

HUMAN SMUGGLING AND TRAFFICKING ECOSYSTEMS
– NORTH AFRICA AND THE SAHEL

2024 SERIES



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

LIBYA

HYBRID HUMAN SMUGGLING
SYSTEMS PROVE RESILIENT

Rupert Horsley

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

GACS	General Administration for Coastal Security
GI-TOC	Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime
GNS	Government of National Stability
GNU	Government of National Unity
LAAF	Libyan Arab Armed Forces
LYD	Libyan dinar
NGO	Non-governmental organization
SSA	Stabilization Support Apparatus
TBZ Brigade	Tariq Bin Ziyad Brigade
Western Border CID	Western Border Criminal Investigations Directorate



INTRODUCTION

This report details the key trends and developments in human smuggling in Libya in 2023. In large degree, the year was one of continuity with the patterns seen in 2022. Over the course of the year, for example, 77 470 migrants departed the Libyan coast, only marginally higher than 2022's figure of 75 500.¹

Furthermore, hybrid migration, in which migrants travel to Libya regularly or semi-regularly before attempting the sea crossing to Europe, accounted for an estimated 75% of these departures, also roughly similar to the proportion recorded in 2022. Many of the migrants involved in hybrid journeys first arrived in Libya at Benina airport in the east of the country.

This indicates the increasing importance of eastern Libya to human smuggling writ large. In addition to the migrant arrivals at Benina airport, eastern Libya also saw a dramatic rise in departures from the coastal areas in and around Tobruk in 2023, with some 40% of sea crossings in the first half of the year taking place from there. Some, though not all, of the migrants leaving from the east coast had arrived in Benina.

While heightened enforcement by the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) suppressed departures from the Tobruk hub in the second half of 2023, the body reportedly continued to allow Benina to be used as the main air travel arrival point for hybrid migration for the rest of the year. Thus, the LAAF clearly emerged as one of the main actors influencing hybrid migration in Libya in 2023.

Following the shutdown of the Tobruk system, hybrid migration sea crossings were displaced to the west coast. By August, departures from this area had increased significantly and there were reports of migrants accumulating in warehouses in several hubs. In October, a notably large series of departures from Zuwara occurred at a remarkable rate. Increased departures from the west coast indicate that entrenched smuggling networks remain ready to seize opportunities. Given the political and security fragmentation of the region, these networks are likely to underpin the resilience of human smuggling in Libya for the foreseeable future.

A notable element that remained marginal in 2023 was trans-Saharan smuggling through Libya. This was once a major route for migrants departing from Libya, but has declined significantly since 2017/18 due to insecurity and migrant abuse in Libya and law enforcement action in downstream countries.

One of the few significant developments was the relatively moderate but growing number of Sudanese refugees fleeing the civil war in that country. However, this was not substantial enough to drive systematic changes in the dynamics of overland human smuggling. Similarly, Sudanese nationals did not leave the Libyan coast in large numbers.

This is the latest GI-TOC monitoring report on human smuggling in Libya. It builds on the series of annual reports that has been issued since 2017, tracking the evolution of human smuggling in Libya, as well as the political, security and economic dynamics that influence it.²

Methodology

This brief is based on the GI-TOC's field monitoring system. During 2023 – the reporting period for this study – field researchers in the region collected data through semi-structured interviews with smugglers, migrants, community members, transporters, NGO personnel, international observers and others.

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

Care has been taken to triangulate the information. However, the issues detailed are inherently opaque and the geographical areas covered are often remote, volatile or difficult to access. For this reason, the brief should be seen as a snapshot that will feed into future GI-TOC reporting and analysis to capture the rapidly evolving dynamics in Libya and the wider region.



KEY TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS IN HUMAN SMUGGLING

The dynamics of human smuggling in Libya in 2023 mirrored those of 2022. By December, approximately 77 470 people had attempted the sea crossing from the Libyan coast. This is roughly comparable to the previous year's figure of 75 500. Once again, hybrid smuggling systems, whereby migrants travel to Libya using regular or semi-regular routes before undertaking irregular sea crossings, were the dominant mode of migration. The four nationalities associated with this type of migration – Egyptian, Syrian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani – accounted for three quarters of all arrivals in Italy during 2023. This was even more pronounced than in 2022.

In the first half of the year, departures from the coast around Tobruk in the far east of Libya remained at a high level, continuing the trend established in 2022. This was enabled by the alleged complicity of elements within the authorities in eastern Libya. Departures from Tobruk consisted largely of migrants making hybrid journeys, with the four main nationalities almost entirely dominant.

By far the largest number of migrants departing from Tobruk – apart from the sizeable cohort of Egyptians who crossed the border – had entered the country at Benina airport, the main infrastructure hub for hybrid smuggling, which is controlled by the LAAF. The combination of Benina and Tobruk created an important nexus for hybrid smuggling, streamlining the process from entry through the airport to embarkation for the sea crossing.

One of the most important developments in 2023 – and a major shift from the trajectory of recent years – was the total shutdown of departures from Tobruk in July. This was the result of a law enforcement campaign spearheaded by Faraj Qaim, the Deputy Interior Minister of the Government of National Stability (GNS). This operation appeared to reflect a strategic decision by the LAAF to clamp down on maritime smuggling in Tobruk. The result is clearly visible in the overall departure data, with a highly anomalous collapse at the peak of the season in July.

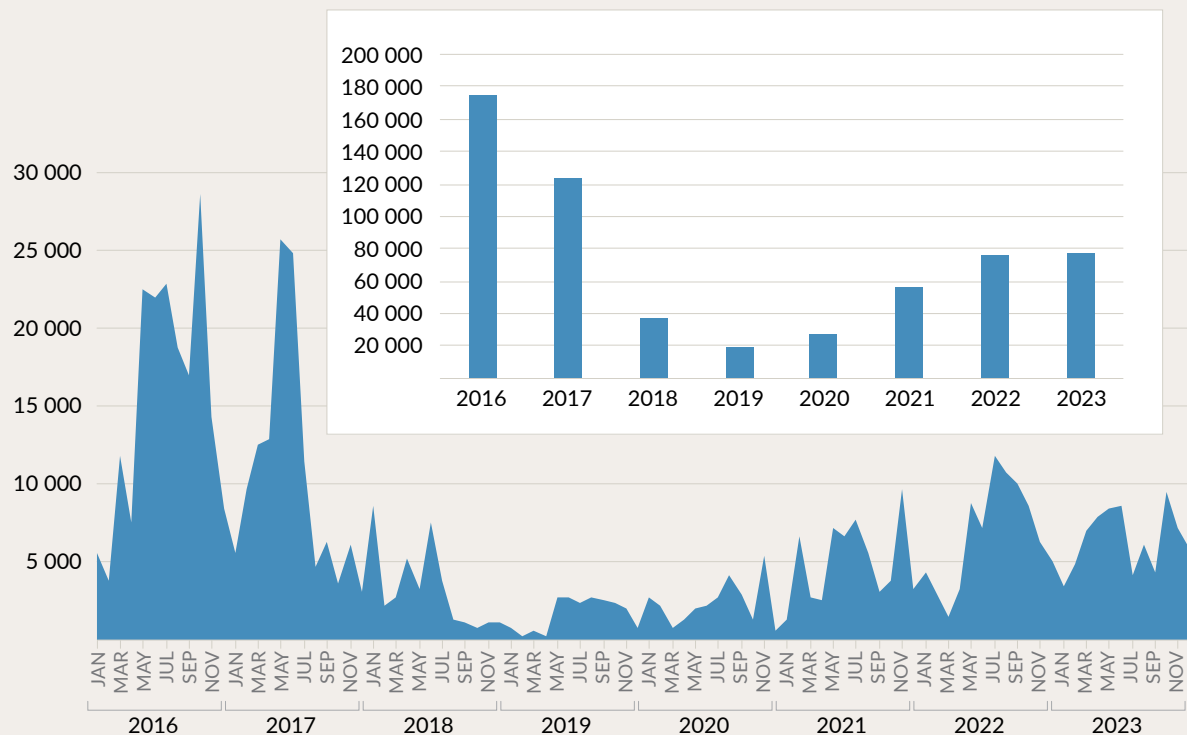


FIGURE 1 Total number of attempted departures from the Libyan coast by month, 2016 to 2023 (annual totals inset).

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

While Tobruk remained suppressed for the rest of the year, the flow of migrants was eventually displaced to the west coast, allowing departures to return to levels similar to those before the shutdown. This was initially an organic process, but was supercharged by the stepping down of local police actors in Zuwara in protest at an air strike in October, which led to an intense spike in departures. Although this surge was short-lived and the police actors agreed to resume work in early 2024, the year ended with the west coast reasserting itself as the undisputed epicentre of maritime human smuggling in Libya.





HYBRID SMUGGLING SYSTEMS CONSOLIDATE

Since 2021, hybrid smuggling has played a central role in the overall human smuggling ecosystem in Libya. In 2023, these systems continued to dominate, with an estimated 75% of arrivals in Italy made up of the four nationalities associated with this method: Egyptians, Bangladeshis, Syrians and Pakistanis. The GI-TOC has excluded interception data from this analysis as the large number of people of unknown nationality in this particular dataset makes the margin of error too large to draw any valuable conclusions. However, in terms of known nationalities, Syrians, Bangladeshis and Egyptians are the top three. The notable exception is Pakistanis, who do not feature. The possibility that this data conceals a disproportionate number of unrecorded West African interceptions is discussed below.

Looking at the monthly breakdown of arrivals in Italy, the importance of the hybrid migration cohort becomes even clearer. The overwhelming majority of the increase in the 2023 migration season was attributable to the above-mentioned group of four nationalities. Similarly, the collapse in arrivals in June and July was almost entirely due to the same group. By contrast, the other cohorts – West and East Africans and others – remained relatively constant and low. The major surge in departures recorded in October was also overwhelmingly driven by Egyptians, Pakistanis and Syrians.

While the nationalities associated with hybrid smuggling follow the same broad bulging pattern over the summer months, Pakistani nationals form the most extreme trend, rising dramatically before effectively collapsing from July onwards. The case of Pakistani migration is discussed in more detail below.

The characteristics of hybrid migration in 2023 remained broadly similar to those observed over the past several years.³ While the GI-TOC has previously reported on these in detail, it is worth briefly updating and summarizing them here.⁴

Migrants making hybrid journeys find out about and arrange the trip to Libya in a variety of ways, including through the internet, their family or communities, and local travel agencies and smugglers who actively promote the routes. While comprehensive journeys including the sea crossing are common, many migrants travel to Libya in the hope of finding work and only decide to travel on to Europe later, effectively splitting the trip into two legs. In practice, it is not possible to distinguish between these two types of migrant journeys.

The paperwork used for these trips is typically an entry permit issued on arrival. While the process of obtaining this documentation can be convoluted – for example, involving the handing over of a passport – in many cases it appears to have become more streamlined, simply requiring a copy of a passport to be sent to an agent. In one case, for example, a Pakistani migrant reported receiving a document with a serial number by email from a Turkey-based travel agency, which he exchanged for an entry permit on arrival.

In previous years, particularly when flying into Mitiga airport, it was generally necessary to obtain sponsorship from a company registered in Libya and approval from the Labour Ministry in order to obtain an entry permit, with the expectation that the traveller would apply for a work or residence permit once in the country.⁵ This was a major bottleneck, as registered companies are allocated a limited number of work permits. In some cases, the GI-TOC received reports of companies selling these allocations, or of smugglers attempting to buy registered companies outright, simply to gain access to their allocated work permits for use in irregular migration.

While some migrants continue to enter Libya through this process, less regulated or formal methods are now also being used, including flying into Benina airport without any paperwork at all. This is facilitated by the deepening factionalism within the LAAF, which makes it possible to bring people into Benina without oversight from any other branch of government.

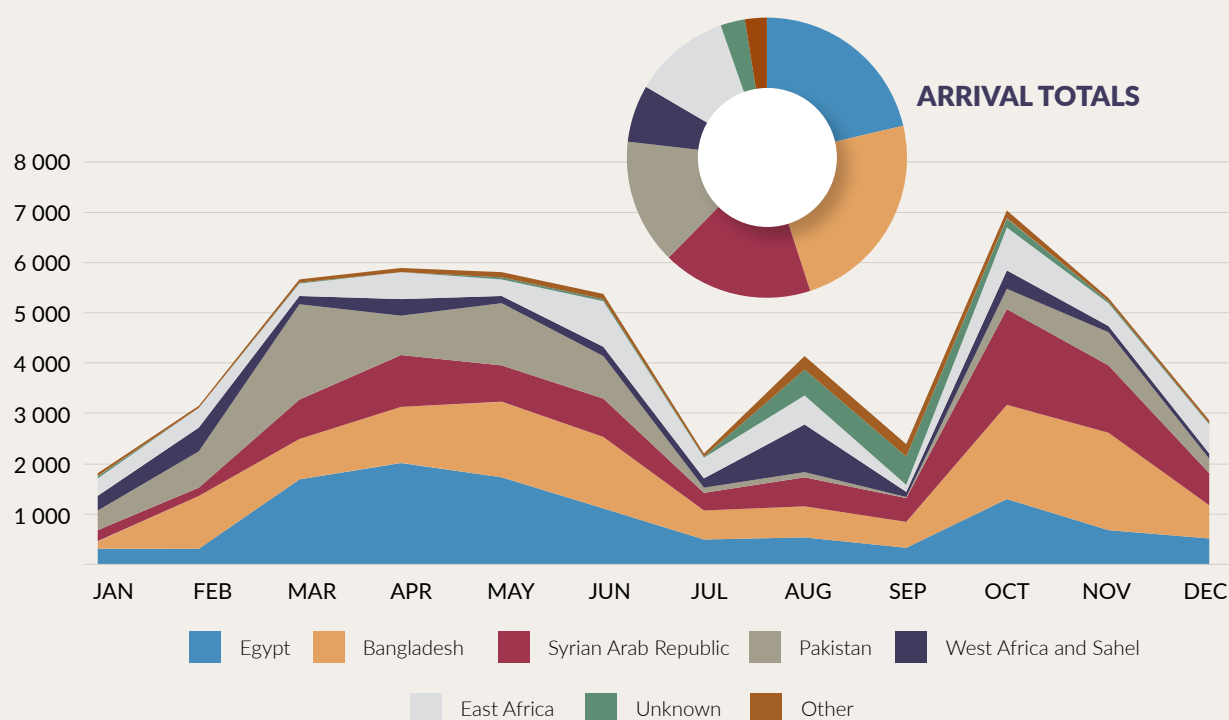


FIGURE 2 Monthly arrivals in Italy by nationality, January to December 2023 (annual total inset).

SOURCE: Based on data from the UNHCR

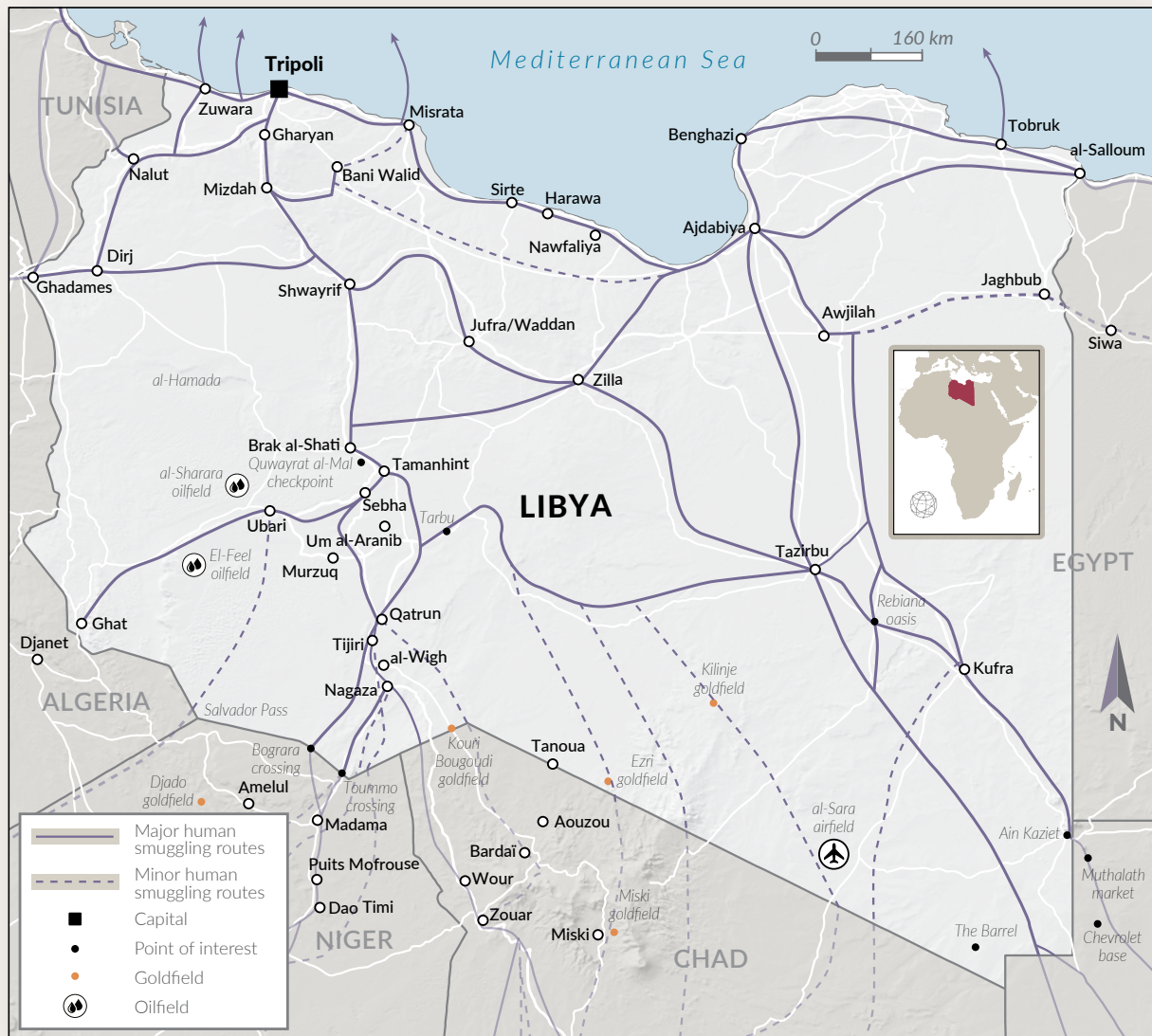


FIGURE 3 Libya, showing main human smuggling routes.

The vast majority of migrants making hybrid journeys fly into Benina airport. Typically, a representative of the agency or the contact who helped arrange the trip will meet the migrant at the airport to facilitate passage through immigration. This is usually a relatively simple and efficient process. One migrant who arrived in March 2023, on a trip arranged by a supposed distant relative based in the United Arab Emirates, reported that he was met at the airport and only had to wait 15 minutes before clearing immigration.

Benina is preferred to Misrata or Tripoli because of the reliability of the immigration process and the predictable security environment, not only at the airport but in the wider region. This reflects the deep complicity of elements within the eastern authorities in hybrid migration – both in allowing maritime smuggling to take place in Tobruk, and in facilitating and profiting from arrivals in Benina.

Beyond this complicity, general security dynamics are also likely to play a role in the preference for Benina. Reliably receiving large numbers of migrants and distributing them to accommodation ahead of a sea crossing requires a predictable environment. The fragmented nature of security in western Libya, particularly in Tripoli, where different and often antagonistic groups control a patchwork of territory, makes this essentially impossible for arrivals in Mitiga and, to a lesser extent, Misrata.

Before July, many of the migrants arriving in Benina stayed in eastern Libya and attempted the sea crossing from Tobruk. After the LAAF clamp-down on smuggling in Tobruk in June, this pathway was effectively closed. However, migrants arriving in Benina also have the option to continue overland to western Libya, a journey that is often paid for and arranged as part of a package that includes the sea crossing itself. The overland journey is made by minibus or taxi. In the past, it was necessary for migrants to take inland routes to avoid the militarized front line between the LAAF and western forces at Sirte. In 2023, most migrants reported travelling through Sirte. Some detours were taken to avoid checkpoints.

We drove on the coast road and at some points we passed by the desert road. It was a very long way, and I did not recognize the names of any of the cities. The vehicle was a Hyundai minivan. We were the only passengers, apart from a friend of the driver. We passed by several police checkpoints and they didn't ask us anything. The driver had a document that he would show to anyone who asked about our purpose in Libya. He informed us that we should not speak English if anyone stops us, we should just act like we don't know it.

Interview with a Pakistani migrant, Tripoli, June 2023

The cost of the journey to Libya and then on to Europe varies widely depending on the services offered and the nationalities involved. At the top end, some Pakistani migrants reported paying US\$16 000 (€15 120) for a full package. This was broken down into US\$8 000 (€7 560) paid on arrival in Libya, of which US\$2 500 (€2 365) was for the visa, and a further US\$8 000 on arrival at the west coast to attempt the sea crossing. Other Pakistanis with better connections paid less, in one case US\$6 300 (€5 960) to reach Libya, with an additional US\$1 800 (€1 700) for the sea crossing.

Syrians have reported paying far less, with the cost of travel documents and flights between the Syrian capital of Damascus and Benina ranging from US\$1 100 to US\$1 700 (€1 020 to €1 580) in early 2023, and the process taking around two weeks to complete. One Syrian reported paying only US\$2 100 (€1 950) for the entire trip, including the sea crossing from Zuwara.

Bangladeshis who travelled in the summer reported paying €2 000 to €3 000 for the trip from Bangladesh to Libya, and €3 000 to €5 000 for a boat. These journeys were often split, with payment for arrival in Libya made in advance in Bangladesh, and the sea crossing paid for separately from within Libya. One migrant paid €8 000 for a full trip arranged up-front. It was also common for Bangladeshis to arrange travel to Libya for work and only later decide to attempt the sea crossing.

The rise and fall of Pakistani hybrid smuggling

Pakistanis were the second or third largest cohort of migrants leaving Libya for Italy from January to June 2023. GI-TOC contacts indicated that just under 6 000 Pakistani migrants made this trip during this period. This is remarkable, given that the number of Pakistani migrants had been negligible in previous years.

This dramatic increase appears to be attributable to the expansion of pre-existing networks offering hybrid smuggling packages to the new market. The routes used were similar to those taken by air from Bangladesh, often involving stops in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates and/or Egypt before the final leg to Benghazi. There was no evidence of Pakistani migrants flying into western Libya in large numbers in 2023.

As with other non-African and Egyptian cohorts, the packages offered to Pakistani migrants often included entry permits. One migrant reported paying US\$2 500 (€2 320) for the entry permit alone. However, it appears that in some cases no paperwork was arranged at all, and migrants were taken directly from the plane at Benina airport without passing through any form of immigration control. One migrant interviewed in Benghazi reported that he did not receive any paperwork before the trip and was simply met on arrival in Libya by a representative from the travel company who facilitated his passage through immigration.

Most Pakistani migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC in 2023 paid in advance for a comprehensive package that included the sea crossing from Tobruk or western Libya. Migrants intending to depart from Tobruk were met at Benina airport and taken to the city either directly or after a short stop in Benghazi.

The payment method was cash. I paid US\$7 000 (€6 490) for the trip. I paid it to my friend and he coordinated it. My trip was from Pakistan to Dubai, from Dubai to Egypt, from Egypt to Libya. All the airlines were subsidiaries of the state airlines and not private planes. [...] In Benghazi, there were people waiting for us. They took us to an area inside Benghazi and then to Tobruk, where we were arrested.

Interview with a Pakistani migrant in eastern Libya, May 2023

As noted above, the prices charged to Pakistanis for a full trip ranged from US\$7 000 to US\$10 000 (€6 270 to €8 955) for a Tobruk departure, and up to US\$16 000 (€14 325) for a departure from the west coast. These are very high sums compared to those charged to non-African and Egyptian cohorts, illustrating how profitable this type of smuggling has become. With at least 6 000 Pakistani migrants arriving in Italy from January to June 2023, this amounts to more than US\$40 million (€37 million), even at the lower end of the estimate. Notably, the number of Pakistani nationals in the apprehension data is negligible compared to the number arriving in Italy (they accounted for 1% of interceptions⁶ but 14% of arrivals in Italy⁷). This is a strong indicator that the surge in Pakistani migration through Libya was driven by well-organized transnational networks that were able to offer integrated journeys with a high chance of success – and therefore to charge much higher prices.

From July onwards, the number of Pakistani migrants arriving in Italy from Libya plummeted. The monthly average of almost 1 000 from January to June fell to well below 100 in July, August and September. There was a partial recovery in October, November and December, with 400, 650 and 300 departures respectively. However, these figures remained significantly lower than those for the other three nationalities associated with hybrid smuggling in the same months. The collapse appears to be largely the result of a clamp-down on smuggling networks in Pakistan following the tragic sinking of a boat departing from Tobruk on 14 June in which a great many Pakistanis died.⁸ However, the shutdown of departures from Tobruk is also likely to have played an important role (see below).



THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BENINA-TOBRUK NEXUS TO HYBRID SMUGGLING

In 2022, after years of dormancy, the area around Tobruk emerged as an important embarkation hub, rising from a very low base to account for approximately 25% of all sea crossings from Libya. As noted in past GI-TOC reporting, this was made possible by camps within the eastern authorities and the LAAF giving the green light to local smugglers to massively ramp up their activities.⁹ Elements within or close to the LAAF leadership are also alleged to have been directly or indirectly involved in human smuggling.

In the first half of 2023, smuggling in Tobruk grew even further. According to data collected by the GI-TOC, from January to May 2023 there were more than 10 670 individual departures from the Cyrenaica, 40% of the total recorded. This compared to 8 000 across the west coast and al-Khoms-Misrata zone (there is always a large proportion of unknowns).

Departures from Tobruk during these months consisted mainly of migrants on hybrid journeys, with the four key nationalities almost entirely dominant. Many migrants reportedly bought inclusive packages, with the boat crossing from Tobruk being included. By far the largest number of migrants – excluding only the Egyptians who crossed the border illegally – landed at Benina airport.

Elements within the LAAF directly oversee and benefit from the flow of migrants through Benina. While attempting to outline how this works in general terms, it is important to note that the actual mechanisms of immigration control at Benina are fluid, non-transparent and informal. Critically, the Tariq Bin Ziyad (TBZ) Brigade exercises effective control over the airport through its responsibility for internal and external security. Although other GNS entities formally manage various airport functions, this security function gives the TBZ de facto authority over the flow of travellers through the facility.



The vast majority of migrants making hybrid journeys fly into Benina airport, east of Benghazi.

Photo: Google Earth

The most consistent and formal means by which the LAAF profits from the increased traffic at Benina caused by hybrid migration is the requirement that each traveller purchases a security clearance certificate, at a cost of US\$500 (€475). The issuance of semi-formal travel documents by the LAAF dates back to at least 2019, but has gone through various stages of evolution. Security clearances were originally issued by the Military Investment Authority, but since 2023 the TBZ's Agency for Services and Production has reportedly taken over this authority. Furthermore, while flights are technically approved by the Libyan Aviation Authority, a contact reported that each flight – and every foreign national on the flight manifest – must be cleared by the LAAF, even those arriving on domestic flights.¹⁰

In many cases, migrants have reported travelling with no documentation other than the security clearance. This suggests that the TBZ and the Military Investment Authority have taken on powers that more properly belong to the labour and immigration ministries of either the GNS or the Government of National Unity (GNU). In other instances, migrants reported travelling to Benina without any paperwork at all, being disembarked in a military wing of the airport and transported clandestinely to other areas without any paper trail being created. It is important to emphasize that there is no monolithic network controlling all aspects of these systems, nor is there a single route taken. The process of securing paperwork and the documents required also appear to vary quite considerably from case to case.

Some migrants continue to apply for regular visas or work permits, as they wish to live and work in Libya legally. Even in these cases, the business of providing Libyan documents is highly profitable and it is difficult to obtain the correct papers without the use of agents or intermediaries who charge hefty fees.

Even where more legitimate journeys are concerned, travel agencies specializing in sending migrants to Libya, including on hybrid journeys, appear to have good contacts at the airport and are able to navigate immigration control reliably and quickly for their customers.

Contacts interviewed by the GI-TOC reported that elements within the eastern authorities sit at the top of the smuggling networks responsible for overseeing transport from Benina to Tobruk and the sea crossing. They are also reported to play a role in hybrid smuggling globally, including in the travel agencies that oversee the planning of journeys, up to the point of sea crossings.

Over the first half of 2023, the entrenchment of networks at Benina airport and the Tobruk port enabled the rapid development of highly efficient long-distance hybrid smuggling routes to Europe. By streamlining the passage from entry into eastern Libya to departure for Europe, the Benina–Tobruk hub not only added a new potential embarkation point in quantitative terms, but also acted as a multiplier and qualitative game-changer. For example, the sudden development of routes from Pakistan, from a base of almost zero, was probably made possible by the tightly integrated and controlled network spanning immigration control, Benina airport, the Tobruk area and the relevant road transport.

The importance of this nexus in Libya’s overall smuggling ecosystem was demonstrated sharply in the aftermath of the sudden collapse in departures from the east. In May and June, the LAAF moved to clamp down on embarkations from Tobruk for a complex mix of political reasons, which were reinforced by the tragic sinking of a ship that had departed from the city on 14 June. Following this LAAF about-turn, departures from the east dropped abruptly from July onwards, with August to October recording close to or below 500, and November none at all. Given the importance of Tobruk in terms of departures at the time, the LAAF’s action resulted in overall departures throughout Libya falling to their lowest level since the spring of 2022.



FIGURE 4 Total number of attempted departures from the east of the Cyrenaica, June 2021 to December 2023.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

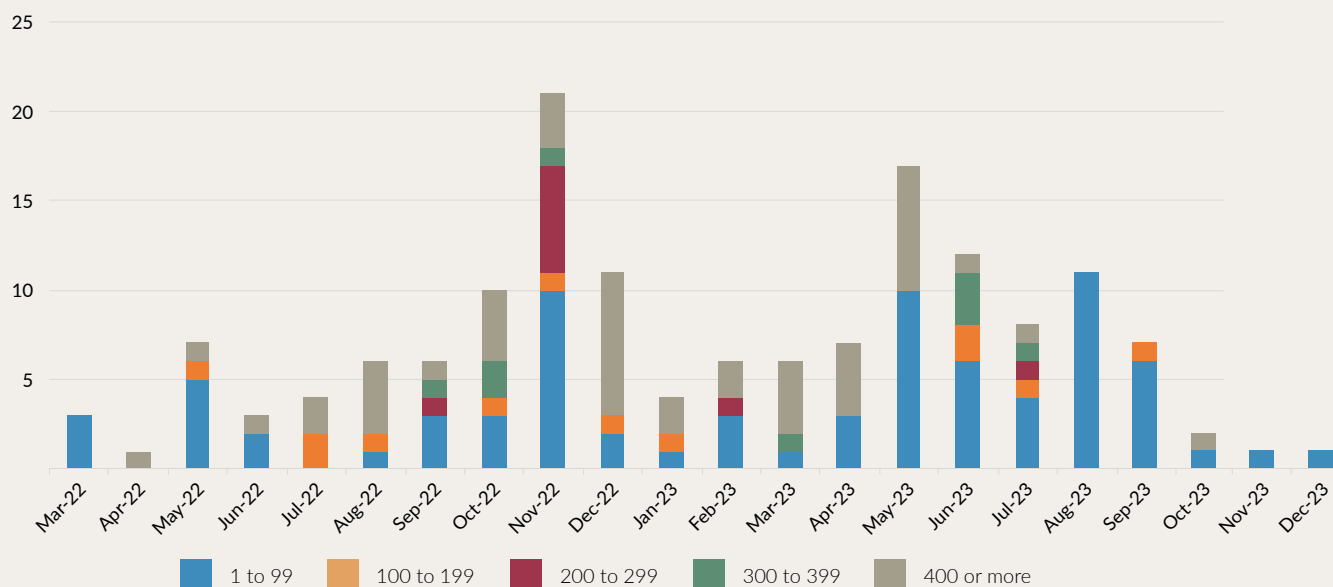


FIGURE 5 Average passenger load for departures from the Cyrenaica, March 2022 to December 2023.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring

There was also a notable shift from large to small passenger loads after the clamp-down. From April 2022 to May 2023, there was a gradual increase in very large passenger loads of 400 people or more, with groups of between 200 and 300 also making up a significant number of departures (see Figure 5). This began to shift to smaller loads in June 2023, and from July onwards the trend was clear, with only two departures exceeding 400 people, and just four above 200.

The average passenger load is important not only because bigger vessels carrying many more migrants have an outsized influence on the total number of arrivals in Italy and carry the inherent risk of larger disasters with a greater number of fatalities, but also because it is a powerful indicator of the capacity of smugglers and the security conditions in which they operate.

Higher passenger loads require far more complex logistical capabilities, such as attracting, transporting and warehousing migrants; procuring large boats and safely managing embarkation; and controlling revenues. Before the LAAF clamp-down, sizeable passenger volumes were a hallmark of the smuggling system in Tobruk. They were illustrative of the sophisticated nature of the networks operating from the area, and the degree of complicity of elements within the security forces, without which such substantial and indiscreet operations would not be possible.

The sudden transition from large to small passenger loads is therefore a strong quantitative indicator that the LAAF clamp-down affected the nature of human smuggling, making it more ad hoc and clandestine. In the context of the Cyrenaica departures – which involve a far longer voyage time than the west coast and therefore require vessels that are more seaworthy – the shift is also indicative of the desperation of the stranded migrants and the small-time smugglers operating without protection.

A similar switch was observed on the west coast of Libya after the crackdown on smuggling by key coastal militias in 2017.

Critically, the clamp-down on maritime smuggling in Tobruk was not matched by corresponding action at Benina airport. Although there were reports of a temporary reduction in flights bringing migrants into Benina in June 2023, this was soon reversed. A contact reported that a brisk schedule had resumed by September.¹¹

This excludes domestic flights and some destinations, such as Tunisia, where there was no evidence of human smuggling. Crucially, it also excludes the Syrian carrier Cham Wings (see additional information below), which only operated charter flights to Benina. These do not appear in published flight schedules. However, a source alleged that there were regular flights from Damascus and Latakia in Syria, which were pre-announced on social media and then booked manually.

The capacity of the flights listed above was between 190 and 230 seats each. This amounts to a minimum of 5 320 seats available per week from Egypt, 1 330 from Turkey and 190 from Dubai, making a total of 6 840. According to information collected, most of these flights were close to capacity. Of course, many of the seats would have been occupied by Libyans or people residing permanently in Libya, travelling legitimately, with no interest in irregular movement once they arrived in the country. However, it is very likely that the surge in departures from western Libya in the autumn was partly driven by the continued arrival of migrants undertaking hybrid journeys in Benina.

Over the autumn months, it became increasingly clear that the migrants arriving at Benina were almost entirely being diverted back to the west coast, and departures from there then surged, completely offsetting the Tobruk closure. For this reason, the specific mechanisms of the visa regime and the process of providing security clearance to travellers arriving at Benina – and which authorities are involved – are highly salient in understanding how hybrid smuggling continues to function in Libya.

CHAM WINGS

Almost all of the migrants interviewed by the GI-TOC who had travelled from Syria to Libya had flown directly from Damascus to Benina airport using Cham Wings. The GI-TOC notes that in themselves these flights were regular and legitimate, with migrants travelling with Libyan-issued travel documents. Cham Wings is a privately owned Syrian airline. In December 2021, the airline was sanctioned by the EU for its alleged involvement in transporting migrants to Belarus, as part of Russia's efforts at the time to put pressure on Europe. These were lifted in July 2022.¹² They were then re-imposed in February 2024, and an appeal against them was rejected in June 2024.¹³ The US also sanctioned Cham Wings in 2016 for providing military assistance to the Syrian regime.¹⁴ ■





ZUWARA SURGE SHOWS WEST COAST IS KEY TO SMUGGLING RESILIENCE

In October and November 2023, there was a dramatic surge in departures from Libya's west coast, driven almost entirely by movements from Zuwara. In those months, 6 000 and 5 500 migrants respectively left from the west coast – higher figures than the total monthly departures for the whole of Libya from July to September – with estimated embarkation points showing Zuwara to be the most popular point of departure.

The data reflects a step change in the average number of passengers on board vessels during this period. For example, from 26 October to 5 November, it was confirmed that four boats left Zuwara, three with 325 to 520 passengers on board and another with 245. This amounted to almost 2 000 departures in just 10 days. In total, there were six departures in November with more than 300 people, and two that exceeded 200. By comparison, only three vessels with more than 300 passengers departed from the west coast in the whole of 2022.

This trend drove up overall departure numbers significantly, bringing 2023 slightly above the previous year's level, having lagged behind in previous months. Importantly, this negated the effect of the complete collapse of departures from Tobruk from July onwards, which suppressed overall maritime activity in Libya during the peak summer months.

The embarkation of such large numbers of passengers – particularly in such a short space of time – would be impossible to achieve without the complicity or tolerance of the law enforcement authorities. Indeed, in this case, the sudden explosion of such trips reflects a reported change in policy by local law enforcement in Zuwara. This followed an allegedly errant GNU air strike on 12 October, targeting a *tarad* boat moored off the Nadi Rimal water sports club, which wounded a club member.¹⁵ (The GNU employed air strikes from its drone fleet as a so-called law enforcement tool at several points in 2023. The GI-TOC will report in more detail on this dubious tactic in a forthcoming report in this series focused on policing and law enforcement in Libya.) Western Border Criminal Investigations Directorate (Western Border CID) patrol boats moored nearby were damaged beyond repair by flying

shrapnel. Another air strike on the same day hit a small tanker at Zuwara port. The GNU has accepted responsibility for the latter strike but denied responsibility for the former. In response, the Western Border CID reportedly suspended operations, stepping back from anti-human smuggling activities.¹⁶ The impact of this is clear to see in the data (see Figure 1).

The spike in departures from Zuwara waned relatively quickly, with no large boats recorded between 27 November and the end of the year. A local contact reported that smugglers had been pressured by the community at large to cease their activities, under threat of a more forceful intervention. The General Administration for Coastal Security (GACS) Support Forces – a militia that controls Zuwara port – were also persuaded to tighten control over the movement of vessels out of the port. The GACS Support Forces were reported to have ‘looked the other way’ when large vessels were diverted for use in smuggling.¹⁷ This, combined with worsening weather conditions, was enough to stem the flow. In December, the Western Border CID reportedly agreed to resume anti-smuggling operations following negotiations with third parties, but the underlying issues with the GNU were not resolved.

Despite the proximate cause of the wayward air strike, the spike in departures from Zuwara in October and November also tells a deeper story. Even as Tobruk was rising to prominence as a major departure point for migrants flying into Benina, many had continued to travel to the westernmost tip of Libya to attempt the sea crossing from there, due to the deeply established smugglers operating in Zuwara and, to a lesser extent, other hubs such as Sabratha.

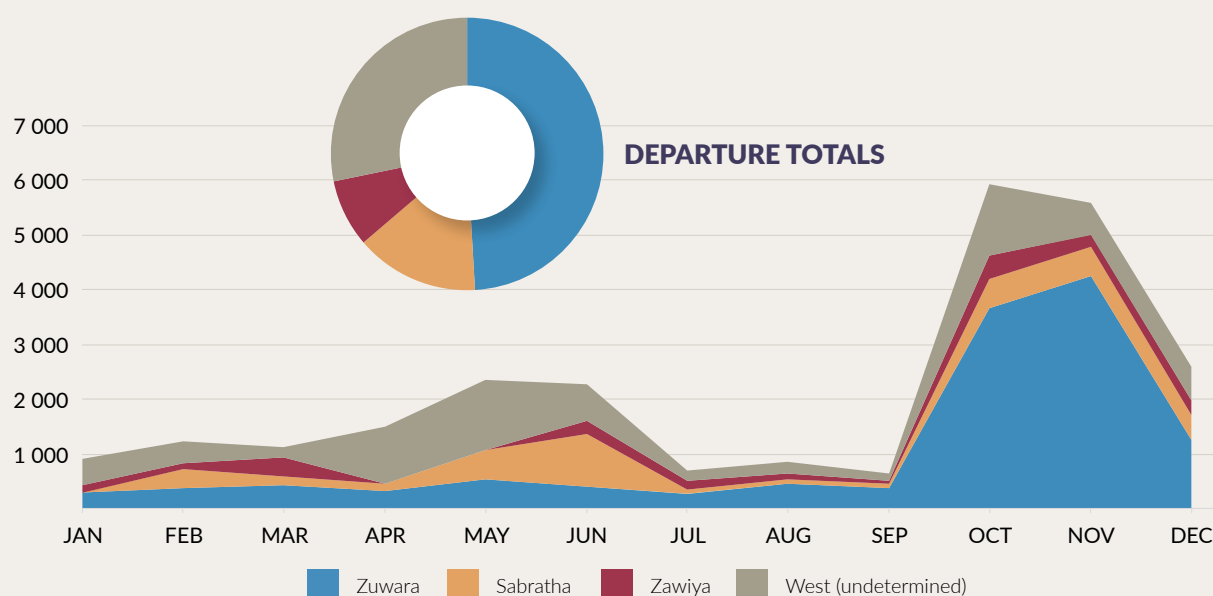


FIGURE 6 Estimated breakdown of departures from the west coast, January to December 2023.

SOURCE: GI-TOC monitoring



Border guards belonging to the Government of National Unity in al-Assa. © Ahmud Turkia/AFP via Getty Images

With the effective shutdown of Tobruk from June, the number of departures from these west coast hubs also collapsed. This may have been the result of a shock to the supply lines to western Libya due to a temporary interruption of flights into Benina. However, from August onwards the numbers gradually climbed back (see Figure 6 – this analysis is based on the assumption that by far the most unknown embarkation points are in western Libya, given the nature of maritime smuggling from this coast).

In addition to the data on sea crossings, there were also anecdotal reports of groups of migrants accumulating in storage facilities in Sabratha and Warshefana. In September, a contact in Sabratha reported an unusual increase in the number of migrants being held in warehouses in the town, with a similar situation also reportedly arising in Zawiya and Zuwara.¹⁸ The increase was unexplained, and the contact felt that the situation was the worst it had been since 2017. Another contact reported similar gatherings of migrants in warehouses in southern Warshefana owned by families with a history of involvement in human smuggling.¹⁹ Finally, several migrants interviewed in late 2023 reported experiencing long travel delays of over a month after arriving in Benina in the summer.²⁰ They were then transported by land westwards to eventually make the sea crossing. Taken together, these reports and the departure data suggest an ongoing displacement of migrants from Tobruk to the west coast since July.

This dynamic links the overland routes, multiple areas where gathering hubs have been reported – including Sirte, Warshefana and Bani Walid – and the embarkation zones in Sabratha and Zawiya. However, Zuwara was the key – and most likely indispensable – node that allowed this situation to develop so comprehensively, particularly from October onwards. The potential for Zuwara to play an opportunistic role was already clear from interviews conducted with law enforcement and smugglers in the town in early 2023, which suggested that law enforcement actors in Zuwara were unable or unwilling to fully suppress smuggling, and that sophisticated actors felt comfortable operating clandestinely.²¹

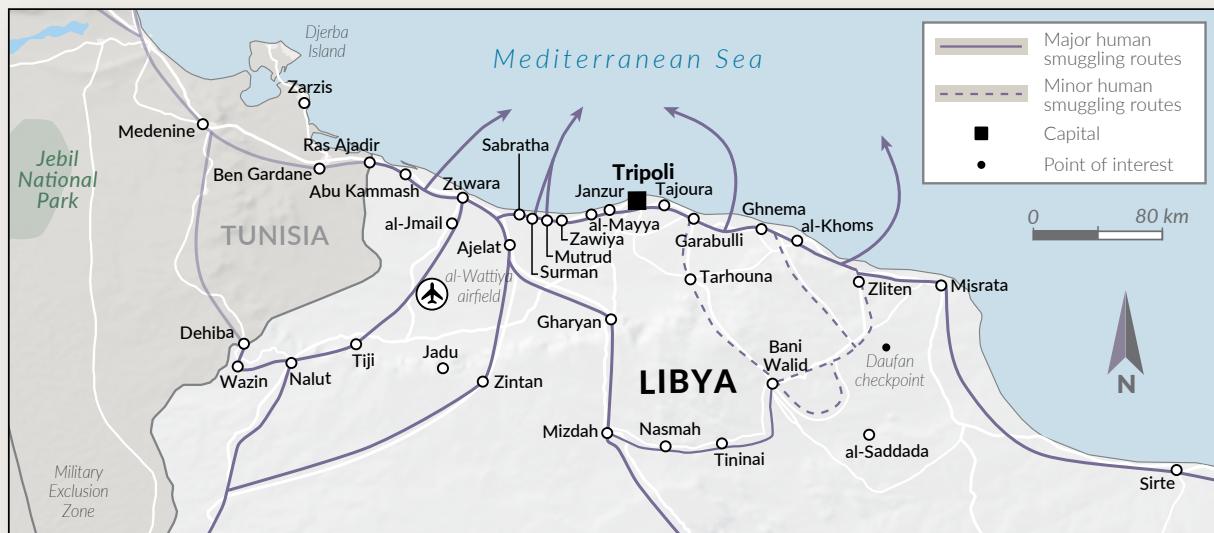


FIGURE 7 Libya's west coast, showing main human smuggling routes.

Zuwara has long been the epicentre of sophisticated maritime smuggling – of both people and fuel – in western Libya, and has been a key driver of previous crises. Human smuggling in the town collapsed following a community-led initiative in 2015.²² Although numbers recovered slightly over the following years, local policing efforts led by the Security Directorate kept the situation under control, even as sea crossings in other west coast hubs soared.

In 2021, however, this policing capacity was compromised by the arrest of police chief Emad Abza. Abza was arrested due to factional rivalries with elements of the security forces in Tripoli, and was released without charge. However, the episode has weakened his authority. This led to a resurgence of human smuggling in Zuwara, not only in terms of departure numbers, but also in terms of the brazenness and impunity of the smugglers. In 2022, the Western Border CID (formerly the Masked Men) stepped in to fill the vacuum and took several measures to bring smuggling back under control.²³

Interviews with smugglers and security officials based in Zuwara in mid-2023 indicated that while these measures were still in place and effectively suppressing new entrants or less serious opportunists, the more established and sophisticated smugglers had adapted and were able to operate relatively unimpeded.

For example, around October 2022, the Western Border CID moved to block human smugglers from using a small harbour in Abu Khammash to launch boats, and increased security at a checkpoint on Farwa Island, a peninsula nearby, to prevent migrants from being transported there by land for embarkation.

According to smugglers interviewed in the summer of 2023, these measures remained in place for some time and were effective in deterring activity on the Abu Khammash–Farwa Island stretch. The Western Border CID also reportedly continued to actively pursue smugglers through patrols, raids on warehouses used for accommodation and investigations. Smugglers who were caught were sent

to the district attorney in Ajelat and were likely to face custodial sentences in al-Twila prison, typically ranging from three to seven months. The two smugglers interviewed reported that fines were no longer being imposed. Smugglers estimated that between 25 and 30 smugglers were serving sentences in al-Twila at the time.

Smugglers reported that all these efforts had a minimal impact on their business. Prison sentences were not seen as a deterrent as they were too short, and there was little apparent concern about spending time in al-Twila. Similarly, the obstruction of smuggling at Abu Khammash and Farwa Island was not seen as a problem, because, as the smugglers revealed, 'We have many options and can use other places.' Nor did they find it difficult to arrange safe and secure accommodation for their customers, despite the efforts of the Western Border CID to disrupt this.

There are other security bodies in Zuwara – such as the Security Directorate, the Western Region Support Forces and the Zuwara branch of the Stabilization Support Apparatus (SSA) – that occasionally report maritime or land-based interceptions of migrants.²⁴ However, smugglers did not see this activity as a problem, as they felt that there was little coordination between the various forces. Summing up the general attitude towards the challenges posed by law enforcement, one smuggler said, 'If you know how to work, you can avoid them, but even if you are caught, seven months is not too much considering the money we can make.'²⁵

The significance of the continued smuggling in Zuwara is not simply quantitative. As the above makes clear, those smugglers who are still active are committed and professional. One explicitly stated that law enforcement in Zuwara is only really effective in discouraging inexperienced newcomers from entering the business. This gives Zuwara an outsized influence on the important hybrid smuggling routes involving nationalities such as Syrians and Bangladeshis. Smugglers explained that they focus on these groups because they are the most profitable. Smugglers offer services that include accommodation arranged through intermediaries (*mandubs*), with whom they have sufficiently stable relationships to accept payment into a type of escrow account that is only released to the smuggler once the migrant has safely arrived in Europe. The cost of a boat trip is very high, ranging from LYD17 000 (€2 615) to LYD20 000 (€3 075).²⁶

In addition to their key role in serving the main migrant smuggling markets currently using Libya, sophisticated Zuwaran smugglers also tend to contribute to other hubs. One smuggler interviewed explained that local law enforcement efforts are ineffective in part because they work closely with groups from Zawiya, allowing them to circumvent any measures in place at a given location. This entrenched networking between nodes is one of the reasons for the resilience of human smuggling on Libya's west coast.



TRANS-SAHARAN SMUGGLING SUBDUED

Trans-Saharan smuggling through Libya – essentially the routes that bring East Africans into Libya through the Kufra region and West Africans through the Fezzan – has remained suppressed since 2017/18. Despite growing instability in the Sahel in 2023, this trend largely held, with the kind of hybrid smuggling outlined above – confined to northern Libya – clearly the more dominant mode.

Perhaps the most significant development in 2023 was the relatively moderate but growing increase in the number of Sudanese refugees fleeing the civil war in that country. This was a gradual process, dispersed across many different routes, and did not lead to an increase in departures from Libya, as Sudanese either chose to stay in Libya or cross into Tunisia to attempt the sea crossing to Europe.

In the case of West Africans transiting the Fezzan, there was no significant change in 2023. However, the lifting of the ban on transporting migrants in Niger could prove to be a turning point in the coming year, particularly if the suppression of irregular migration in Tunisia continues (see the report on Niger in this series).²⁷

Sudanese overland routes proliferate

Historically, the direct routes from eastern Sudan to Kufra – the main vector for migration from Sudan and East Africa into Libya – have carried large volumes of traffic. For example, these were the main corridors used by Eritreans during the peak of their migration to Europe.²⁸ In 2017/18, this activity was suppressed through a combination of concerted security efforts in the border area by Sudanese forces and the dismantling of transnational Eritrean smuggling networks.²⁹

A key question raised by the outbreak of conflict in Sudan in April 2023 was whether it would lead to a revival of these routes, driven either by an explosion in demand from Sudanese refugees or by a dramatic change in the security landscape, opening the way for smugglers to ramp up their activities. While the civil war in Sudan has caused a massive displacement of civilians within Sudan and into Chad and Egypt, there was not the large-scale displacement into south-eastern Libya that had seemed possible.

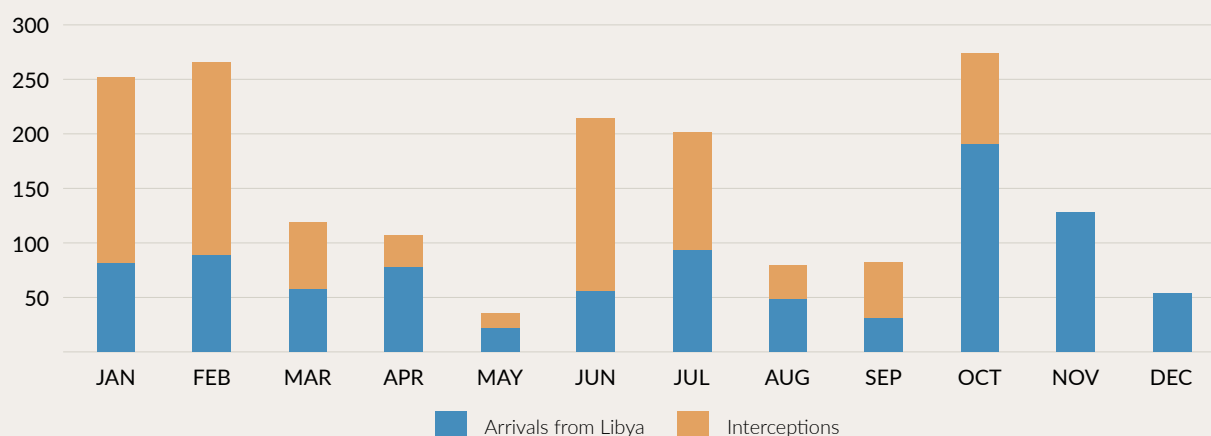


FIGURE 8 Sudanese arrivals and interceptions by month, January to December 2023.

SOURCE: Based on data from the UNHCR

There was also no significant or sustained increase in the number of Sudanese migrants attempting the sea crossing from Libya. In fact, the combination of confirmed arrivals in Italy and interceptions of Sudanese does not show a clear pattern over the course of 2023. The period from April to September was indeed less busy than the first two months of the year, before the outbreak of the war. There was a notable increase in October and November, but this remained well below the levels recorded for the more common nationalities. In summary, the number of Sudanese departures remained low compared to the main nationalities for most of 2023, with the war in Sudan having no discernible impact on departures.

The picture is slightly different when departures from Tunisia are taken into account. According to Italian government data, there were almost 5 000 Sudanese arrivals in Italy between January and early November.³⁰ Although Libya was not the main embarkation point, it nonetheless played an important role, with most departing migrants travelling overland through Libya to Tunisia. Indeed, the main development in Libya as a result of the war in Sudan was the proliferation of routes through the country, as Sudanese migrants sought safety in small numbers by any means available, crossing through both Kufra and the Fezzan.

Risks of increased smuggling through the Fezzan

The smuggling of West Africans through the Fezzan has remained suppressed since 2018, with the overall increase in departures from the Libyan coast in recent years being driven by entirely different routes and nationalities – as outlined above. However, large numbers of West Africans have continued to attempt the sea crossing from Tunisia, demonstrating that the demand for access to Europe among this cohort remains very high.³¹

The irregular migration of West Africans to Europe through Libya has been suppressed by heightened law enforcement in several key countries of origin and in the main transit country of Niger, as well as by the danger and difficulty of long overland journeys through Libya.³² Several West African countries also have restrictions on travel to Libya, but these are not always well enforced and do not pose a major obstacle. For example, a female migrant from southern Cameroon told the GI-TOC that while there are restrictions on travel to Libya, the conflict and unrest have essentially prevented them from being enforced. In another case, a Ghanaian migrant claimed that only women travelling to Libya were subject to government restrictions because of the perceived risk of sex trafficking.

Given the obvious demand for access to Europe, West African migrants would likely pivot back to Libya rapidly and in large numbers were these obstacles removed. This would be exacerbated by an effective closure of the currently more popular routes through Tunisia. This eventuality became more likely in late November, when the new government in Niger lifted restrictions on the transport of migrants in the north of the country. These regulations had played a key role in suppressing these routes.

According to regular interviews conducted in the region throughout 2023, clandestine routes from West African countries through Niger to Libya are now well established, albeit on a small scale. There is now the risk that these extant human smuggling networks – even if currently subdued – could rapidly upscale their activities and once again become central to irregular migration to Europe.

Many migrants interviewed in southern Libya explained that they had taken the risk of travelling to the country because the routes were easier and better equipped to evade security forces than those through Algeria, as well as being relatively cheap. Some reported using desert routes through northern Niger into Libya without encountering any checkpoints or security forces. Others confirmed that they had passed through checkpoints easily if their drivers paid bribes.

Prices vary, but a range of US\$500 to US\$700 (€465 to €650) per person from home countries such as Nigeria or Cameroon to Sebha is typical. Migrants often report paying by money transfer, either themselves or with the aid of relatives who helped them arrange the trip. There is a widespread reluctance to travel on credit because of the risk of exploitation.

Some migrants reported that their journey included the sea crossing to Europe. For example, a woman from Nigeria interviewed in November 2023 was travelling to Italy on a trip arranged and paid for by her sister. The woman's sister paid the cost of US\$1 200 (€1 115) through a money transfer. Although the reliability and safety of such journeys is questionable, it is clear that networks currently exist that are capable of transporting moderate numbers of West Africans through Niger and Chad to southern Libya and, in some cases, on to the west coast.

Missing West Africans in departure data

A persistent question is why West African migrants are not more visible in the data on departures from Libya, despite the fact that many continue to live and work close to the departure hubs in the north-west of the country. This is particularly striking given the large number of West Africans who departed from the Tunisian coast in 2023, and the continued, albeit less busy, migration routes linking West Africa with north-west Libya through the Fezzan.

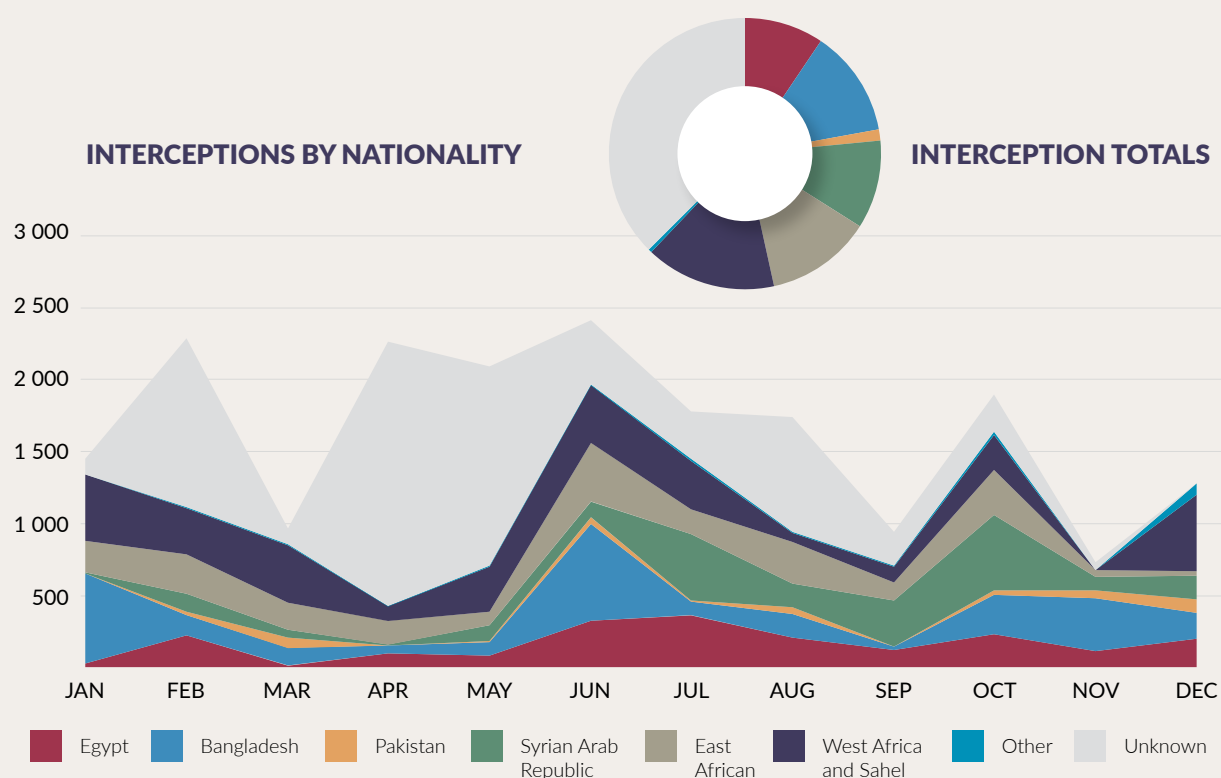


FIGURE 9 Monthly interceptions by Libyan maritime forces by nationality, January to October 2023 (annual total inset).

SOURCE: Based on data from the UNHCR

One possible explanation may be hidden in the data on interceptions. Between 2018 and 2021, there was a significant disparity between the proportions of nationalities arriving in Europe and those intercepted and returned to Libya, reflecting the varying purchasing power of different nationalities.

The relatively wealthy migrants from countries such as Bangladesh and Egypt tended to pay higher prices, often for comprehensive packages. These sea crossings were more likely to be successful, both because of the superiority of the boats and because the smugglers had relationships with the naval forces in Libya and paid bribes to ensure safe passage. By contrast, the relatively impoverished migrants from West Africa often arranged sea crossings on an ad hoc basis, using cheaper and more opportunistic smugglers who did not have the capacity or interest to ensure that their boats were not intercepted.

Unfortunately, the quality of interception data has deteriorated over the past two years, due to restrictions on international organizations' access to disembarkation sites. A major shortcoming is the large number of intercepted migrants whose nationality is not recorded. In 2023 this category represented the largest single group, at 38%. This makes comparisons between the nationalities of intercepted and arriving migrants very difficult.

Even with this caveat, among the migrants whose nationality is known, Sahelians and West Africans are more frequently intercepted compared to the rate at which they arrive in Italy, 16% versus 7%. On the other hand, the nationalities associated with hybrid migration seem less likely to be intercepted than to make a successful crossing: 34% versus 76%. The difference is particularly striking for Pakistanis, who accounted for 14% of arrivals but only 1% of interceptions between January and October.

Without systematic data coverage it is impossible to be more precise in disaggregating the nationalities of intercepted migrants. However, the GI-TOC assesses it is reasonable to suppose that the very large number of people of unknown nationality in fact conceals a disproportionate number of West Africans and Sahelians. It is therefore possible that West Africans are attempting significantly more sea crossings than the data shows.



CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

This report has detailed how hybrid smuggling systems in Libya have become further consolidated in 2023. These systems have come to dominate the smuggling market due to a combination of relative stability following the end of the war for Tripoli, and the resulting ease of movement, which has encouraged migrants to fly to Libya as a reliable route to Europe. At the same time, chronic political fragmentation has prevented the development of a coordinated policing response to human smuggling.

In the absence of a credible state-building project that promises to lead Libya out of its long post-revolutionary crisis, many key local power-holders – both large and small – face very little real pressure or incentive to prevent human smuggling. Indeed, as the case of the LAAF shows, the opposite is more often the case.

The most dramatic shock to this status quo in 2024 would undoubtedly be the outbreak of war between the LAAF and the western alliance that supports the GNU. It is impossible to predict if and when this might occur, and what the implications would be. However, the instability and resulting disruption to mobility would almost certainly destroy the hybrid smuggling systems that currently dominate the Libyan smuggling sector.

In the absence of war, there are few obvious factors that could alter the current trajectory of human smuggling in Libya. One important question will be whether the eastern authorities will continue to allow Benina airport to be used as the main entry point for migrants on hybrid journeys. This is the single greatest node for irregular migration in Libya and is entirely under the control of the LAAF.

The fate of the GNU hangs in the balance; however, much of the real power in western Libya is held by local actors who are rooted in their own communities and will survive regardless of who rules from Tripoli. With political prizes potentially up for grabs if a new government is formed, most political energy is likely to be consumed by factional competition. Security reform and improved law enforcement may be used as rhetorical positions in this context, but real progress will be hard to achieve in such circumstances.

This means that continuity further in 2024 is the most likely outcome for the country's hybrid smuggling systems, with their resilience underpinned by the stability of core infrastructure – particularly Benina airport but also the coast road – and no obvious political project capable of shutting them down or fundamentally changing the incentive structure of local elites. On the other hand, it should be recognized that this smuggling system is highly structured and canalized and therefore vulnerable to disruption should enough localized law enforcement actors be sufficiently incentivized to crack down. Several relatively slow months between April and July 2024 highlighted the potential for the GNU to have some limited impact on local smuggling systems at least over the short term, when it is sufficiently motivated.

While trans-Saharan smuggling – from both East and West Africa – remained suppressed in 2023, these routes could also undergo transformations further in 2024. Chronic instability across the whole of the Sahel and Sudan, coupled with legislative changes in Niger, could lead to a significant increase in the number of people making the journey to Libya.



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