deputy commander.⁷

In the end, Bashagha's leadership bid failed and he was beaten to the post by Dabaiba. This led to a shelving of his professed strategy of aggressively dismantling mafia-like groups (or more cynically, rival power centres) under the guise of law enforcement and state capacity building. One reason for this is that, by failing to win power using this strategy, Bashagha showed the limits of confrontation when trying to impose control on western Libya, particularly when the tools available to the putative statesman are so weak. More insidiously, Bashagha's decision to enter into partnership with the infamous speaker of the House of Representatives, Aguila Saleh, for the LPDF elections undermined his standing as a noncorrupt law-and-order candidate. This has only been exacerbated by his subsequent dealings with the Haftar family in their attempts to stitch together a new government.

It is important to recognize that Bashagha left some legacy achievements from his time as Interior Minister. His 'law-enforcement agenda' was successfully applied in the area from Garabulli to al-Khoms, based on building the capacity of trusted armed groups and culminating in the arrest of a suspected leader of the most powerful human-smuggling network in al-Khoms, which had been partly responsible for the expansion of migrant departures from the east of Tripoli during the preceding years. His arrest, and the wider law-enforcement campaign it was part of, was easier for Bashagha to pull off in al-Khoms than elsewhere due to the town's subordinate relationship to his own city of



Abd al-Hamid Dabaiba addresses a meeting in Riqdalayn, 12 February 2022. Photo: Official Facebook Page of Abd al-Hamid Dabaiba

Misrata. Nonetheless, it showed that targeted action against criminals, as opposed to the rounding up of migrants, which is what constitutes most law enforcement action, could produce significant results in Libya; departures from al-Khoms remained so low during 2021 that the formerly important hub is not addressed further in this brief.

Politically speaking, however, the law-enforcement strategy did not lead to success for Bashagha. Dabaiba pursued a very different strategy to governance in western Libya, adopting a large-tent approach based on securing popular support through populist economic measures while accommodating the demands of powerful actors by not threatening their personal fiefdoms. Avoiding conflict has been a significant priority.

In this accommodating environment, the leading factions sought to pursue economic interests, expand their power and prepare for the elections scheduled for December 2021, which ultimately were not held. During this period, the SSA outlasted its initial purpose – as a bulwark for al-Sarraj – and flourished as a vehicle of collective action for al-Kikli, the Awlad Buhmeira network, and Muammar al-Dhawi in Warshefana. Haithem Tajouri, the Nawasi Brigade and various others were also aligned with this grouping during 2021. In keeping with the characteristics of the so-called Tripoli Cartel, this faction lacked strong ideological commitments and was bound instead by a common desire to defend and expand positions of power individually acquired over communities, locations and institutions. Given that Bashagha had so overtly positioned himself against such private capture of public goods, the success during 2021 of the SSA stood as a rebuke of his whole political agenda.

The Rada Special Forces was the main Tripoli force that sat somewhat apart from the SSA grouping during 2021. It is more ideologically committed, having within it a strong Salafist influence. During Bashagha's time as Interior Minister, Rada became closer to him and the Attorney General al-Sadiq al-Sour as a reliable law-enforcement actor. During 2021, the 444 Brigade (which was formerly the 20/20 Strike Force of Rada, before administratively splitting off in 2020) was unusual in continuing to pursue an aggressive anti-crime policy, including against human smuggling. Starting in March, it began to target human smugglers in Bani Walid and further south with significant raids. This continued Bashagha's prior work in al-Khoms in 2020 and helped keep the coast east of Tripoli quiet during 2021.

Inevitably, this was also political, being inseparable from the growing rivalry between the 444 and the SSA. Hostilities between the two sides broke out in Tripoli during September. However, for most of 2021 these tensions were kept in check and did not dominate political life in Tripoli to the same extent as inter-militia rivalries did in the years prior to the 2019–2020 war for the capitol.

Another point of conflict that festered during 2021 was between the Awlad Buhmeira network and Muslim Brotherhood-aligned factions in Zawiya. This conflict arose partly as a turf war between the Awlad Buhmeira network and Mohammed Bahroun (al-Far), a militiaman who heads the Zawiya Criminal Investigations Directorate. However, the deeper context was the entrenched enmity between Zawiya's Muslim Brotherhood-aligned factions, particularly Mahmoud Bin Rajab and Khalid Mishri, and the Awlad Buhmeira, along with other tribes in Zawiya. While the former opposed the December elections and were determined to have them derailed, the latter expected to do well and welcomed the poll. But despite the political context of this conflict, and the occasional peaks of violence that briefly sucked in outside players, in general it did not have wider repercussions across western Libya.

There were other important political dynamics that played out in western Libya during 2021, but for the purposes of this brief, it is sufficient to observe that the area was substantially less conflict-ridden than has been the case since at least 2018 even as, conversely, the political environment led law enforcement to be deprioritized – although not abandoned by all players. Instead, the focus was on

making money, expanding alliances and generally politicking in preparation for nominal end of the GNU mandate. It is a key argument of this report that these dynamics were to the benefit of human smugglers in Libya.

Another key player in Libya's political scene in 2021 was the LAAF. The failure to capture Tripoli in 2020 was a moment of peril for Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the LAAF. His project to take control of Libya relied on momentum and a sense of inevitability; their loss was potentially crippling. Politically, Haftar was able to resecure his base in the northern Cyrenaica, benefitting from the support of enough of the region's rigidly tribal society to ride out the storm. However, his position in the Fezzan deteriorated to a dangerous extent. During 2021, he lost the support of the 116 Brigade, a powerful armed group of the Awlad Suleiman tribe, and came to rely increasingly on the Magarha's Tariq Bin Ziyad (TBZ) Brigade, who alienated many locals with their rapacious behaviour. Saif al-Islam Qaddafi's return to the political scene in November was also awkward for Haftar and threatened to split his base, which has reactionary elements.

In the end, the LAAF also managed to ride out the storm in the Fezzan and started 2022 in a stronger position. The most salient aspect of the LAAF's loss of the war for Tripoli, then, was not its collapse elsewhere but the impact it had on the force's profit-seeking behaviour. The massive cost of the war for Tripoli emptied coffers. Concerted efforts by the Tripoli government to limit funding streams from Libyan state entities to the LAAF also took their toll on the armed group's finances. This forced the LAAF to be more aggressive in its pursuit of resources, resulting in greater involvement in criminality. Libyan social and online media regularly accused the LAAF, including its senior leadership, of controlling drug trafficking flows in Libya. These allegations have not been proven. At the local level, officers in affiliated armed groups participated in bribe seeking and smuggling, either directly or through taxation. This is not new, but it intensified and created substantial resentment during 2021, for example with the TBZ Brigade's practices at the logistically important Quwayrat al-Mal checkpoint north of Sebha. Broadly speaking, these conditions created greater space for the expansion of human-smuggling activities across multiple different locations and communities in Libya.



Haithem Tajouri meets with Ali Busriba and others shortly after his return to Libya in December 2020.

Photo: Facebook



BUSY 2021 HERALDS RETURN OF SOPHISTICATED NETWORKS

More migrants departed the Libyan coast for Europe in 2021 than in any year since 2017. During the course of the year, just over 60 000 migrants left the Libyan coast for Europe. This compares with 39 000, 19 500, and 27 000 in the years 2018 to 2020 respectively.⁸

The first clear indications of a shift came in November 2020, when 5 400 migrants left Libya for Europe (the first monthly total above 5 000 since June 2018), even though the summer of 2020, directly after the end of the war for Tripoli, was also busier than the year before. During 2021 there were a further six months in which more than 5 000 departures were recorded. More importantly, there was a general upward trend in departure numbers throughout 2021. While some of this reflected the usual summer spike, with the period between May and June seeing monthly totals above 6 000, November 2021 was in fact busier still, with more than 9 600 departures.

There have also been significant fluctuations throughout the same period, with quiet months interspersed among the busier ones. For example, only 600 departures were recorded in December 2020, January 2021 had only 1 200 departures, and March and April each experienced fewer than 3 000. Although September and October both recorded departure numbers greater than 3 000, this is still significantly less than the months directly before and after.

This variability is important for what it says about the state of change in the political economy of human smuggling and trafficking in Libya, suggesting a system in flux.

There are often monthly surges preceded or followed by quieter months. Between 2018 and late 2020, these were generally the result of temporary, local factors relating to security or weather conditions, or else a consequence of the logistical vagaries of human-smuggling networks dealing with fluctuating supply and demand. The smaller departure numbers during these years meant that large relative differences from month to month did not necessarily reflect substantial changes in actual conditions. By contrast, the trend that started in November 2020 and lasted through 2021 was more extreme. Monthly departures in excess of 5 000 are highly indicative of a systematic increase in the capacity of smugglers to transport, accommodate and embark migrants. Three consecutive months seeing more than 6 500 departures simply cannot be explained by the kind of temporary, local factors that were sufficient in the past.

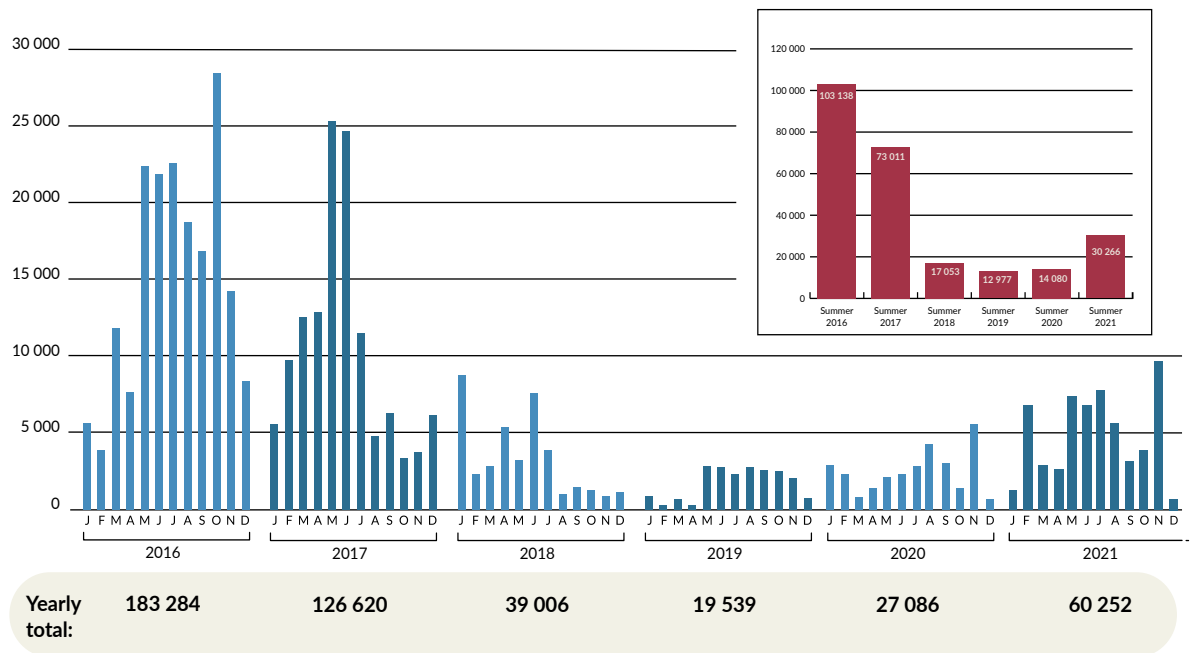


FIGURE 1 Total number of attempted departures from the Libyan coast by month.

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

In fact, observations made throughout 2021 indicated a qualitative shift in the kind of human smuggling being practiced in Libya since the second half of 2020, hinting at a transition to a new era. As noted in the introduction, between 2014 and 2020 there had been two broad eras in the political economy of human smuggling in Libya: the crisis era from 2014 to 2017 and the post-crisis era from 2017 to 2020. During the crisis years, sophisticated transnational networks made up of Libyan armed groups that controlled key territory (especially on the coast) and foreign *manadib* (middlemen, also known as *coxeurs* in southern Libya and Sahelian states) based in source countries, engaged in a series of partnerships that systematized Libya's human-smuggling industry. These networks were able to coordinate the transportation of high numbers of migrants through multiple countries, across Libya and to the coast for embarkation.

The networks were dismantled through the selective measures of a number of different governments and international actors – for example, targeting prominent *manadib*, co-opting coastal militias for anti-smuggling work, and hindering mobility at certain borders. This gave way to the post-crisis period. Transnational networks did not disappear with the end of the crisis, but their relative importance diminished. In their place, smaller and more fragmented groups of smugglers operated clandestinely, especially in the coastal areas. These groups were often opportunistic, appearing reactively to serve migrant populations already living and working near embarkations hubs on the Libyan coast. Overland transport networks became more fragmented, with fewer migrants being moved and at greater risk of kidnap for ransom.

In addition to the measures taken to mitigate irregular migration, two subsequent external factors kept irregular migratory flows subdued between 2018 and the first half of 2020. One is that Libya acquired a fearsome international reputation for migrant abuse. The journey via Libya had always been extremely risky, but the collapse of the transnational human-smuggling networks in 2017 led to a wildfire of predatory behaviours as some smugglers looked for alternative ways to make up for lost

revenue. In some cases, these were last-ditch schemes by smugglers-turned-traffickers to squeeze whatever money they could out of migrants in their warehouses before abandoning the business for good. This was especially the case for East African *manadib* operating in Bani Walid, and it dissuaded many migrants from trying their luck in Libya.

At the same time, the expansion of the LAAF into the Fezzan and then Tripolitania during 2018 and 2019, culminating in the war for Tripoli, created an environment of social fragmentation and distrust that made cooperation between communities and armed groups across different areas much harder. In essence, human-smuggling networks in Libya are nothing but this kind of cooperation applied to the transport and accommodation of migrants.

In the second half of 2020, following the end of the war for Tripoli and the subsequent easing of mobility and social tensions, the political economy of human smuggling in Libya entered a new phase that is best characterized as transitional, with different models of human smuggling coexisting as part of a chaotic and unstable mix.

The significant increase in departures is the clearest signal of the change that took place from mid-2020 and throughout 2021. Other aspects of maritime smuggling dynamics also illustrate this shift – for example, the increasing use of wooden boats, the growing average number of passengers on board, and the increasing prevalence of migrants from relatively wealthier North African and non-African countries successfully arriving in Europe.

However, this purview cannot simply be limited to dynamics on the Libyan coast. By their nature, such networks must extend from source countries to Libyan points of entry, at airport and on the country's borders, across Libya and to the coast.

In the following three sections, the GI-TOC attempts to sketch the outlines of human smuggling in Libya as it existed in 2021 by focusing first on different aspects of maritime smuggling, including providing an outline of the political and security conditions in the two key hubs of Zuwara and Zawiya. The brief will then turn to look at the evolution in relations between armed groups and communities on a few important routes, before looking at migrants from different nationalities to give a sense of how entire journeys are made.



FOCUS ON MARITIME DYNAMICS

Average number of passengers on board increases

A defining characteristic of maritime human smuggling during the post-crisis period was the reduction in the number of passengers on board per incident. This is a good indication of the collapse of large, well-integrated coastal smuggling outfits, and their replacement by smaller, more agile and more opportunistic players who operate in the shadows.⁹

During the crisis years of 2014–2017, large embarkations with 400 or more persons on board (POB) were common. Similarly, the overloading of six-metre-long rubber boats with as many as 200 POB during this period is well documented.¹⁰ Moreover, between 2013 and 2017, shipwrecks were recorded with very large numbers of migrants on board. However, this changed after 2017. Figure 2 illustrates this collapse in large passenger loads from the summer of 2018 (approximately 10% of boats) into 2019 and 2020, when fewer than 1% of boats carried more than 200 passengers. This trend abruptly reversed in the summer of 2021, with nearly 5% of incidents involving boats carrying more than 200 passengers each.

This shift is significant for a few reasons. In terms of overall numbers, a small increase in the percentage of large passenger loads can have a significant impact on overall departure numbers. In terms of fatal accidents, large passenger loads are significantly more dangerous, with more lives being at risk and rescue operations significantly more complicated. However, the most important implication of more passengers per boat for the analysis of human smuggling is what it says about the evolution of the political economy of this industry on Libya's coast.

Larger embarkations require more demanding logistics as well as confidence on the part of the smugglers that the environment will be predictable and amenable to them. By contrast, smaller vessels, particularly of 100 passengers or fewer, are more suitable to opportunistic actors with less logistical capacity and less confidence that they will not be interrupted by law enforcement.

In addition to the logistics of managing larger numbers of migrants, procuring larger and more seaworthy boats is also required in the post-2017 context. This is particularly the case since the withdrawal of much SAR capacity has made it less acceptable to launch overcrowded and unseaworthy boats in the expectation that they will be rescued close to the Libyan coast and from there transported to

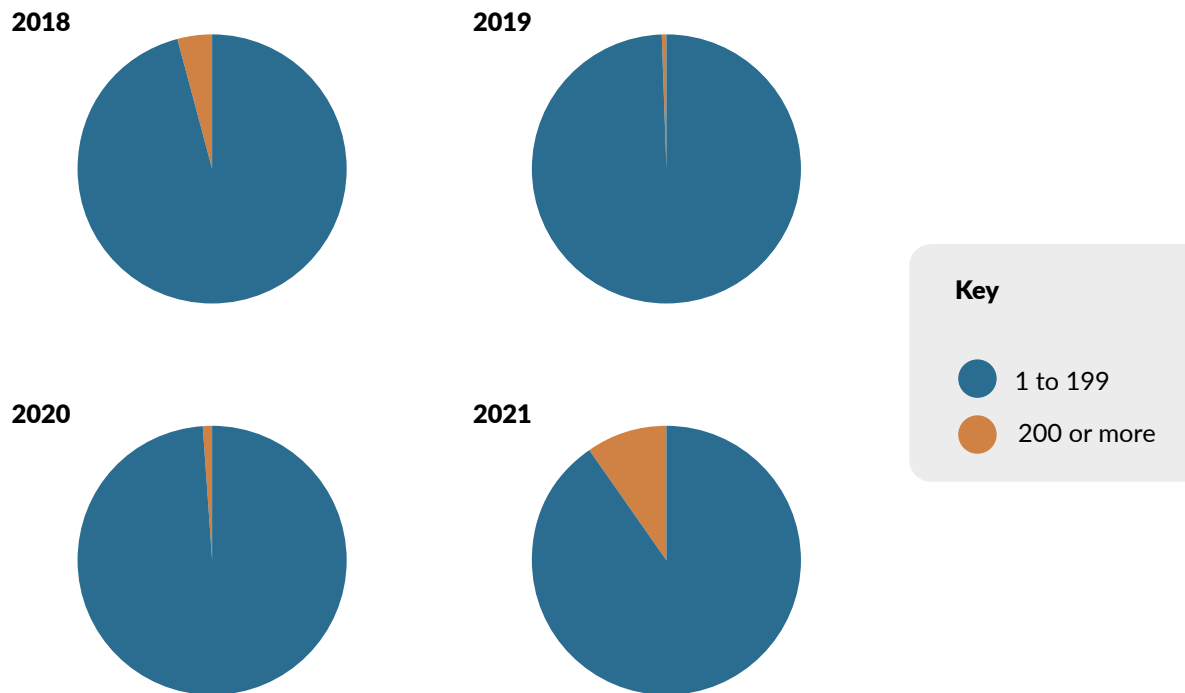


FIGURE 2 Relative incidents with fewer or more than 200 passengers on board during the summers of 2018–2021.
SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

Europe. This means that the practice of increasing passenger loads has gone hand in hand with the greater use of wooden boats, as well as with more cases of fishing boats being repurposed or stolen (although dangerously overcrowded rubber vessels are still embarked – see below).

The increase in the number of boats carrying more than 200 passengers, from one or two in the summers of 2019 and 2020 to 15 in the summer of 2021, is not on its own proof of the return of larger, more sophisticated smuggling networks and an overall easing of conditions on the coast. However, it is one important indicator of qualitative rather than simply quantitative change, particularly in light of the fact that it coincides with a significant increase in overall departures.

Use of specially manufactured wooden boats and repurposed fishing vessels increased in 2021

The number of wooden boats used by smugglers increased in 2021, when compared to the previous three years (see Figure 3).

Wooden boats made up 26% of the total in the summer of 2021, while it was below 15% for the preceding three years. Given that the summer of 2021 was so much busier, this increase of 10% or more reflects a dramatic increase in the actual number of wooden boats being embarked, from fewer than 50 to 148.

Although ‘unknowns’ make up a considerable proportion of boats in each year, creating a potentially wide margin of error, this data is supported by anecdotal evidence reported by multiple interviewees across different departure hubs along the west coast. A series of bomb attacks on boat-building factories in Sabratha during the summer months also supports the data.¹¹ Although the reason

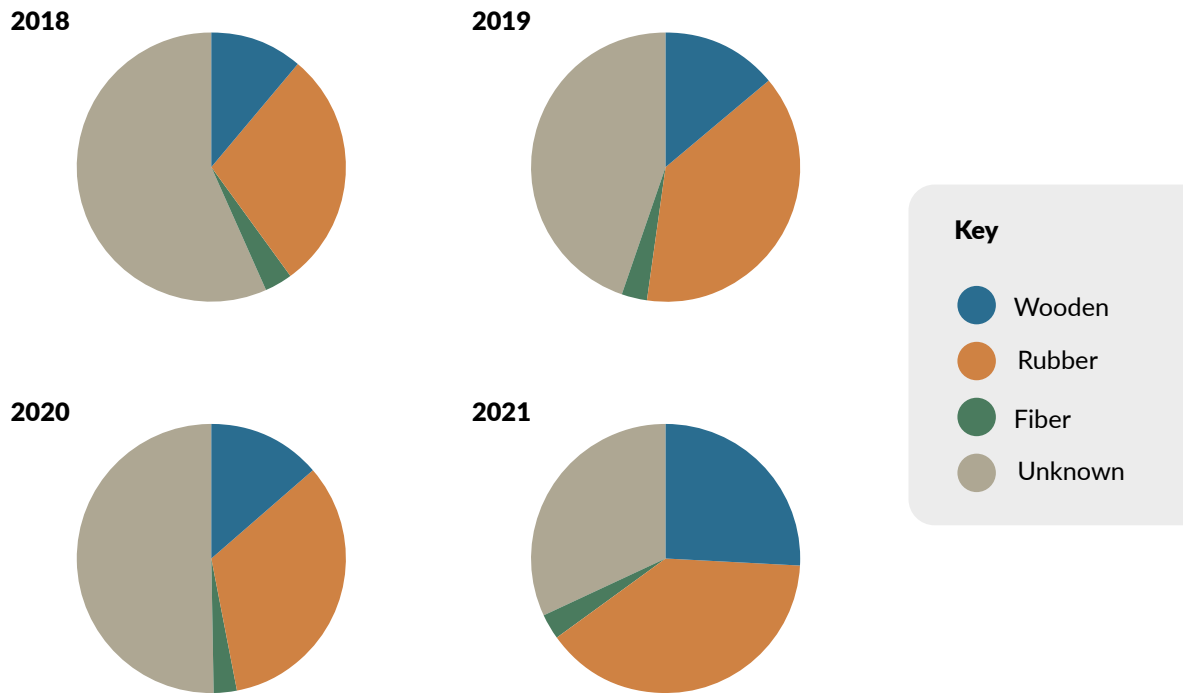


FIGURE 3 Types of boats used by smugglers departing the Libyan coast between 2018 and 2021.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

for these attacks has not been established, it is believed that the explosions were connected to competition among boat builders and smugglers, which was in turn linked to the increased demand for wooden boats.

As with the average number of passengers, the type of boat used is an important indicator of the state of the political economy of human smuggling on Libya's coast, reflecting numerous aspects of law enforcement, smuggler logistics and migrant purchasing power.

For example, procuring repurposed fishing vessels is an involved, complicated and often expensive process when compared to having a wooden boat made locally or buying an imported rubber boat from the local market.

There was an illuminating case of this in September, when 700 migrants arrived in Lampedusa on board a repurposed fishing vessel that had left from Zuwara. It is likely that this vessel was smuggled out of Zuwara port, with bribes to authorities as high as LYD100 000 (€17 800), and then sold on to the end user via middlemen.¹² This long chain of procurement and the need for large upfront payments makes it far more complicated than simply buying a rubber boat in the local market.

Another recent event also illustrates the complex and dangerous means smugglers will resort to in order to secure large vessels for use in human smuggling. In November, a group of Egyptian fishermen working on a fishing boat out of Zuwara port stole the vessel and sailed it to Tobruk. The single Libyan crew member – all fishing boats need one Libyan crew member by law – was unaware of these plans and so effectively found himself kidnapped. En route to Tobruk, the Egyptians threw the fishing nets and other equipment overboard.¹³

According to an eyewitness, once in Tobruk they docked within sight of Tobruk Port and began to receive migrants shuttled out from land on small boats. There were Libyans and Egyptians overseeing the embarkation. The Egyptian captain became concerned about overcrowding and so sailed the boat further out to sea, only accepting more migrants once he had gained better control. The migrants were all Egyptian, except for a small group of Syrians. The boat then sailed for Italy.

In terms of procurement, specially manufactured wooden boats are relatively easy to come by on the west coast, where many private factories exist. In October 2021, there were reportedly currently two boat builders active in Zawiya, six in Zuwara and an unknown number in Sabratha.¹⁴ Wooden boats are also seen as affordable. Prices vary widely, with estimates given in October 2021 of between LYD30 000 (€5 400) and LYD65 000 (€11 700) for a decently built wooden boat without an engine. One interviewee suggested a median price of LYD50 000 (€9 000), but others cited far lower costs for small boats.¹⁵

Although procurement might be relatively easy for specially manufactured wooden boats, these vessels are harder to transport to the embarkation point than rubber boats, which can be folded away and concealed. Reflecting this, wooden boats built near embarkation points, or delivered already in the water, command higher prices. One interviewee suggested that this can increase the price by as much as LYD10 000 (€1 785).

Given that specially manufactured wooden boats and repurposed fishing vessels both come with considerable logistical and procurement drawbacks compared to rubber boats, why were they used with greater frequency in 2021? One important answer is their greater ability to transport large numbers of migrants to European shores unaided.

The widespread use of overcrowded rubber boats became common during the crisis of 2014–2017, owing in part to the intensity and proximity of the European SAR effort, which meant that smugglers could embark overcrowded and unseaworthy boats in the expectation that passengers would be rescued just outside Libyan territorial waters (12 nautical miles) and transported to Europe. The withdrawal of much SAR capacity in 2017 rendered this model dangerously obsolete. In reaction,

opportunistic smugglers stuck with rubber boats but reduced the number of passengers on board. While this lowered the risk of mass-drownings, it was a relatively unsuccessful tactic for delivering migrants to Europe.

The revival of the use of wooden boats and repurposed fishing vessels in 2021 was connected to the imperative of delivering clients successfully to Europe in a context in which they could no longer depend on European SAR assets, and in which interceptions and returns by the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG) and General Administration of Coastal Security had increased significantly. For example, in 2021, approximately 30 000 migrants were returned to Libya, compared to



Poor-quality boat intercepted by the Zawiya Refinery Coast Guard, October 2021. Photo: Facebook

approximately half of that or even less going back to 2017. In this context, the use of these boats marks a clear distinction between more organized smugglers and opportunistic ones who enter the market briefly and have less interest in building a reputation for successful trips with an eye on sustainable business. Inseparable from this, the increased presence of fixed-hull vessels also implies greater ability on the part of migrants to discern between smugglers and chose to pay more for superior services.

In addition to the success of journeys, safety is also an important consideration. In October and November 2021, there were reports that local law-enforcement bodies had started targeting smugglers responsible for fatal accidents more energetically than smugglers not responsible for bloodshed.¹⁶ This encouraged smugglers to prioritize safety, and switching to wooden boats is one of the ways to do this. Migrants themselves also demanded these services. This is not a new phenomenon; between 2013 and 2016, Eritrean migrants, among others, were known to decide to travel in wooden vessels.

There are several reasons for using these boats; the first reason is that there are nationalities that do not accept the use of rubber boats – namely, the Arab and Bangladeshi nationalities – in addition to being safe, which makes smugglers who use these boats a good reputation. And on the other hand, wooden boats have the ability to carry more people than rubber, which increases the gains. In addition, getting these boats is not difficult in the western region.

INTERVIEW WITH NGO WORKER IN ZUWARA, OCTOBER 2021

It is important to stress that unsafe and overcrowded rubber boats were still used in 2021. The data shows that the growth in the use of wooden boats and repurposed fishing vessels was in addition to the overall numbers, rather than displacing rubber boats. In fact, rubber boats were used in considerably greater absolute numbers in 2021 than in past years and remained more popular than wooden boats. In other words, the use of both types of boats increased side-by-side; the entry of more success and safety-minded smugglers drove a higher proportion of fixed-hull vessels, while opportunistic smugglers continued to use rubber boats in large numbers. In fact, one smuggler from Zuwara interviewed in November 2021 suggested that the surge in activity was attracting more rookies to enter the market and employ dangerous methods.

I think that the increase in the number of people in the boats depends on the mentality of the smuggler. Does he want a guaranteed trip or he wants to risk the lives of the migrants? I think the main reason is the new smugglers who do not have work experience.

INTERVIEW WITH SMUGGLER IN ZUWARA, OCTOBER 2021

A third important factor that transcends considerations of safety and success is the general environment on the coast. As already discussed, there are good reasons for using wooden boats and repurposed fishing vessels, despite certain drawbacks. However, the conditions must exist to permit smugglers and migrants to make this choice. A generally more permissive security environment over 2021, as a result of the end of the war for Tripoli and the establishment of the GNU (see above), allowed smugglers greater space and confidence to complexify their operations in the expectation of greater returns. A breakdown in law enforcement in Zuwara in early in 2021, in response to the detainment of the police chief (detailed later), also created a local bubble where smugglers were able to emerge from the shadows and take greater risks.



Photo: Hazem Turkia/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Demographic changes in irregular migration via Libya points to growing sophistication of smuggling networks

Over the past few years, there have been some significant changes in the composition of the nationalities of migrants departing the Libyan coast. Within this data, there are also instructive differences between arrivals in Italy and interceptions and returns to Libya.

In Figures 4–7, the top 10 nationalities for arrivals and interceptions, respectively, are laid out. The colour shading indicates the broad region from which the migrants come, as a way of showing regional patterns more clearly. In effect, the Sahelian category constitutes Sudanese and Malian migrants. Coastal West African countries represented are diverse. The non-African category is mostly represented by Bangladeshis; however, it also includes Syrians, Iranians, Iraqis and Pakistanis (though many of these will have arrived in Italy by other routes – see caveats directly below).

A few caveats: The North African category for arrivals in Italy includes Tunisians, but the GI-TOC has excluded them from the analysis below as nearly all departed from Tunisia, and so are not relevant to this report. Similarly, the GI-TOC has excluded other nationalities in the arrival data that do not also show up in Libyan interception data – such as Iranians and Iraqis – because these nationalities are likely to have arrived in Italy via other routes. In fact, the arrivals table is most valuable when read in relation to the interceptions table, the two together showing the ratio of successful attempts for migrants of specific nationalities departing Libya. Finally, this data is inevitably messy; the GI-TOC's analysis is therefore guided not only by the data but by qualitative observations made over years of monitoring human smuggling in Libya.

The most obvious, and perhaps most important, observation is that both tables reflect a substantially different distribution of nationalities. It might be expected that different nationality groups would arrive in Italy and be intercepted by the LCG in roughly the same numbers, meaning that the tables would look much more similar. In fact, since 2017, there has been a reduction in the ratio of West Africans and Sahelians arriving in Italy when compared to the numbers being intercepted (this is visualized in the pie charts in Figures 6 and 7). In 2017, West Africans and Sahelians made up 50% of the top 10 of arrivals by nationality. In 2018, this changed to 33%; in 2019, it was 21%; in 2020, 14%; and in 2021 to date, 12% (Sahelians did not make the top 10 in 2021 so this number would be slightly higher when considering all arrivals, but the point stands). By contrast, the percentage of West Africans and Sahelians intercepted and returned to Libya as a proportion of the total remained steady or increased over the same period: 56% in 2017, 65% in 2018, 74% in 2019, 56% in 2020 and 54% in 2021.

Simultaneously, the percentage of North African and non-African migrants arriving in Italy has steadily increased since 2017. In 2017, these two groups made up 13% of the top 10 nationalities; in 2018, this rose to 24%; in 2019, 48%; in 2020, 53%; and in 2021, 53%. The same two groups have also been intercepted at increasingly higher rates since 2017; however, this change has taken place only gradually and is not proportional to the numbers arriving in Italy: in 2017, North Africans and non-Africans made up 12% of overall interceptions; in 2018, this was 4%; in 2019, 6%; in 2020, 20%; and in 2021, 28%.

This disparity is explained by the fact that different nationality groups tend to engage with human smugglers in distinct ways, depending on economic, social and geographic circumstances; and this leads to different outcomes.

Bangladeshis, for example, travel to Libya from far away, with no plausible land route available and few linguistic or cultural connections to Libya. They also tend to have more purchasing power, at least among the cohort of nationalities that contribute significantly to irregular migration via the Central Mediterranean route. These characteristics make them particularly dependent upon, and valuable to, transnational networks made up of Libyan and Bangladeshi smugglers. Bangladeshis are less likely than other nationalities to attempt this perilous journey independently.

2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
Nigerian	18 153	Tunisian	5 181	Tunisian	2 654	Tunisian	12 883	Tunisian	15 671
Guinean	9 693	Eritrean	3 320	Pakistani	1 180	Bangladeshi	4 141	Egyptian	8 352
Ivorian	9 504	Iraqi	1 744	Ivorian	1 139	Ivorian	1 950	Bangladeshi	7 824
Bangladeshi	8 995	Sudanese	1 619	Algerian	1 009	Algerian	1 458	Iranian	3 915
Malian	7 114	Pakistani	1 589	Iraqi	972	Pakistani	1 400	Ivorian	3 807
Eritrean	6 953	Nigerian	1 250	Bangladeshi	602	Egyptian	1 264	Iraqi	2 645
Sudanese	6 172	Algerian	1 213	Iranian	481	Sudanese	1 125	Guinean	2 446
Tunisian	6 092	Ivorian	1 604	Sudanese	446	Moroccan	1 030	Moroccan	2 193
Senegalese	5 994	Malian	876	Guinean	295	Afghan	1 009	Eritrean	2 328
Moroccan	5 928	Guinean	810	Somalian	270	Iranian	970	Syrian	2 266
Other*	34 712	Other*	4 704	Other*	2 423	Other*	6 924	Other*	15 593

FIGURE 4 Top 10 nationalities arriving in Italy between 2017 and 2021.

NOTE: This data represents all arrivals. Since 2019, there has been a stream of migrants from the Middle East arriving in Italy from Turkey, including Iranians, Iraqis, Afghans and Syrians.

SOURCE: Italian Interior Ministry and UNHCR

2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
Nigerian	1 825	Sudanese	2 114	Sudanese	3 298	Sudanese	2 590	Sudanese	4 183
Malian	1 596	Nigerian	1 870	Malian	709	Malian	1 375	Malian	3 082
Senegalese	855	Eritrean	1 805	Ivorian	543	Bangladeshi	1 250	Bangladeshi	2 957
Moroccan	816	Malian	1 381	Somalian	507	Nigerian	494	Egyptian	2 383
Eritrean	779	Ivorian	1 068	Bangladeshi	479	Guinean	452	Eritrean	1 674
Sudanese	758	Guinean	889	Nigerian	277	Ivorian	433	Nigerian	1 588
Ivorian	732	Somalian	665	Eritrean	277	Egyptian	407	Syrian	1 482
Gambian	642	Ghanian	552	South Sudanese	257	Moroccan	393	Guinean	1 324
Bangladeshi	637	Bangladeshi	525	Guinean	243	Somalian	370	Ivorian	1 240
Ghanian	491	Senegalese	487	Senegalese	214	Ghanian	354	Ghanian	781
Unknown	3 180	Unknown	1 400	Unknown	726	Unknown	1 958	Unknown	3 588

FIGURE 5 Top 10 nationalities being intercepted and returned to Libya between 2017 and 2021.

NOTE: Colour indicates region: Orange is West Africa, pale blue is non-African, grey is Sahel, green is Horn of Africa, yellow is North Africa.

SOURCE: Italian Interior Ministry and UNHCR

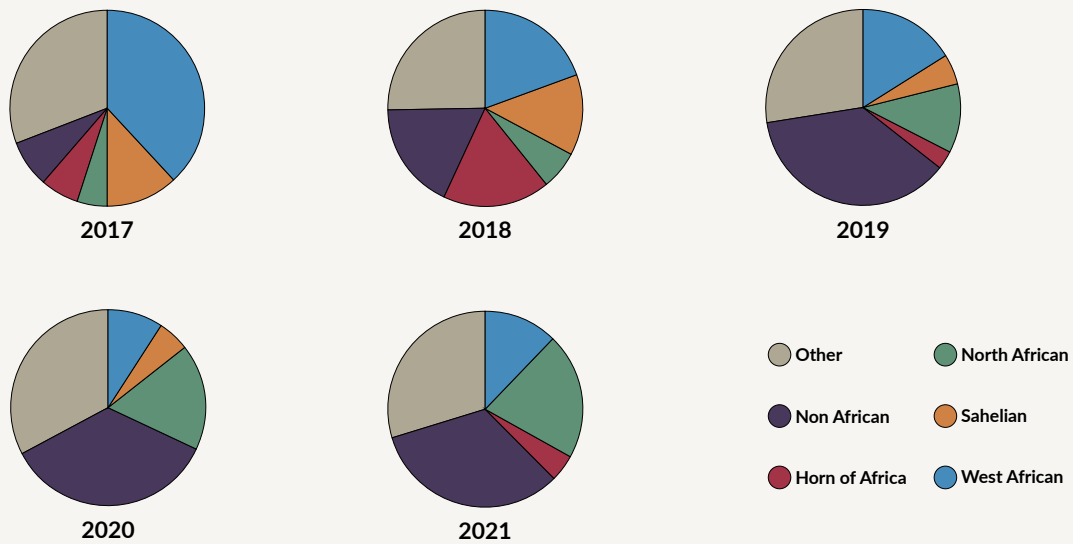


FIGURE 6 Ratio of top 10 nationalities arriving in Italy between 2017 and 2021.

SOURCE: Italian Interior Ministry and UNHCR

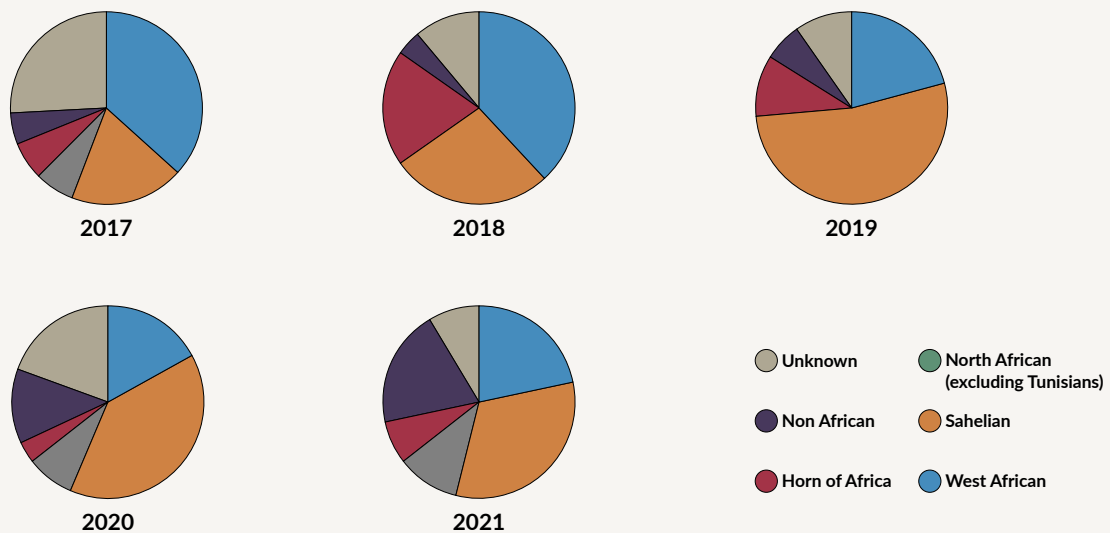


FIGURE 7 Ratio of top 10 nationalities being intercepted and returned to Libya between 2017 and 2021.

SOURCE: Italian Interior Ministry and UNHCR

On the flip side, Bangladeshi migrants are valuable to Libyan smugglers and their Bangladeshi partners, because serving this market is more lucrative. Securing this market by providing a better service more likely to result in a successful outcome (e.g., satellite phones, better boats and adequate bribes to law-enforcement entities) is therefore worthwhile. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the ratio of success to failure for Bangladeshis narrowed during the latter part of 2021, for reasons that are not yet clear.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Sudan is a neighbouring country to Libya with a plethora of overland routes available to migrants wanting to make the journey. Sudanese migrants share many linguistic and cultural ties with Libya and are more capable of travelling independently.

While they do employ human smugglers to negotiate parts of the overland route, this is a more fragmented set of transactions which seldom includes the cost of the boat at the end of the trip. Instead, Sudanese irregular migrants appear more likely to try to find a boat when already living on or near the coast.¹⁷ The maritime human smugglers who serve this market are opportunistically meeting a local demand; they charge less, do not have international networks to sustain and are less likely to provide the more expensive services (satellite phones, better boats and adequate bribes to the coastguard) that lead to successful journeys.¹⁸ This accounts for the remarkable discrepancy between Sudanese arrivals in Italy versus interceptions (see below for a more detailed discussion of Sudanese migration via Libya).

Sudanese migration insights

In the spring and early summer of 2021, the GI-TOC interviewed a number of Sudanese migrants living on the west coast, in order to better understand the dynamics underlying this trend.

In one typical case, a migrant from Nyala in Darfur had departed for Libya in April 2021 as a result of the lack of work opportunities locally. He paid for the entire journey upfront, but this did not include a boat to Europe. He claimed that there were many routes available to enter Libya. He entered via Chad – which many migrants at the time said was safer – and once in the country, he travelled via al-Sara in the far south-east to Murzuq in the Fezzan, then northwards to Sebha, Shwayrif, Gharyan and then Zawiya. The cost of the trip was US\$3 000 (€2 650). He said that he would travel to Europe as soon as he had saved up enough by working in Zawiya.

Because of the recent circumstances in Sudan, everybody is trying to escape from there. The situation changed 100%. Before the revolution, the people of Darfur left, but now it doesn't matter, everyone wants to go, the young at least, people who are looking for a decent life!

INTERVIEW WITH A SUDANESE MIGRANT IN ZAWIYA,
JUNE 2021

This account is typical. The migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC consistently reported that economic fallout from schisms within the

new government in Sudan was driving them to leave. (This was prior to the coup in Sudan, after which the situation is likely to have worsened.) By contrast, they reported that work was relatively easy to find on the Libyan west coast and were all saving up for a trip to Europe, with no intention of staying in Libya.

In addition to the push factors from Sudan, there was a notable diversification of available routes from south-eastern Libya to the west coast, and an apparent easing of mobility, although this was not consistent everywhere.

The general background to this was an increase in profit-seeking activities by LAAF-aligned groups in the south-east, linked to the financial and material strain on the general command since the failure of the war for Tripoli.

LAAF forces in the area are involved in smuggling fuel and people and imposing taxes and bribes on smugglers to get money to spend on their forces because of the drying up of government support after the great loss of the Tripoli war and all the material they wasted during it. There has been a notable increase in the flow of migrants from Sudan through Kufra, as well as the movement of small cars that are smuggled along with subsidized basic foodstuffs such as flour, oil and sugar, as well as camels.

INTERVIEW WITH RESIDENT IN KUFRA, JUNE 2021

In between the extremes of Bangladeshi and Sudanese migration via Libya, people from Egypt, West Africa and the Horn of Africa combine these characteristics in ways that are unique to their circumstances and countries of origin. The number of Egyptians departing the Libyan coast and arriving in Europe surged during 2021, and it is also worth briefly outlining the dynamics behind this group. More than 8 350 migrants from Egypt arrived in Italy (the vast majority of whom departed from Libya), while more than 2 380 were intercepted and returned to Libya. These numbers are high in comparison to those of other nationalities and also high in comparison with Egyptian numbers from the past few years. In 2020, for example, just over 1 250 Egyptians arrived in Italy and 400 were returned to Libya. In the three years before that, Egyptians did not make the top 10 of either metric.

Egyptian migration to Libya is well established, with Egypt having supplied labourers to Libya's relatively rich labour market for many decades. This mutually beneficial relationship was disrupted when the Egyptian government banned its own citizens from travelling to Libya in 2015 due to security concerns. Although Egyptians continued to travel to Libya irregularly in large numbers, very few attempted to take boats to Europe. Most did not even travel to the west of the country but stayed in the Cyrenaica and worked locally. As the data shows, this trend began to change in 2020, with Egyptians showing up in departures in greater numbers. This trend accelerated dramatically in 2021.

Interviews conducted in November 2021 with Egyptian migrants in Libya, as well as with smugglers and Libyan activists, highlight a few common themes that help explain the rise in Egyptian irregular migration to Europe via Libya during 2021.¹⁹ The only push factor cited was the painful economic situation in Egypt. All migrants described the lack of job opportunities at home as the main reason for leaving. Some migrants also referred to general economic conditions, such as inflation and the government's efforts to increase taxes, as having pushed them to leave Egypt.

I left because of the lack of jobs and income and the bad living standards. I want to earn money to get married and open a small project. The situation in Egypt is unbearable; government policies are moving toward collecting more taxes, and prices are high with no signs of developments.

INTERVIEW WITH EGYPTIAN MIGRANT IN ZUWARA, NOVEMBER 2021

Perhaps more importantly, in 2021 it became far easier and cheaper for Egyptians to travel to and through Libya than in recent years. This is likely to be the key factor behind increased Egyptian migration via Libya. The conditions following the end of the war for Tripoli and the establishment of the Government of National Accord (GNA) had an impact on all irregular migration via Libya, but this is particularly salient for Egyptians, given that Egypt is a neighbouring country that is politically implicated in the conflict between eastern and western Libya. Most simply, many Egyptians previously felt unsafe in western Libya due to their government's support for the LAAF. The establishment of relations between the GNU and the Egyptian government eased these tensions.

Connected to this, during 2021 the Egyptian government also began to soften the legal restrictions on emigration to Libya that were imposed in 2015. While many Egyptians continued to use smugglers to enter Libya and to travel through the country, numerous Egyptian migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC during November 2021 reported that they had been able to secure Libyan visas from inside Egypt with minimal difficulty using agents, and they were able to travel directly to Misrata by air. A smuggler in Zuwara also explained that it has become much cheaper and easier for Egyptians

to travel to western Libya when they are able to obtain formal documents. This is a departure from the conditions that had prevailed since the emigration ban of 2015, which made direct air travel between Libya and Egypt impossible and prevented Egyptians from easily obtaining the required paperwork.

The brief characterizations above are generalizations. For example, the GI-TOC has interviewed Bangladeshis who moved to Libya to work and only chose to try to take a boat later on. Broadly speaking, however, the data fits the models.

Overall, the GI-TOC assesses that the increase in departures of West African and Sahelian migrants in 2021 reflected a simple expansion of the kinds of small scale, opportunistic human-smuggling activities that were common in the post-crisis era. This expansion was not a result of changes in the behaviour or nature of human-smuggling networks, but a reaction to the growing number of Africans in western Libya, who created a bigger market for smugglers. By contrast, the increase in the number of North African and non-African migrants arriving in Italy is one more piece of evidence pointing towards a qualitative change: the revival of well-organized smuggling networks transporting migrants on pre-paid trips.



Photo: David Ramos via Getty Images



CRIMINAL COOPERATION BETWEEN GROUPS BECAME EASIER IN 2021

As argued already in this report, 2021 saw a revival of complex human-smuggling networks in Libya, largely as a result of the country being caught in a limbo state between conflict and peace. The lack of a final settlement during this year hobbled the reconstruction of the state and the imposition of law and order, while the relative peace has allowed better cooperation between groups living in different areas and eased the restrictions on movement caused by the war for Tripoli.

Vitally, this is not simply a matter of the fault line between the LAAF in the east and the pro-GNA military alliance in the west. Haftar's expansion during 2018 and 2019 exacerbated many pre-existing local fault lines within and between towns in western Libya and the Fezzan. For example, during different periods of Haftar's siege of Tripoli, starting in April 2019, pro-LAAF groups were in control of Sabratha, Surman, Tarhouna and Gharyan. Misrata, areas of Tripoli, Zuwara and other towns across Libya mobilized to defend the capital and their own communities. Some critical towns such as Zawiya and Zintan were divided.

Such a complicated and shifting kaleidoscope of loyalties and divisions drastically reduced self-interested cooperation between groups and communities. In some cases, this was a matter of hardened front lines cleaving communities from each other and preventing nearly all mobility and communication – for example, between Tarhouna and Garabulli. However, in most cases the cleavages were more social than physical. There was very little trust even among groups nominally on the same side, widespread suspicions of double-dealing and betrayal, and a real fear that the war would spread from Tripoli and consume the whole of western Libya.

This did not deter human smuggling entirely. However, the pervasive social fragmentation exacerbated by the expansion of the LAAF was a key environmental factor holding back human smuggling in the years of 2018, 2019 and to some extent 2020. In order for complex human-smuggling networks to move large numbers of migrants reliably across a mosaic of territories, they must be able to coordinate the distribution of payments and sharing of information about migrant convoys to the right people in order to minimize the risk of kidnap or arrest. This necessarily relies on a wide net of relationships of trust.

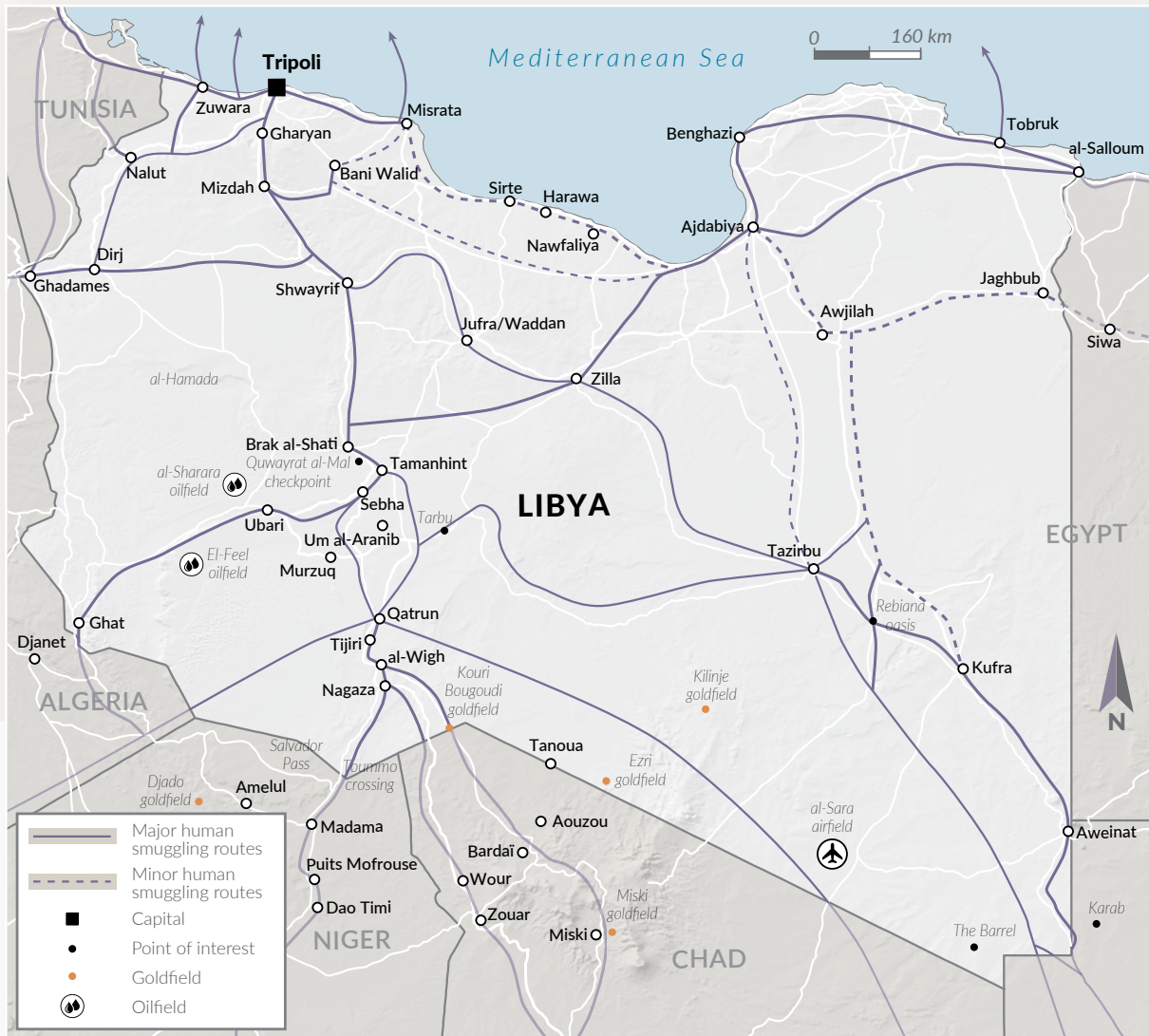


FIGURE 8 Libya, showing main people-smuggling routes.

To be clear, these conditions do not need to be met for migrants to travel through Libya. Migrants can take their own taxis and pay their own bribes en route; small, opportunist operators can conceal a few migrants in the trunks of their cars and travel in the hope of avoiding detection. Smugglers might also simply disregard the safety of their clients and send large numbers of people on journeys having taken no precautions against them being intercepted or kidnapped. All these things are common occurrences in Libya.

However, 2021 saw the revival of networks operating on a more sophisticated basis, with larger numbers of migrants being transported and accommodated across a more consistent logistical chain, for up-front payments. The permanence and durability of these networks should not be overstated. This is not a case of a single, well-structured and hierarchical organization taking root across Libya. It is more that general environmental conditions made self-interested cooperation easier, resulting in shifting but effective partnerships emerging in response to opportunities. In some cases, it appears that this was super-charged by relationships of trust and solidarity that were built up between groups from different towns fighting on the same side during the war for Tripoli, that were then used for commercial cooperation during the ensuing peace.

A few important examples (and counterexamples) of this are described below.

The Awlad Buhmeira network, armed groups in Gharyan and Magarha smugglers

In August 2022, GI-TOC research outlined how relations had developed since the end of the war for Tripoli between the Awlad Buhmeira network in Zawiya, armed groups in Gharyan, and smugglers transporting migrants north from Shwayrif or Brak al-Shati, and how this has facilitated human smuggling.

Zawiya's influence in Gharyan was bolstered as a result of the former's leading role in kicking the LAAF out of the town during the war for Tripoli. (Gharyan had been the key bridgehead via which the LAAF was able to threaten Tripoli.) Although rival camps in Zawiya – namely, the Awlad Buhmeira and the Islamists supporting Mahmoud Bin Rajab – were both involved in this, the Awlad Buhmeira network came out on top, due to its relationship with the key armed leaders in Gharyan, who are reportedly involved in criminal activities.

This connection between Zawiya and Gharyan led to it becoming an increasingly important hub in 2021, effectively eclipsing Bani Walid. It seems also to have contributed to greater logistical integration on migration routes running from Brak al-Shati or Shwayrif to the coast, via Gharyan.

The routes to Gharyan pass through territory controlled by the Magarha tribe, which is loyal to the LAAF and fought alongside it in the war for Tripoli. The armed groups in control of Gharyan during 2021, by contrast, were bitterly opposed to the LAAF, incorporating fighters who fled the town after it was taken over in April 2019 and who fought against the LAAF in the war for Tripoli. Even after Gharyan had been retaken in June 2019, cooperation between Magarha tribesmen and these armed groups – even on an apolitical and totally commercial basis – would have been very awkward so long as the war for Tripoli continued. Apart from this social distrust, Shwayrif and Mizdah were strategically important for the LAAF's posture in western Libya, vastly increasing the hazards and obstacles to mobility. The end of the war for Tripoli and gradual thawing of distrust were therefore necessary conditions for better cooperation in human smuggling between the Gharyanis and the Magarha smugglers.

Tebu smugglers in the Cyrenaica, Tebu armed groups in the Fezzan and Magarha smugglers

During 2021, a series of interlinking relations between ethnic-based smuggling networks and armed groups led to changes in human-smuggling routes from the south of the Cyrenaica to the south of the Fezzan and onwards to the west coast.

From 2018 until 2020, Subul al-Salam, the dominant LAAF group in the Cyrenaica, based out of Kufra, excluded Tebu smugglers from operating in the far south-east of Libya, in coordination with Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The RSF was reportedly motivated by its fear of the warm relations that some of the Tebu communities plying these routes had with Darfuri rebels.



Still from video showing a raid by the 444 Brigade on a trafficking compound in Bani Walid, March 2021.

Photo: 444 Brigade Facebook Profile

By concentrating the flow of migrants into the area it dominates between Kufra and the Sudanese border around Aweinat, Subul al-Salam was cementing its economic and political dominance. The outcome was the suppression of routes that Tebu plied from the Sudanese and Chadian borders westwards, via Rebiana and then on to Murzuq or Um al-Aranib.

The exclusion of Tebu smugglers took place alongside a reduction in the flow of migrants from source countries using these routes. This was in part because many of the successful *manadib* working on these routes left Libya in 2017 and 2018, their businesses having shrunk as a result of changes in Libyan human-smuggling dynamics after 2017 and the reduction in demand from Eritrean and Ethiopian migrants.

An increase in Sudanese migration in the south-east in 2021 coincided with the return of Tebu smugglers to the previously defunct routes running from the far south-east to the Fezzan. In part, this came about due to cooperation between RSF officers and Tebu smugglers. This change was not a high-level strategic pivot by RSF leadership, and it has not affected the relationship between the RSF and Subul al-Salam. Instead, those involved are mid-level officers seeking funds from activities occurring in their areas of operation, often working along ethnic lines, with, for example, Gouran members of the RSF cooperating with Tebu smugglers (Gouran and Tebu are closely related ethnic groups).

Under these new conditions, Tebu drivers have been able to pick up African migrants from the Sudanese and Chadian borders. They drive them non-stop from the Libyan border to Rebiana, an oasis located approximately 120 kilometres east of Kufra. The journey takes about 10 hours, and drivers received around LYD20 000 in return (€3 500).

From Rebiana, migrants are often transported to Murzuq or Um al-Aranib. This route is exclusively available to Tebu smugglers. Numerous contacts reported that migrants are received at an oasis town known as Tarbu, located approximately 40 kilometres south-east of Um al-Aranib. From there migrants are transferred to members of local Tebu armed groups and then on to Magarha smugglers, who transport them to Brak al-Shati and the north.

The Magarha have historically played an important role in trans-Saharan smuggling, dominating the routes from Sebha and Brak al-Shati up to Shwayrif. Their ability to operate south of Sebha has ebbed and flowed. Historically, the tribe has been on good terms with the Tebu (unlike, for example, the Awlad Suleiman and the Zway, whose relations have been soured by war), and they have been able to operate in partnership. However, the relationship was put under strain with the involvement of the 12th Infantry Brigade (then the dominant Magarha armed group) in the LAAF's advance southwards into Tebu territory in early 2019, which caused conflict with the Tebu.



Migrants wait for work by the roadside in Sebha, December 2020. Photo: GI-TOC

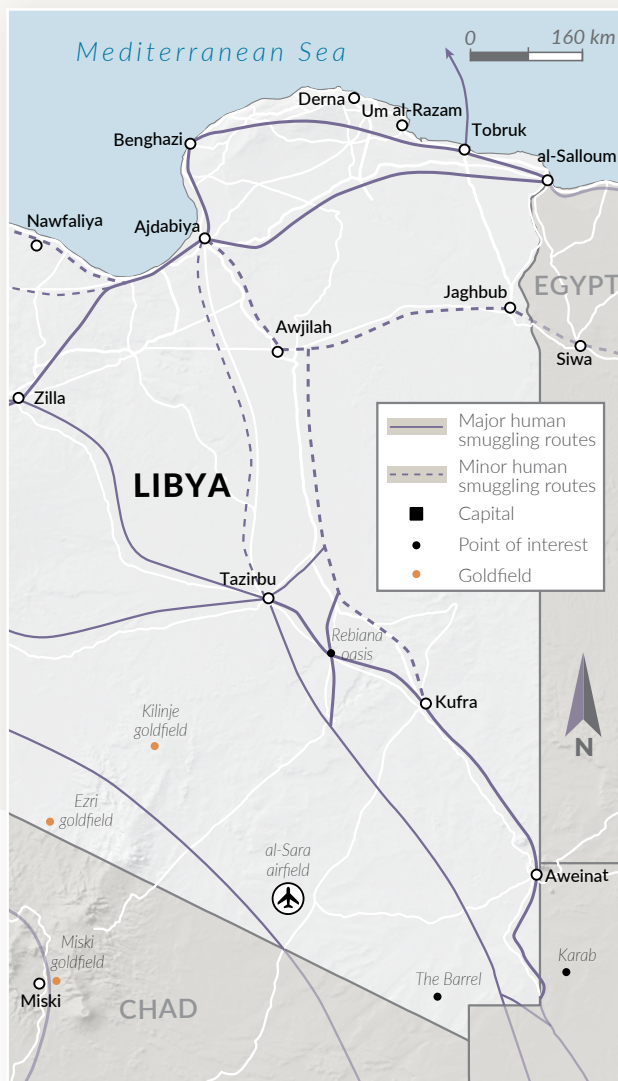


FIGURE 9 Libya's Cyrenaica, showing main people-smuggling routes, 2021.

There were reports during 2021 of cooperation in the above system between smugglers and armed group members affiliated with the LAAF. This fits into the wider patterns of LAAF groups becoming more involved in profit-seeking activities, and of greater cooperation between armed groups across the territory, as the complex, multifaceted conflicts engendered by the LAAF's expansion in 2018 and 2019 gave way to a time of money-making.

Blockage in Tazirbu caused by competition over resources

The greater openness and quest for resources seen during 2021 has not consistently led to easier mobility and smoother operations for human smugglers. In the first half of the year there was a dangerous build-up of migrants being held in poor conditions in Tazirbu – a majority-Zway town located 260 kilometres north-west of Kufra. Tazirbu has long been a hub for migrants entering Libya from the south-east, ahead of their onward journey to the north-west. In addition to its geographic location along routes entering Libya from Sudan and Chad, the town is topographically suitable, lacking a sand berm and surrounded by flat land dotted with farms, which allows ease of mobility for smugglers.

However, Subul al-Salam – the main LAAF enforcer in the far south-east of the Cyrenaica, primarily based in the town of Kufra – has worked assiduously in past years to concentrate flows through Kufra, and generally monopolise control over the area. This had led to the reduction of flows passing through Tazirbu. During the summer, reports emerged that smugglers – either Zway tribesmen from Tazirbu seeking to avoid paying money to Subul al-Salam, or Tebu smugglers who were pushed out of the business altogether – had begun more intensely to employ routes that run to the south-west of Kufra as a means of avoiding Subul al-Salam’s taxation and control. While this bought more migrants into Tazirbu, it also raised tensions with Subul al-Salam.

In March 2021, Subul al-Salam established a local branch in Tazirbu, led by Hamad Slimane, which began targeting smugglers operating here. On 7 May, they raided a farm and detained – and later possibly freed – the approximately 80 migrants being held there who had been exposed to abuse.²⁰ A second farm raid took place on 19 July.²¹

Although Tazirbu is majority Zway, these operations were unpopular locally, with protests occurring in May against the excessive controls on mobility. GI-TOC interviewees reported that there was a local confrontation with Subul al-Salam during May in reaction to its operations, which forced the branch to leave central Tazirbu and relocate to an area known as the Palm project. Despite this, the impact on human smugglers was notable. In the words of one local contact: ‘These disputes have raised the vigilance of Subul al-Salam and made smugglers warier.’

As a result, the journey northwards from Tazirbu became more complex, with delayed journeys and the build-up of migrants in warehouses, as noted above.



Migrants freed following a raid on traffickers by Subul al-Salam. Photo: Subul al-Salam Facebook page



IMPACT OF SECURITY AND POLICING DEVELOPMENTS IN ZUWARA AND ZAWIYA

The changes in the practices of maritime smugglers outlined earlier in this report largely took place in two key locations: Zuwara and Zawiya. While the deeper context for these changes is often much broader – encompassing national circumstances in Libya and worldwide trends – it is also important to factor in very specific conditions at these key choke points, which can have an outsize influence on the course of events.

Two key events from 2021 need to be considered. The first is the collapse in policing in Zuwara due to the detainment of the town's police chief in April. The second is the fractious expansion of the Awlad Buhmeira network's power in Zawiya, which led to a conflict in the town in the summer and had ambiguous implications for governance and law enforcement across the whole of Libya's west coast.

The policing vacuum in Zuwara

In April 2021, the then-head of the Zuwara Security Directorate, Emad Abza, was detained by local rivals due to a dispute and transferred to the control of the Rada Special Forces in Tripoli. Rada's justification for holding Abza related to his involvement in the 2018 interception of Mohammed Rida Bin Nour, the nephew of Rada commander Abd al-Raouf Kara, when he was found passing through Zuwara towards the Tunisian border with millions of dollars' worth of gold and currency. Abza's security directorate arrested Bin Nour and confiscated the money. Abza was called upon by members of Rada to transfer the case to Tripoli, but he refused. Finally, Rada managed to have an order to release Bin Nour issued. Although Abza was forced to let Bin Nour go, he kept the gold and currency to show that there was still a case to be answered for. There had been tensions between Abza and Kara ever since.

Whatever the reason for Abza's detention, it created a policing vacuum in Zuwara and greatly contributed to the expansion of human-smuggling activities in the town during the remainder of the 2021.

Since his emergence as the dominant policeman of Zuwara in 2017, Abza's approach to human smuggling had been a balancing act between the somewhat incompatible imperatives (within the contemporary Libyan context) of enforcing the law and maintaining local stability, reflecting the lessons learned from previous anti-human smuggling efforts.

Zuwara has historically been seen as a major hub for different smuggling activities. Partly this is a matter of geography: the town is located near the Tunisian border and faces a long stretch of rugged coast. However, it is also social, with the town's ethnic Amazigh community alienated from the Arab-dominated state and so reluctant to enforce conformity with an authority who is not seen as representative. Despite this, since 2015 there has been general public rejection of human smuggling in Zuwara, owing to moral repugnance at the deaths caused and wariness of the toxic reputation it brings with it. A local campaign against human smuggling in 2015 largely eradicated it from the town.²²

While numbers crept back up over the following years, the sense that human smuggling was not legitimate and generally harmful to the town's interests remained widespread. Over 2020 and 2021, public frustration with irregular migration also took on a xenophobic dimension, with Zuwarans protesting at the growing number of Africans residing in town, many of them waiting to earn enough to make the onward journey.

Abza sought to balance these demands against the risks of persecuting local smugglers by a strategy of soft deterrence, based mostly on disruptive patrols, the detention of migrants and small fines imposed on smugglers caught in the act, who were seldom prosecuted. Although smuggling could continue to exist under these conditions, Abza's actions nonetheless had a dampening effect on departures from the town.

Following Abza's detention in April, this deterrent effect became weakened and patrols and checkpoints targeting smugglers near the coast ceased. On top of the sudden removal of concrete deterrence actions, the fact that their own police chief had been 'arrested' while infamous criminals in other towns were being honoured and promoted further convinced many in Zuwara that communally upholding the law was not recognized or rewarded. This created a generally permissive atmosphere, with contacts reporting that smugglers were operating brazenly, out in the open and in the daytime.



Emad Abza returns to Zuwara following his detention in Tripoli, June 2021. *Photo: Facebook*

One contact relayed an experience that powerfully illustrated this sentiment. He described how a group of smugglers were loading migrants onto a boat opposite his farm during daylight hours. Having found dead bodies washed up on this stretch, he challenged the smugglers about the openness with which they were operating. According to the contact, 'They replied that Emad [Abza] is in jail, so what is going to happen?'²³

Reflecting this reality, there was a significant increase in human-smuggling activity in Zuwara following Abza's detainment. Although data on specific departure locations is not accurate, GI-TOC monitoring indicates that Zuwara was the busiest hub during the spring and summer of 2021; of those incidents where a departure point was identified, Zuwara appeared most often. On top of this, the data suggests that boats with large passenger loads were more likely to depart from Zuwara.

Abza was released in June 2021, but his authority had been fatally undermined and he was not able to reimpose himself. In September, he was replaced by Ali al-Taib, the former manager of a police-training facility in Zuwara. A contact reported that al-Taib is seen as a strong character in Zuwara and is not suspected of having close relations with smugglers.²⁴ However, the general climate in Zuwara made a crackdown on local smugglers by a new police chief difficult.

The combination of an absent (and then new) police chief and widespread disillusionment with adherence to law-and-order principles were major problems for the containment of departures for Europe from Zuwara. The professional smugglers in the town were responsible for driving many of the trends noted earlier in the report: increased overall numbers, larger POB per incident and greater use of fixed hull vessels, and more migrants departing from better-off countries.

Despite this troubling picture, a development in the latter months of 2021 could impact this dynamic in 2022. The Western Border Criminal Investigations Directorate (CID) – a powerful armed group also known as the Masked Men – moved in to fill the vacuum left by Abza. Their main action was the arrest an Egyptian mandub (middleman), however they made clear that this was part of a broader campaign targeting human smuggling in the town. This law-enforcement campaign has continued in 2022, however, it is not yet clear if they will be able to reverse the increase in departures from Zuwara.

Expansion of the Awlad Buhmeira empire on the west coast

During 2021, the Awlad Buhmeira network steadily expanded their empire in Zawiya and along the west coast. This was a broad-spectrum political and security strategy, driven partly by Hassan Busriba's role as deputy commander of the SSA. Hassan Busriba is a leading member of the Awlad Buhmeira tribe in Zawiya. His role in the SSA lent greater legitimacy to the Awlad Buhmeira network and tied it more closely to allies also linked with the SSA, such as the Abu Salim Central Security Force (the head of which, Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli, commands the SSA) and Muammar al-Dhawi's 55 Brigade.

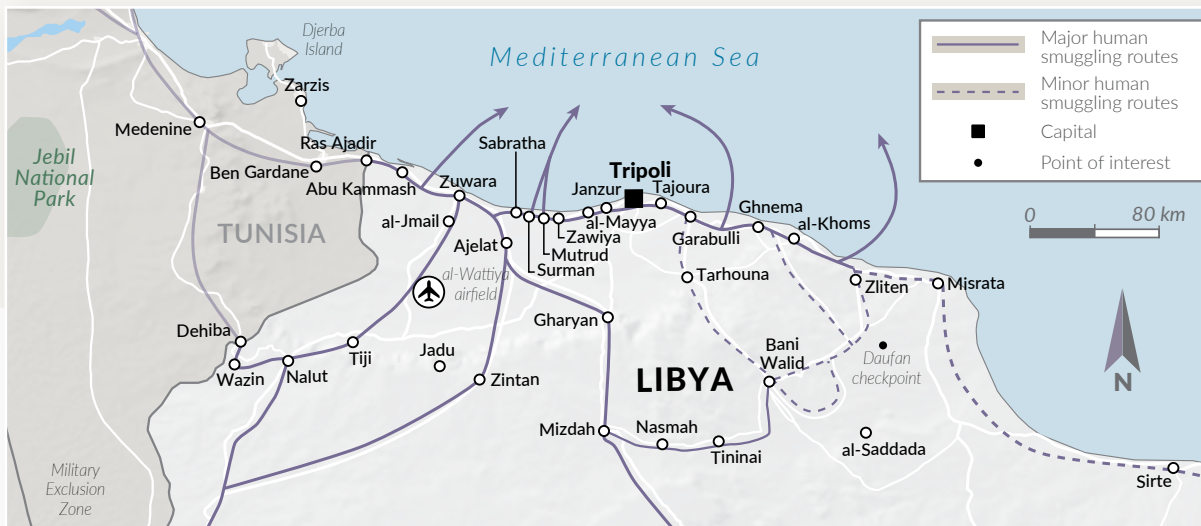


FIGURE 10 Libya's west coast, showing main people-smuggling routes, 2021.

In the context of this monitoring project, the most salient area of expansion by the Awlad Buhmeira network relates to the operations of the Zawiya Refinery Coast Guard and its commander Abd al-Rahman Milad (al-Bija), who is a member of the Awlad Buhmeira tribe and closely linked to the Busribas. Milad was arrested in October 2020 under the orders of Fathi Bashagha, who was the Interior Minister at the time and was engaged in a bitter contest with the Awlad Buhmeira network and its allies in Tripoli. Milad was released in April 2021.²⁵

After Milad was released, a contact reported that he intended to demonstrate the illegitimacy of his arrest by stepping up interceptions by the LCG unit under his command.²⁶ This was borne out, with a remarkable increase in interceptions over the latter part of 2021 by the Zawiya Coast Guard. Prior to May 2021, the Zawiya Coast Guard was effectively inactive; however, this started to pick up in May, and by August, the unit was carrying out the majority of interceptions (see Figure 11 – The Tripoli Sector, which is normally the busiest, and the Central Sector, which is based in Misrata and much less busy, are combined in this chart for ease of comparison. There were no recorded SAR operations in December up to 16 December due to poor weather).

Towards the end of 2021, vessels called the *al-Qayid 1* and *al-Qayid 2* also became involved in interceptions under the direct control of the SSA's newly established Department for Combatting Settlement and Illegal Migration (DCSIM). A third vessel called the *al-Qayid al-Saqr* was delivered from Turkey to Libya in November or December. This innovation reflected efforts to raise further the profile of the Awlad Buhmeira network in the SAR domain, as an alternative to the LCG. This was a dynamic that gathered momentum towards the end of 2021.

At the same time, migrants were increasingly disembarked at the Zawiya Refinery port, which was rarely used before May 2021. There was a lack of transparency about what happened to migrants once they were disembarked in Zawiya. It appeared that many – if not the majority – were transferred through locations that are under the control of the Awlad Buhmeira network and their allies in Zawiya and Warshefana. Although the GI-TOC was not able to confirm it, this may include a location in

al-Harsha that has been linked with extortion and other abusive practices.²⁷ During September, it was reported that al-Dhawi – the commander of Warshefana's 55 Brigade and a close ally of the Awlad Buhmeira network – had opened a detention centre at a former pharmaceutical factory in al-Mayya, which is being used by the SSA to hold migrants. This facility was reportedly opened to get around the negative reputation of the al-Nasr centre in Zawiya. Migrants who were disembarked at Zawiya during November were sent to al-Mayya.

In spite of the opaque manner in which the disembarkation of migrants was conducted, it was clear that Milad and the wider Awlad Buhmeira network spent that latter part of 2021 significantly expanding their influence over both SAR and detention on the west coast.

Complementing these efforts, Milad also engaged in a strategic project to refurbish the Naval Academy in Janzur, which aimed at the rehabilitation of his reputation and increased his proximity to senior Libyan officials and politicians. During July and August, Milad oversaw the rehabilitation of the academy building, releasing numerous videos to publicize this work.²⁸

The first batch of new cadets began training at Janzur in November and were expected to graduate in time for the 10th anniversary of the 17 February revolution in 2022. (The GI-TOC has not seen confirmation that this graduation took place.) Officers on a four-year training course were also reportedly enrolled at Janzur. The ability to oversee the training of cadets is likely to cement Milad's influence across the LCG in the future. Referring to the Naval Academy refurbishment, a contact told the GI-TOC: 'He [Milad] will control the coast, because he will appoint and train the people who staff the navy.' The academy itself is also a prize, with its size and strategic location a major asset for the Awlad Buhmeira network.

The project also succeeded in securing buy-in from the formal military and naval leadership. Rida Issa, the commander of the LCG, visited the academy alongside Milad at the end of August;²⁹ while in October, the Chief of General Staff Mohammed al-Haddad formally visited the academy.³⁰ This conferred a huge amount of legitimacy on Milad and served to rehabilitate his reputation within the context of the western Libyan state.

The political economy of human smuggling is deeply bound up in this strategy. If the Awlad Buhmeira and its allies continue to register success with this strategy, they will further entrench their control over much of the territory, institutions and infrastructure that are critical to the long-term control of departures from the Libyan coast.

The GI-TOC previously described the complex nature of the local governance structures that have emerged across Libya since 2011, which combine elements of formal law enforcement and security responsibility with tribal/communal authority and direct or indirect control of criminal enterprise.³¹ While these structures embed criminality in the fabric of the Libyan state, they also often provide a degree of accountability and continuity that may be the best option on offer for rebuilding the Libyan state: the survival through time of powerful networks with unique ability to influence realities on the ground and an interest in maintaining the status quo. However, maintaining the status quo is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, this incentive pushes local actors to seek respectability and shore up their legitimacy. On the other hand, there is no desire for real reform, and the proceeds of corruption and crime must continue to flow in order to keep the power structures functioning.

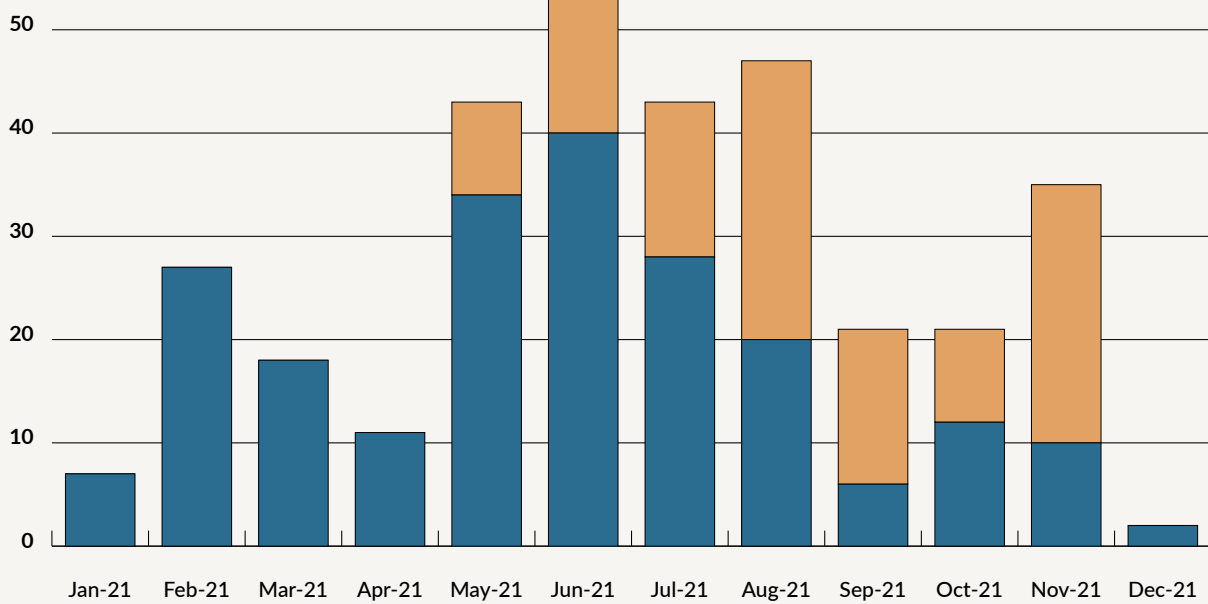


FIGURE 11 Breakdown of Libyan Coast Guard operations comparing Zawiya-based LCG unit (orange) with central and Tripoli sectors.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

The SSA's expansion of its SAR and disembarkation activities is deeply bound up in this contradiction. The clear impact of the Zawiya Coast Guard on increasing interceptions during 2021 illustrates their indispensability to any effective control efforts in the current context in Libya. However, as the Awlad Buhmeira network is funnelling more of the intercepted migrants into opaque and unaccountable facilities under its own control, the actual benefits of increased SAR are far from clear. When armed groups provide governance and law-enforcement services their control over the detention system becomes an important source of illicit revenue, one that directly feeds back into human-smuggling networks through the resale of migrants or systematically charging bribes for release. In May 2022, Amnesty International expressed concern about the role of the SSA in migrant interception and detention in Libya. The SSA rejected these accusations and asked Amnesty International to investigate the accuracy of its reporting.³²

It is not clear what role the network will play in moderating the emerging 'new normal' for human smuggling in 2022, but it is likely to continue to be a key player.

Conflict with Mohammed Bahroun shakes Zawiya during summer 2021

During 2021, the expansion of the Busribas' empire exacerbated pre-existing tensions in Zawiya and led to conflict breaking out with Mohammed Bahroun (al-Far) – an militiaman and the head of the Zawiya Criminal Investigations Directorate. Conflict also broke out during June in the form of clashes between Bahroun's followers and Mohammed Zeituni (al-Shilfuh) in Ajelat.³³

During these clashes, other components or allies of the SSA from outside Zawiya joined the fray on the side of the Busribas, including the Abu Salim Central Security Force, the Daman Battalion and the 55 Brigade. Meanwhile, fighters loyal to Othman al-Lahab, a militiaman from the Awlad Saqr tribe, fought on the side of Bahroun. These were the broad groupings behind skirmishes that broke out repeatedly over the summer months.

On the one hand, the fighting was a turf war between former allies competing for dominance in Zawiya. However, there was a deeper political aspect too. The Awlad Buhmeira are sworn enemies of Zawiya's Muslim Brotherhood-aligned factions, particularly Mahmoud Bin Rajab and Khalid Mishri. This deep ideological enmity was sharpened during 2021 by the prospect of elections in December, which the Busribas – along with the rest of the SSA – welcomed; and the Muslim Brotherhood-factions opposed. Alarmed by the growing power of the SSA and their support for elections, Bin Rajab and Mishri supported Bahroun in his aggression, hoping that the turf war with the Awlad Buhmeira would weaken the network's position in Zawiya and possibly undermine elections.

This was not the case. By December 2021, the Awlad Buhmeira appeared to have isolated Bahroun and resisted his provocations to enter into a wider conflict. With the unpredictability that Libya is facing this situation could easily reverse. However, at present it seems that Awlad Buhmeira dominance in Zawiya will continue through 2022.



Abd al-Rahman Milad and senior LCG officers visit the Naval Academy in Janzur, August 2021. Photo: Zawiya Coast Guard Facebook page



CONCLUSION

The relative political stability that held sway in Libya during 2021 has not lasted into 2022. The LPDF agreement that brought the GNU into being required that new elections be held on 24 December. When these failed to materialize, the GNU simply continued beyond this deadline. Then, in February 2022, the country once again became divided between two rival governments when the House of Representatives elected a new administration, the Government of National Salvation (GNS), which is the legal face of a political agreement between Fathi Bashagha and Khalifa Haftar that aims to replace the GNU in Tripoli.

The existence of two governments with rival claims inevitably led to an intensification of political manoeuvring in the first half of 2022. The GNU secured the support of a majority of Misrata, and important Tripoli groups such as the 444 Brigade and the Tripoli faction of the SSA led by Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli and Ayub Buras. The GNS secured the support of the west coast faction of the SSA, under the Awlad Buhmeira network, Muammar al-Dhawi from Warshefana, Usama al-Juwaili from Zintan, and eventually also that of the Nawasi Brigade.

The political split between the two factions of the SSA was, to some extent, coordinated to hedge against as many potential outcomes as possible. However, this is an inherently fragile arrangement that has weakened the SSA functionally and may end out causing it to split apart. Although there was reportedly an agreement between al-Kikli and the Awlad Buhmeira network not to use violence in support of their respective sides, this was breached in May when al-Kikli attacked two bases belonging to the Nawasi Brigade, helping to force Bashagha to leave Tripoli after a brief appearance.

This flashpoint moment illustrates how political manoeuvring among rival leaders can spill over into violence. More salient to this brief, it also points to a deeper problem: Libya's chronic political instability constantly undermines the consolidation of large politico-military coalitions that transcend the narrow confines of neighbourhood, town or tribe and that have the potential to harden into a permanent security ecosystem at the national scale – albeit an imperfect one. During 2021 and the opening months of 2022, the SSA emerged as one of the most powerful and successful coalitions of armed groups in western Libya, allowing a higher degree of coordinated action from Sabratha to Tripoli than was previously the case.

As discussed in this brief, there are many negative consequences to the consolidation of power in the hands of groups such as the SSA. However, the post-revolutionary history of Libya shows that locally rooted armed groups that wield power on the ground are a fact that needs to be confronted, no matter



Fathi Bashagha makes a statement regarding the clashes between supporters of the Government of National Unity and armed groups that supported him after his arrival in Tripoli, 17 May 2022. Photo: Abdullah Marei/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

how compromised they may be. In most cases, building on these existing groups is the best hope of constructing durable state institutions that actually wield power – rather than exist primarily on paper. However, this is a process that is ushered through a consistent set of sanctions and incentives packages forming part of a broader strategy to properly integrate militias into the state structure. The tragic flaw is that these groups continually undermine the same institutional structures that they are indispensable to through their incessant infighting and self-interested manoeuvres. Mirroring the Libyan fractured landscape various foreign states also further undermine state building with their patronage of select groups, further incentivising intransigence and prolonging conflict.

So far in 2022, it appears that neither the GNU nor the GNS will be able to offer an escape from this trap. The GNS has managed to bring together several important towns to the south and west of Tripoli that could form a decent powerbase in western Libya. However, even if they are able to install a Bashagha-led government in Tripoli, the losers from this outcome – many in Misrata, Bahroun and Bin Rajab in Zawiya, the Zuwarans – may view this as an existential threat and feel they have no choice but to undermine. Furthermore, even if a government is installed in Tripoli, it is unlikely to pursue an aggressive ‘law enforcement’ agenda involving top-down reforms and the disbanding of militias. This strategy has failed in the past; the politician most associated with it – Bashagha – has aligned himself with actors he previously sought to dismantle; and all aspirants to national leadership are now explicitly reliant on the support of militias, most of which have now thoroughly penetrated the state.

For the foreseeable future, the most capable and coherent organizations acting in the policing and security sphere in western Libya will continue to be those rooted in tribe, town or neighbourhood, with limited national-level control or oversight. Although groups from neighbouring towns may be able to sustain strong alliances, political fragmentation will make it hard to build and sustain any grander

coalition that is capable of claiming legitimate control over all of Tripolitania – in a fashion comparable to the LAAF’s control over the Cyrenaica.

More importantly, in these circumstances, with law enforcement driven principally by armed groups whose ambition is largely to accrue legitimacy with little strategic interest in addressing the root causes of human smuggling and trafficking (with some exceptions), the focus of law enforcement in Libya will likely remain locked on migrants, as opposed to smugglers and traffickers. Nonetheless, the capacity and attitude of local security actors will continue to be determinative, in respect to irregular migratory flows, particularly in Zuwara, the area from Sabratha to Zawiyah, and east of Tripoli between al-Khoms and Bani Walid. If the contest for control of the national institutions based in Tripoli does not escalate into a war, there may be opportunities for improved coordination and cooperation between some of these groups, for example in the detention and repatriation of migrants or in the arrest of powerful smugglers. However, the GI-TOC expects such coordination to remain primarily transactional, with policing and security actors in the different towns and neighbourhoods retaining effective autonomy and independent agendas that respond to their own needs, not to those of Libya as a whole.

In the first half of 2022, there were concerted efforts by some groups in key territory to clamp down on human smuggling, in terms of both maritime and inland interceptions. In Zuwara, the Western Border CID targeted smugglers and migrants, with the District Attorney handing down custodial sentences on smugglers arrested in the town. The SSA also continued intercepting migrants in large numbers in the area of Zawiyah, and other groups also conducted interceptions and at least one significant arrest in Sabratha. The 444 Brigade continued targeted smugglers in Bani Walid. These efforts in the first half of 2022 likely contributed to a relative drop-off in departures during the first quarter of 2022.

However, there are severe limitations to what local groups acting with relative autonomy, under no supervision, and often with ambiguous motivations, can achieve. This is in terms of both the dismantling of human smuggling networks, and even more so the humane treatment of migrants caught up in the system. In the first six months of 2022, the rate of departures and tempo of activity was on a par with the same period in 2021, indicating that current law-enforcement actors are unable (or uninterested in) containing human smuggling once demand increases with the traditional summer season. The global food crisis is expected to intensify unrest and demand for access to Europe even further. Unless war breaks out in western Libya, leading to militarization and the obstruction of mobility, it is possible that the summer of 2022 will be as busy as that of 2021.



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ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 500 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

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