How migrant smuggling has fuelled conflict in Libya

A systems analysis of key transit hubs

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Summary

— Migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons (TIP) have gone through three phases of development in Libya. The first, from 2011 to 2017, saw the rapid expansion of these practices. The second (2017–19) consisted of a clampdown by international and local actors to reduce coastline departures for Europe. The third and current phase, broadly beginning in 2020, has seen an uptick in departures and the de facto regulation of migrant smuggling and TIP by local actors.

— To understand the development of transnational networks of migrant smuggling and TIP via Libya since 2011, this paper utilizes a comparative systems analysis of three key transit hubs: Kufra, Sebha and Zawiya. The findings illustrate how two interconnected feedback loops have driven the expansion of migrant smuggling and TIP. The first is a dispute over authority in each location, which spurs competition that leads to violent conflict. In turn, this conflict further aggravates the contention over authority. The second is grounded in economics: the structure of the economies in the three locations is reliant on informal and illicit cross-border trade and the movement of people. As state support has diminished and the informal and illicit sectors have expanded, reliance upon the latter to boost economic activity has grown.

— These two feedback loops have contributed to the entrenchment of armed groups and strengthened a pervasive conflict economy. These dynamics continue to frustrate hopes to establish unified and accountable governance in Libya.

— Migrant smuggling and TIP dynamics are often solely viewed through the lens of criminality. However, a closer look at Libya's trajectory since 2011 illustrates how the development of the country's illicit marketplace – of which migrant smuggling and trafficking are central – is intimately connected to historical legacies, social dynamics and enduring conflicts over authority at both the local and national level.

— These components are particularly visible in Kufra, where there has been longstanding conflict between the Arab Zway and the Tebu over the right to govern the territory. Likewise, Sebha, a key transit point for trans-Sahelian trade, continues to be contested by a number of community groups, with governance divided into neighbourhood districts. In contrast, while Zawiya is more homogenous, there are ongoing violent conflicts for power and authority inside and outside the city's borders.

— Framed as rule of law interventions, European attempts to curb migrant smuggling and trafficking have addressed symptoms rather than causes. Migratory flows have fluctuated – but are significantly reduced from their 2016 highs – due to a series of transactional bargains that entrench conflict. However, this has made the issue harder to resolve, as Libyan actors seek to leverage flows of migrants, which are once again on the rise, for financial and political support.

— A more effective strategy to tackle this issue would be to develop a 'whole-of-route' approach that contains a wider suite of policy tools than simply enforcement, most notably sustainable local development initiatives and peacebuilding efforts. These have the potential to reduce demand and the perceived need for migrants to move and tackle the enabling environment in which criminal groups and conflict actors operate.

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Introduction: Libya since 2011

A pervasive conflict economy has developed in Libya since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi. Migrant smuggling and TIP became a key vector of this conflict economy, particularly in parts of the country reliant on cross-border trade.

Libya has experienced three nationwide outbreaks of violent conflict and many episodes of localized fighting since 2011. A ceasefire has largely held across the country since 2020, but has been punctuated by sporadic armed confrontations between a range of rival groups.[1] While the initial violence was related to the popular uprising against the Gaddafi regime, the conflict soon became characterized by a quest for territory, power and resources.[2] Apart from a limited period in 2021, the country has been administratively divided since 2014, with rival governments – based in the capital, Tripoli, and in the east of the country – claiming legitimacy.

Amid Libya's ongoing governance crisis and myriad conflicts, the country's illicit marketplace has expanded dramatically. The distinction between the formal and the informal sectors, as well as the licit and illicit sectors, has become less clear, as much economic activity traverses these spaces.

Within this context, researchers and policymakers have focused significant attention on the development of migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons (TIP) in post-2011 Libya, primarily as a result of European interests and concerns over irregular migration. To date, two broad approaches have been adopted to analyse migrant smuggling and TIP on Libyan soil. The first focuses on the experiences of those traversing Libya as migrants and refugees, both voluntarily

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1 Reuters via Associated Press (2023), 'Dozens Dead in Worst Violence This Year Between Libyan Factions', VOA News, 15 August 2023, https://www.voanews.com/a/tripoli-clashes-widen-in-worst-fighting-this-year-/7225820.html.
2 Eaton, T. (2018), *Libya's War Economy: Predation, Profiteering and State Weakness*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-04-12-libyas-war-economy-eaton-final.pdf.

and involuntarily, highlighting the widespread violations of rights that they suffer.[3] The second focuses on detailed political-economy analysis of migrant smuggling and TIP,[4] and is closely connected to assessments of migrant smuggling and TIP through the lens of organized criminality.[5] Notably, emphasis on organized criminality has been a dominant feature of public discourse in European states.[6]

The analysis in this paper adopts a different focus, examining the role that conflict has played in the expansion of migrant smuggling and TIP from a broader, political-economy perspective, rather than through a detailed analysis of the modus operandi of migrant smuggling and TIP.[7]

Libya's conflict as a catalyst for migrant smuggling and TIP

Libyan territories have long been part of a transnational, trans-Sahelian trading route for goods. Historically, Libya was also a waypoint for the slave trade. From the 1970's onwards, Libya's oil-fuelled economic development led to significant waves of circular labour migration. Alongside Gaddafi's outwardly pro-Africanist policies, these developments resulted in significant populations of migrants working in Libya. As anti-Gaddafi sentiments simmered beneath the surface, frustrations over lenient migration policies and Gaddafi's preference for investing in development projects across Africa – often perceived to be at the expense of Libya's own development – fuelled growing anti-migrant sentiments among Libyans.

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3 There is a significant literature produced by the United Nations and rights groups such as Médecins Sans Frontières, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch on the violations of rights suffered by migrants. See, for example: United Nations (2023), 'Libya: Urgent Action Needed to Remedy Deteriorating Human Rights Situation, UN Fact-Finding Mission Warns in Final Report', 27 March 2023, https://www.ohchr.org/en/pressreleases/2023/03/libya-urgent-action-needed-remedy-deteriorating-human-rights-situation-un; Médecins Sans Frontières (2022), 'Italy-Libya Agreement: Five Years of EU-Sponsored Abuse in Libya and the Central Mediterranean', 2 February 2022, https://www.msf.org/italy-libya-agreement-five-years-eu-sponsored-abuse-libya-and-central-mediterranean; Amnesty International (2022), 'Libya: Hold Stability Support Authority Militia Leaders to Account', May 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/libya-hold-stability-support-authority-militia-leaders-to-account; Human Rights Watch (2024), 'Libya: Rights Violations Unchecked as Divisions Persist', 11 January 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/11/libya-rights-violations-unchecked-divisions-persist. There is also a growing academic literature on the topic. For example, see Kirby, P. (2020), 'Sexual violence in the border zone: the EU, the Women, Peace and Security agenda and carceral humanitarianism in Libya', *International Affairs*, 96(5), p. 1219, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa097.
4 The work of the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is especially notable. See Micallef, M. (2017), 'The Human Conveyor Belt: trends in human trafficking and smuggling in post-revolution Libya', Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 17 March 2017, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/report-the-human-conveyor-belt-trends-in-human-trafficking-and-smuggling-in-post-revolution-libya; Micallef, M., Horsley, R. and Bish, A. (2019), 'The Human Conveyor Belt Broken: Assessing the collapse of the human-smuggling industry in Libya and the central Sahel'*,* Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 3 April 2019, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/the-human-conveyor-belt-broken-2.
5 See, for example, Kuschminder, K. and Triandafyllidou, A. (2020), 'Smuggling, Trafficking, and Extortion: New Conceptual and Policy Challenges on the Libyan Route to Europe', *Antipode*, 52(1), pp. 206–26, https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12579.
**6** For just one example of this, see Reuters (2024), 'UK Labour leader promises to 'smash the gangs' to tackle small boats crossings', 10 May 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-opposition-leader-sets-out-plans-tackle-small-boats-crossings-2024-05-09.
7 The application of a conflict lens to the study of migrant smuggling and TIP in Libya has been rare. Rizk explores the phenomenon through the framing of 'state failure'. Rizk, J. (2021), 'Exploring the Nexus between armed groups and the trafficking and smuggling of human beings in the Central Sahel and Libya', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 47(7), pp.1–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.2002687.

The smuggling of people overland via the Sahara Desert pre-dates the 2011 revolution. However, the Gaddafi regime placed limits on the levels of smuggling allowed. In the years following the revolution, the fragmentation of the security sector led more communities to engage in smuggling, as the clandestine activity moved into the open and was more widespread. Existing populations of migrants struggled to find work in Libya and in some cases began to participate in the smuggling themselves, utilizing their contacts in their countries of origin.[8]

As a result, the numbers of people moving through the historical trading routes from East and West Africa rose significantly. As Figure 1 illustrates, arrivals to Italy from Libya increased from 28,431 in 2011 to 162,895 at their height in 2016.[9] In the period of rapid expansion (2011–17), movement to the Libyan border was relatively cheap and affordable, while prices paid to cross the Mediterranean had also fallen dramatically – anecdotal evidence suggests prices paid may have gone from $1,000 in 2013 to as little as $60–90 in June 2017 – as smugglers used ever cheaper inflatable boats and the sector continued to expand.[10] In a context where the formal sector – such as state-run agriculture and industry – was in decline and where employment opportunities were limited, migrant smuggling and trafficking offered a significant source of revenue. Previous Chatham House research estimated that migrant smuggling and trafficking generated $978 million in revenues in Libya at the height of the movement of people in 2016.[11]

Figure 1. Arrivals to Italy from Libya, 2011–23
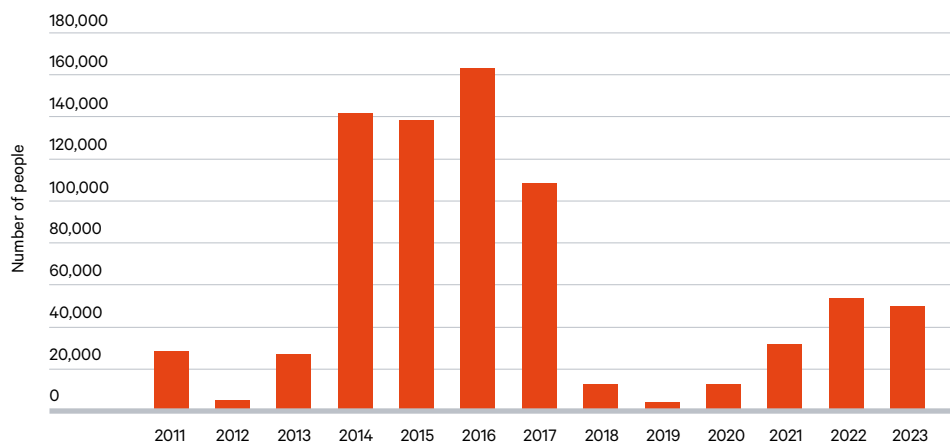
Source: Italian Ministry of Interior (2015), 'Rapporto sulla protezione internazionale in Italia 2015' [Report on international protection in Italy, 2015], https://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/t31ede-rapp_prot_int_2015_-_rapporto.pdf; United Nations (2013–2023), 'Operational Data Portal', https://data.unhcr.org.

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8 Tinti, P. (2024), *Tackling the Niger–Libya migration route: How armed conflict in Libya shapes the Agadez mobility economy*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136079.
9 Italian Ministry of Interior (2015), 'Rapporto sulla protezione internazionale in Italia 2015' [Report on international protection in Italy, 2015], https://www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/t31ede-rapp_prot_int_2015_-_rapporto.pdf; United Nations (2013–2023), 'Operational Data Portal', https://data.unhcr.org.
10 Micallef, M. and Reitano, T. (2017), 'The anti-human smuggling business and Libya's political end game', Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, December 2017, p. 11, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Libya_ISS_Smuggling.pdf.
11 Eaton (2018), *Libya's War Economy*.

Two sets of interlinking dynamics significantly shifted the status of migrant smuggling and trafficking on the Libyan coastline. First, on 2 February 2017, Italy signed a memorandum of understanding with the Government of National Accord in Tripoli, followed a day later by the Malta Declaration signed by EU leaders in Valletta. Over the course of 2017–18, the Libyan Coast Guard became responsible for the search and rescue missions near the Libyan coast. Allegations of the coast guard's involvement in smuggling and trafficking soon began to swirl in human rights circles, and the EU was put under pressure for its choice of partner. Over this same period, European state rescue missions withdrew from Libyan waters, while NGO rescue missions – having been accused of creating pull factors for irregular migration that further emboldened smugglers – were prevented from operating in Libyan waters.[12] The European naval mission, Operation Sophia, which had rescued approximately 48,000 migrants in the Mediterranean between 2015 and 2018[13] was subsequently replaced by a new mission, Operation Irini, in 2020. Irini suspended the use of naval forces and relied solely on unmanned aerial vehicles, which were not equipped for sea rescues.[14]

Existing populations of migrants struggled to find work in Libya and in some cases began to participate in the smuggling themselves, utilizing their contacts in their countries of origin.

Second, a market for 'anti-smuggling' emerged on Libya's northwest coastline over the summer of 2017.[15] Armed group leaders that had been actively facilitating migrant smuggling and TIP sought to evade an emerging threat of being placed under UN sanctions for their complicity. Subsequently, though this has not been substantiated, rumours emerged that some armed actors had received covert funding from Italy to halt migrant smuggling.[16] These events sparked conflict among armed groups in the Libyan coastal city of Sabratha that lasted 19 days and resulted in the ongoing dynamic whereby armed groups complicit in smuggling would seek to position themselves as the very actors responsible for preventing it.[17]

The result of these developments was clear, the number of arrivals to Italy from Libya fell from 162,895 in 2016, to 108,409 in 2017 as the changes took effect, falling to 12,977 in 2018.[18] In the years since, numbers of migrants arriving

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12 Micallef, Horsley and Bish (2019), 'The Human Conveyor Belt Broken', p. 19.
13 Villa, M. (2020), 'Migration and the Myth of the Pull-Factor in the Mediterranean', *ISPI*, 26 February 2020, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/migration-and-myth-pull-factor-mediterranean-25207.
14 Punzo, V. and Scaglione, A. (2024), 'Beyond borders: exploring the impact of Italian migration control policies on Mediterranean smuggling dynamics and migrant journeys', *Trends in Organized Crime,* https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-024-09533-5.
15 Micallef and Reitano (2017), 'The anti-human smuggling business and Libya's political end game', p. 13.
**16** Ibid.
17 Micallef, Horsley and Bish (2019), 'The Human Conveyor Belt Broken'.
18 Figures from United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) (2017), 'Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard', https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/53356; UNHCR (2019), 'Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard', https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/67555; UNHCR (2020), 'Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard', https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/73536.

in Italy have rebounded, reaching 49,740 in 2023, though they are still well below the 2016 high.[19]

Meanwhile, Figure 2 shows that the number of migrants in Libya rose following dynamic shifts in the Mediterranean rescue zone, with numbers of recorded migrants in Libya reaching 198,228 in September 2018.[20] They subsequently fell to 150,996 in November 2021 before steadily climbing to 214,675 in May 2024. These figures illustrate that there is a correlation between crossings of the Mediterranean and the prevalence of migrant smuggling and TIP in Libya, but that the wider sector has continued to operate without the same level of disruption as seen in the Mediterranean. Of course, the numbers also highlight that a significant proportion of migrants are part of circular labour migration patterns, meaning that they have travelled to Libya to work prior to returning to their place of origin.

Figure 2. Numbers of migrants recorded in Libya, 1 February 2017–1 March 2024
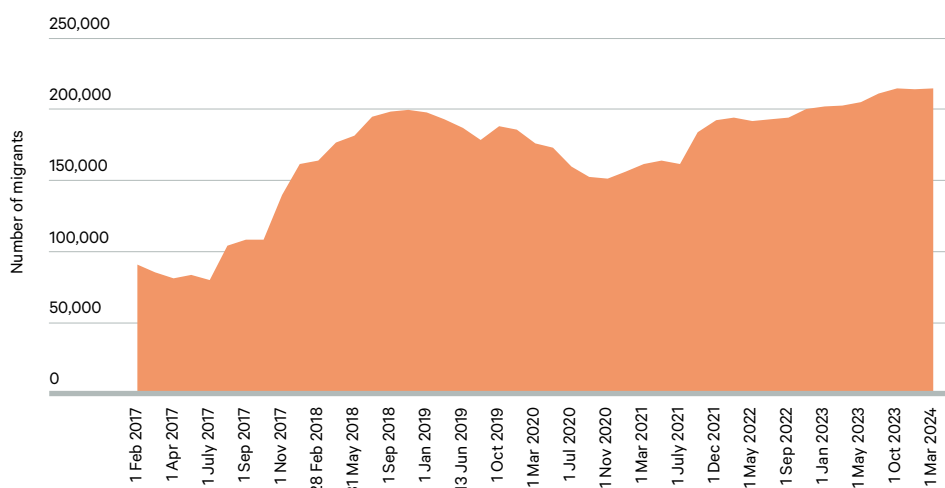
Source: International Organization for Migration (2024), 'The Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)', https://dtm.iom.int/libya.

The use of systems analysis to examine complex transnational smuggling ecosystems

While there is acceptance among policymakers that intra-state conflicts and civil wars have transnational impacts, analysing these impacts presents a steep challenge given the complexities of understanding how societies interact across large geographies. To examine these interactions, this paper posits the application of systems analysis to distinct geographies that are connected transnationally by patterns of trade and social interactions.

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19 UNHCR (2017), 'Italy Weekly Snapshot - 25 December 2023', https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/105667.
20 Figures from the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix are the most comprehensive dataset available, yet they should only be used as an approximation. See IOM DTM (2024), 'Libya', https://dtm.iom.int/fr/libya.

Figure 3. Libya
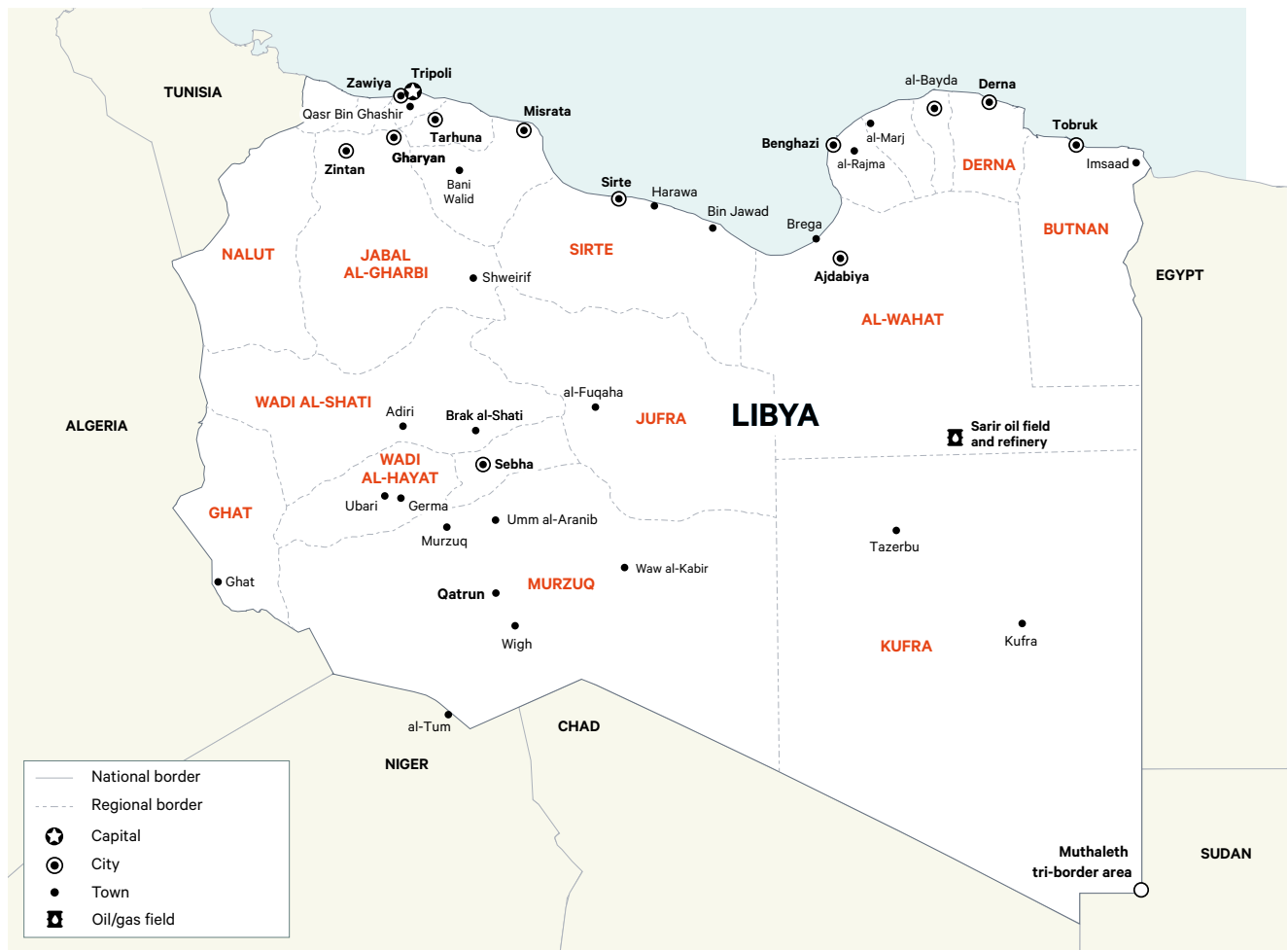
To do this, the paper presents systems analyses of the evolution of irregular migration[21] of migrants[22] and refugees,[23] via smuggling[24] and TIP,[25] in three locations in Libya: Kufra, Sebha and Zawiya. The findings of these analyses illustrate how the second-order effects of violent conflict in Libya have reshaped the process of migration in these transit hubs, stimulating a surge in smuggling activities that, in turn, has exacerbated conflict in Libya.

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21 Irregular migration is a complex phenomenon that relates to social, political, economic and security dynamics in the 'exporting' and 'transit' states.

22 The International Organization for Migration defines a migrant as: 'any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status, (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is.'

23 According to the UN Refugee Convention, a refugee is someone who has fled his/her country because of a well-founded fear of persecution and should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom. Refugees are defined and protected by international law.

24 'Migrant smuggling is normally understood as complicity in, or the facilitation of, immigration in violation of local immigration laws and regulations'. See Carling, J. (2006), *Migration, human smuggling and trafficking from Nigeria to Europe*, IOM Migration Research Series No. 23, Geneva: International Organization for Migration, p. 9, https://publications.iom.int/books/mrs-no-23-migration-human-smuggling-and-trafficking-nigeria-europe.

25 Article 3 of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, defines TIP as: 'The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.'

The paper illustrates that violent disputes over authority in Libya have had a pronounced impact on the smuggling sector, exacerbating other violence through a series of systemic transformations. Assessing the impact of violent conflict over a period of a decade is a complex task, requiring an inter-disciplinary and flexible approach. Giorgio Gallo criticizes simplified assessments of conflict and strategies that adopt linear forms of reasoning as unfit for purpose, arguing that conflict is best understood as a complex system that contains adaptive structures and evolutionary mechanisms.[26] Systems analysis seeks to plot these structures and their evolution, through the qualitative identification of causal relationships, feedback mechanisms and boundaries.[27] It should be noted that the systems created are social constructs that are defined by the researchers, and it is for the researchers to define the system and its boundaries.[28]

A range of academic studies have deployed systems approaches to model conflict dynamics.[29] However, the development and application of the approach with relation to conflict remains largely qualitative and based on participation and debate among practitioners and researchers. Practitioners adopt a community-led approach to understand community perspectives with the goal of supporting peacebuilding. It has been used by peacebuilders to understand how to reveal the structures of conflict, including the hidden aspects, in order to support systemic conflict transformation.[30] This is the approach adopted in this paper, albeit with the supplement of quantitative data in the form of satellite and economic analysis (as laid out in the methodology statement).

About this paper

Forming part of the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme funded by UK International Development, this paper is the third in a series of publications that looks at the transnational connections of conflict in Libya with the proliferation and evolution of migrant smuggling and TIP across the African continent. The first two papers of the series looked at the growth of these practices in Agadez, Niger[31] – a critical transit point in the movement of people to Libya – and in Edo State, Nigeria[32] – which is a key point of origin for

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26 Gallo, G. (2013), 'Conflict Theory, Complexity and Systems Approach', *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 30(2), pp. 156–75, https://doi.org/10.1002/sres.2132.
27 For example, a unidirectional causal relationship may be a simple case of *x* resulting in *y* (such as a government implementing a policy that leads to opposition from certain segments of a population). In other cases, the causal relationship may create a cyclical relationship. An example might be found in a conflict in which the local outbreak of rebellion elicits the mobilization of a force to put down the rebellion, creating a cyclical outcome where the two resulting forces continue to fight. Feedback effects, meanwhile, can be seen as equivalent to second-order effects. In the example above, one of those effects may be the significant increases in food prices as a result of disruption to supply chains caused by the conflict.
28 Gallo (2013), 'Conflict Theory, Complexity and Systems Approach'.
29 See, for example, Coyle, R. G. (1985), 'A system description of counter insurgency warfare', *Policy Sciences*, 18, pp. 55–78, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00149751; Gallo, G. and Marzano, A. (2009), 'The dynamics of asymmetric conflicts: the Israeli-Palestinian case', *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 29, pp. 33–49, https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/JCS/article/view/15231.
30 Berghof Foundation for Peace Support (2006), *Systemic Conflict Transformation: Guiding principles for practitioners and policy makers working on conflict*, Geneva: Berghof Foundation for Peace Support, https://berghof-foundation.org/files/publications/SCT_Systemic_Conflict_Transformation_Brief.pdf.
31 Tinti (2024), *Tackling the Niger–Libya migration route*.
32 de Haan, L., Aghedo, I. and Eaton, T. (2024), *Tracing the 'continuum of violence' between Nigeria and Libya: How the movement of people from Edo State fuels the Libyan conflict economy*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136109.

many who have travelled to Libya, and on to Europe since 2011. This paper will draw upon the findings of those papers to illuminate the complex transnational interconnections between these contexts. The overall findings will be presented in a forthcoming interactive visualization on the Chatham House website.

This paper is structured as follows: the subsequent sections present systems analyses of migrant smuggling and TIP ecosystems in Kufra, Sebha and Zawiya. These sites were selected as they are significant hubs of migrant smuggling and TIP activity in Libya. These analyses are then abstracted into a national-level systems analysis, and the final section discusses the implications of the study's findings for policymakers, identifying access points for policy interventions to support systemic change.

Methodology

This paper pairs a political economy of conflict approach with systems analysis concepts to produce an assessment of the development of migrant smuggling and TIP. Research for the paper has been the product of a multi-year effort, beginning in 2021.

Data on the development of illicit economies are notoriously hard to collect, particularly in difficult to access locations. Chatham House worked with a team of local researchers, who preferred to remain anonymous, to undertake more than 30 semi-structured key informant interviews in Kufra (in person), Sebha (in person/remotely) and Zawiya (remotely) to build an understanding of dynamics in the illicit sector and to seek public perceptions of migrant smuggling and TIP activities, conducted in 2021–24.

The relative absence of data at the subnational level in Libya, with respect to analysis of local economies, provided a further challenge. To address this gap, Chatham House worked with XCEPT to commission local economic assessments for Kufra, Sebha and Zawiya through field data collection organization Emani (now known as Nurai Global). The effort combined a structured survey collected in-person (1,276 responses across the three sites) alongside 60 semi-structured interviews with consumers and key informants (20 per site) to understand local perceptions of shifts in the local economy since 2010. The sampling approach was quasi-representative of the local populations. Respondents were 79 per cent male and 21 per cent female, with 23 per cent describing themselves as internally displaced. Emani's report was delivered in June 2022. In addition, Chatham House worked with XCEPT and Satellite Applications Catapult to commission satellite data analysis of change (2010–2022) in agricultural areas and security checkpoints and, through Emdyn, to monitor signals data on patterns of movement (2020–2022).[33] The reports were delivered in 2023.

The research team, headed by Tim Eaton, convened an in-person workshop in May 2024 to analyse the data collected, as well as discuss and formulate the systems analysis. The authors of the paper have developed the systems analysis, drawing on a systems mapping approach developed by Gallo, that emerged from that conversation.

**33** Signals data was not available prior to 2020.

02
Kufra: Benefiting as a transit point for cross-border trade

The Arab Zway dominate the town of Kufra despite an ongoing dispute over territory. Migrant smuggling and TIP have become a key part of the economy in the post-2011 period serving both as a source of conflict and economic prosperity.

Kufra serves as a pivotal hub in southeastern Libya for cross-border movements of goods and people. Systems analysis of governance dynamics in Kufra illustrates the centrality of conflict between the Arab Zway majority and the Tebu minority in the town of Kufra and the surrounding area.[34] These tensions have fuelled armed conflict on multiple occasions since 2011. On a national level, these conflicting parties form opportunistic and mutually beneficial alliances with factions vying for control of the Libyan state to further their local agendas. On a transnational level, actors over the border in Sudan and Chad have formed partnerships with groups in Kufra on the basis of political and identity criteria.

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34 Kufra is the name of a town and also the name of the province that surrounds it. References to 'Kufra' in this paper are to the urban centre. When the reference is to the wider area, it will be described as 'Kufra and the surrounding area'.

Figure 4. Systems analysis of the relationship between conflict and migrant smuggling and TIP in Kufra since 2011
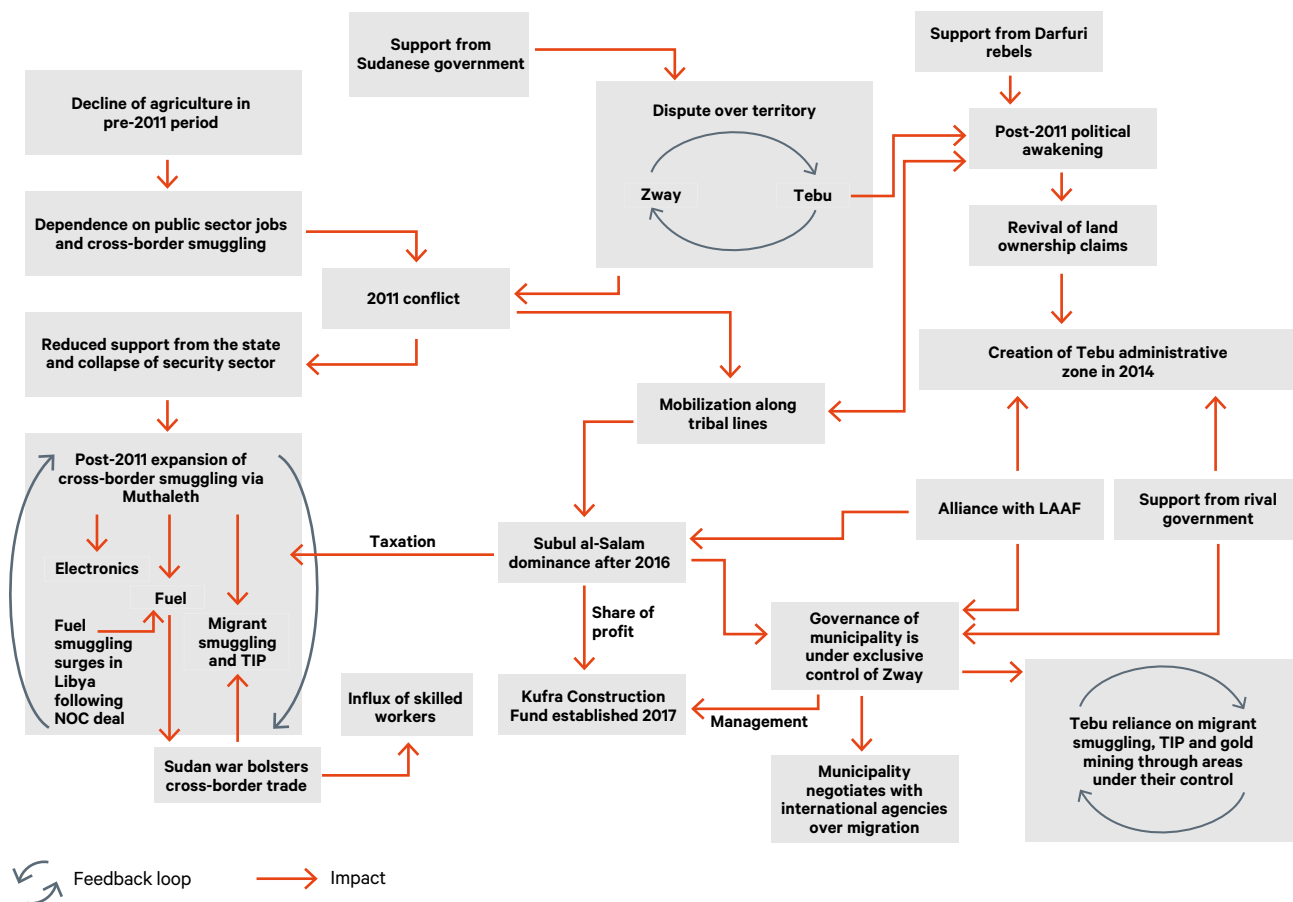
Source: Compiled by the authors.
Note: NOC = national oil company; LAAF = Libyan Arab Armed Forces.

Systems analysis of Kufra reveals the intricacies of a conflict economy shaped by geography, historical legacies, social dynamics, and a blend of licit and illicit activities. Kufra's transition from an agricultural hub to a militarized, economically driven cross-border town began long before the 2011 uprising, but subsequently accelerated due to external pressures, internal conflict and the collapse of state authority. It is in this context that migrant smuggling and TIP have flourished in Kufra. This section seeks to expand upon these findings through the systems analysis in Figure 4. As with all systems analyses in this paper, complex social dynamics have been simplified to the greatest extent possible for clarity.

A local dispute over territory with national and transnational aspects

A dispute over territory lies at the heart of social dynamics in Kufra. The town[35] comprises two principal social groups: Arabs and Tebus. While there are no publicly available statistics, the Arab community in Kufra is believed

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35 The Tebu population calls the location 'Tazer'.

to number around 55,000 people, of which only approximately 5,000 are from non-Zway Arab tribes.[36] The indigenous Tebu community is believed to number less than 10,000.

Physical segregation is an ongoing problem. Kufra's communal make-up has long been a source of tension. Enduring rifts remain, either at a group level, for example Tebu vs Zway, or at a subgroup level, for example Awlad Amira vs Menaya. Within Kufra, residential areas are physically divided between Tebu and Zway, and Zway residential areas are also divided by familial branches, a tradition that goes back to the pre-1969 administration of Kufra. Under the Gaddafi regime (1969–2011), several mixed residential areas were built for military families.[37] However, after the 2011 conflict, the two communities were again fully separated into respective residential blocks.

Authority over Kufra is disputed. Tebu groups argue that they should be recognized as indigenous to Kufra and its surrounding areas and, consequently, should have at least equal opportunities to those of the Zway and other Arabs.[38]

> **Authority over Kufra is disputed. Tebu groups argue that they should be recognized as indigenous to Kufra and its surrounding areas and, consequently, should have at least equal opportunities to those of the Zway and other Arabs.**

On the other hand, the Zway's perception of the Tebu as 'less Libyan' has not only fuelled ethnic tensions but has also influenced the struggle for control over smuggling routes and access to resources. It contributes to the justification of exclusionary practices in local governance and the distribution of resources, reinforcing the Tebu's sense of marginalization and their historical grievances against the state and other Libyan communities.

The Tebu post-2011 political awakening

One of the most prominent grievances post-2011 is the Tebu's quest for an effective role and involvement in local government, and the Zway's efforts to maintain exclusivity of the system. As shown in the systems analysis in Figure 4, the Tebu's involvement in the 2011 conflict triggered a political awakening and a revival of their claims of land ownership. This set the Tebu on a collision course

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36 Non-Zway Arab tribes include the Awajila, Majabera and the Senussi dynasty-related families, known as *Ikhwan*. *Ikhwan* is translated in English as 'brothers'. While the word has a religious connotation in this case, there is no connection to the Muslim Brotherhood.
37 One such area, Sweedia, had 600 houses and 35 Qaryat (villages), each village with 16 houses and a farm.
38 The Zway claim that Tebu groups – a significant number of which returned to Libya from Tebisti after Libya became an independent state in 1951 – are somehow 'less Libyan' because they were not in the territory prior to independence. This claim is made despite some Tebu having resided in the area prior, and the fact that the communities that came back were returning to an area that they had previously inhabited. This claim leads to conclusions that even Tebu who hold Libyan citizenship should be afforded few rights. See Forbes, R. (1921), *The Secret of the Sahara, Kufra*, Pennsylvania: George H. Doran Company.

with the Zway. Local governance structures in Kufra also exacerbated tensions owing to poor representation, development and service delivery for the Tebu. Zway control of these structures was, and is, perceived as a social prerogative.[39]

In the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, a spate of identity-based criminality and violence occurred. This included killings and kidnappings, looting of shops, and the hijacking of property and possessions, which ultimately expanded into a short-lived conflict.[40]

2015 conflict and the re-emergence of Zway dominance

In 2015, the Tebu community sought to address its marginalization by local government. The Tebu used the widening national-level political divisions to convince the eastern Libya-based rival national government, known as the Interim Government, to approve the establishment of a parallel Tebu local governance authority in Kufra and nearby Rabyanah Oasis.[41] This decision directly fuelled the discontent of the Zway community, which contributed to the outbreak of renewed violence in the same year. Over 100 people are believed to have been killed in the fighting and hundreds of others were displaced.[42] The Zway ultimately expelled Tebu armed forces from Kufra and prevented the establishment of the Tebu authority, retaining Zway dominance over local government.

Local security services also remain closely connected to the Zway leadership. These include the town's security directorate (which is akin to a police unit) and Subul al-Salam, an armed faction affiliated with the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) of Khalifa Haftar, an armed commander who has risen to dominate eastern Libya and large parts of southern Libya in the post-2011 period. The Tebu community was left without any armed factions in Kufra to represent it.

Kufra's economy and the growth of migrant smuggling

It was not a collapse of Kufra's formal economic sector in the post-2011 period that drove the rapid expansion of migrant smuggling and trafficking. Prior to this period, the local economy, which has historically been dependent on trans-Saharan trade, had already deteriorated and transformed due to political and security factors. A critical element of the local economy was Kufra's

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39 Even prior to 2011, the Popular Commission (Lajna al-Sha'biya), equivalent to the municipal authority pre-2011, was almost exclusively reserved for members of the Arab Zway community.

40 The cycle began as a result of competition over a checkpoint south of Kufra between Issa Abdul-Majeed, a Tebu commander of a local unit of the 17th February Brigade, and the Zway Kufra Rebels Battalion of the Ishweeshein brothers. The latter managed to expel Abdul-Majeed, who withdrew. Killings and shootouts gradually increased, until a full-blown armed conflict broke out within a month. See Cousins, M. (2014), 'Tit-for-tat Tebu-Zwai kidnappings continue', *Libya Herald*, 6 January 2014, https://www.libyaherald.com/2014/01/tit-for-tat-tebu-zwai-kidnappings-continue.

41 Channel, T. via YouTube (2016), 'لقاء رئيس الحكومة المؤقتة عبد الله الثني بوفد التبو' [Meeting of the Prime Minister of the Interim Government Abdullah Al-Theni with the Tebu delegation], video, 26 February 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGN-BJscHoc.

42 In the Libyan media, the conflict is often presented through the lens of national-level battles (Libya Dawn versus Libya Dignity) or in racist terms, as Kufra's Zway against foreign Chadian/Darfuri. See Ash, N. (2015), 'Many more deaths in Kufra fighting today', *Libya Herald*, 21 September 2015, https://www.libyaherald.com/2015/09/many-more-deaths-in-kufra-fighting-today.

agricultural sector, which had been a key focus of state development efforts from the 1960s to the 1980s. However, the impact of war with Chad (1978–87) and international sanctions following the Lockerbie bombing in 1988 saw the character of the local economy change and agricultural production fall. Kufra emerged as a militarized area, where the state created military installations for war with Chad[43] and where Gaddafi-funded revolutionary armed elements, such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization, created bases for their operations.[44]

The decline of state-run enterprises in agriculture

As shown in Figure 5, the production of crops by the state-run Kufra Agricultural Project was clearly in decline ahead of the revolution. Wheat production peaked in 1985 at 27,099 tonnes, falling to 1,100 tonnes in 2011, while barley production fell from a peak of 9,000 tonnes in 2000 to 400 tonnes in 2011.[45] A 2007 UN study found that agriculture was the third largest sector in terms of employment in Kufra, after public administration and education, yet it was 'not a profitable sector' in terms of wealth creation, job supply or trade.[46]

Figure 5. Production (tonnes) of crops by the Kufra Agricultural Project (1975–2016)
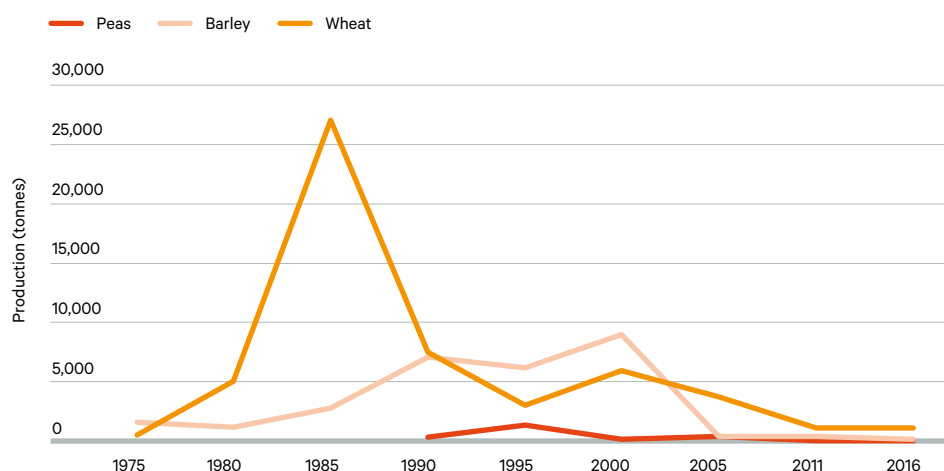
Source: Mansour (2016), 'صعوبات الإنتاج الزراعّ والحّوانّ فّ مشروع الكفرة الإنتاجّ' [The difficulties of agricultural and animal production in the Kufra production project].

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43 For discussion of the use of Kufra as a militarized area, see Waller, R. P. (1994), 'Libyan National Security Policy, 1969-1994: A Study in Irrationality and Third World Security', PhD thesis, Brigham Young University, p. 242, https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/studentTheses/libyan-national-security-policy-1969-1994-a-study-in-irrationalit.
**44** For discussion of Palestinian Liberation Organization activities, see Ibrahim, Y. M. (1992), 'Plane With Arafat Aboard Reported Missing in Libya', *New York Times*, 8 April 1992, https://www.nytimes.com/1992/04/08/world/plane-with-arafat-aboard-reported-missing-in-libya.html.
45 Mansour, J. S. (2016), 'صعوبات الإنتاج الزراعّ والحّوانّ فّ مشروع الكفرة الإنتاجّ' [The difficulties of agricultural and animal production in the Kufra production project], University of Benghazi, 25 February 2016, p. 10, https://repository.uob.edu.ly/bitstream/handle/123456789/813/Difficulties%20in%20Agricultural%20and%20Animal%20Production%20of%20Kufra%20Production%20Project.pdf?sequence=1.
46 UN Habitat (2018), 'City Profile of al-Kufra, Libya', October 2018, https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-04/rapid_city_profile_al_kufra.pdf.

In the post-2011 period, despite the upheaval, production in the agricultural sector (in terms of hectares of land cultivated) actually increased, although it has remained stagnant in the post-2015 period (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Agricultural production in the Kufra region 2010–22
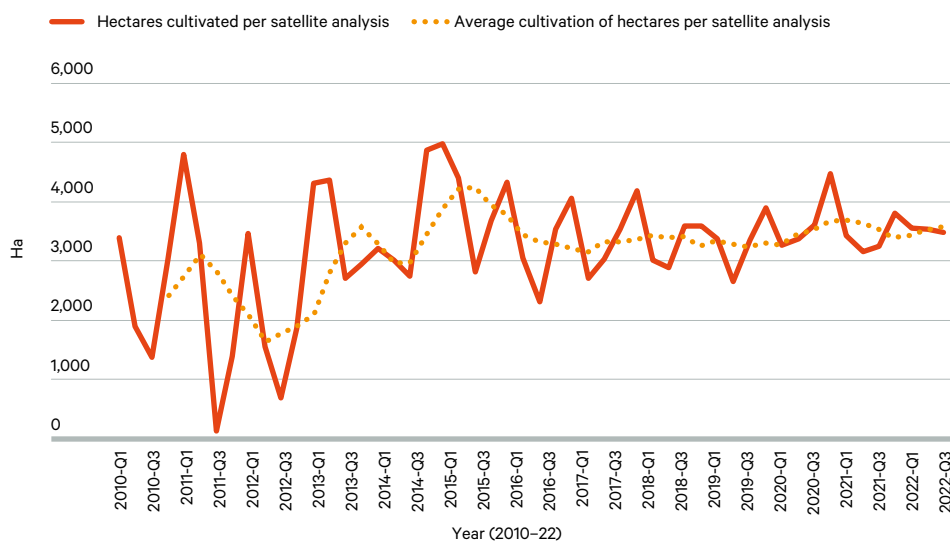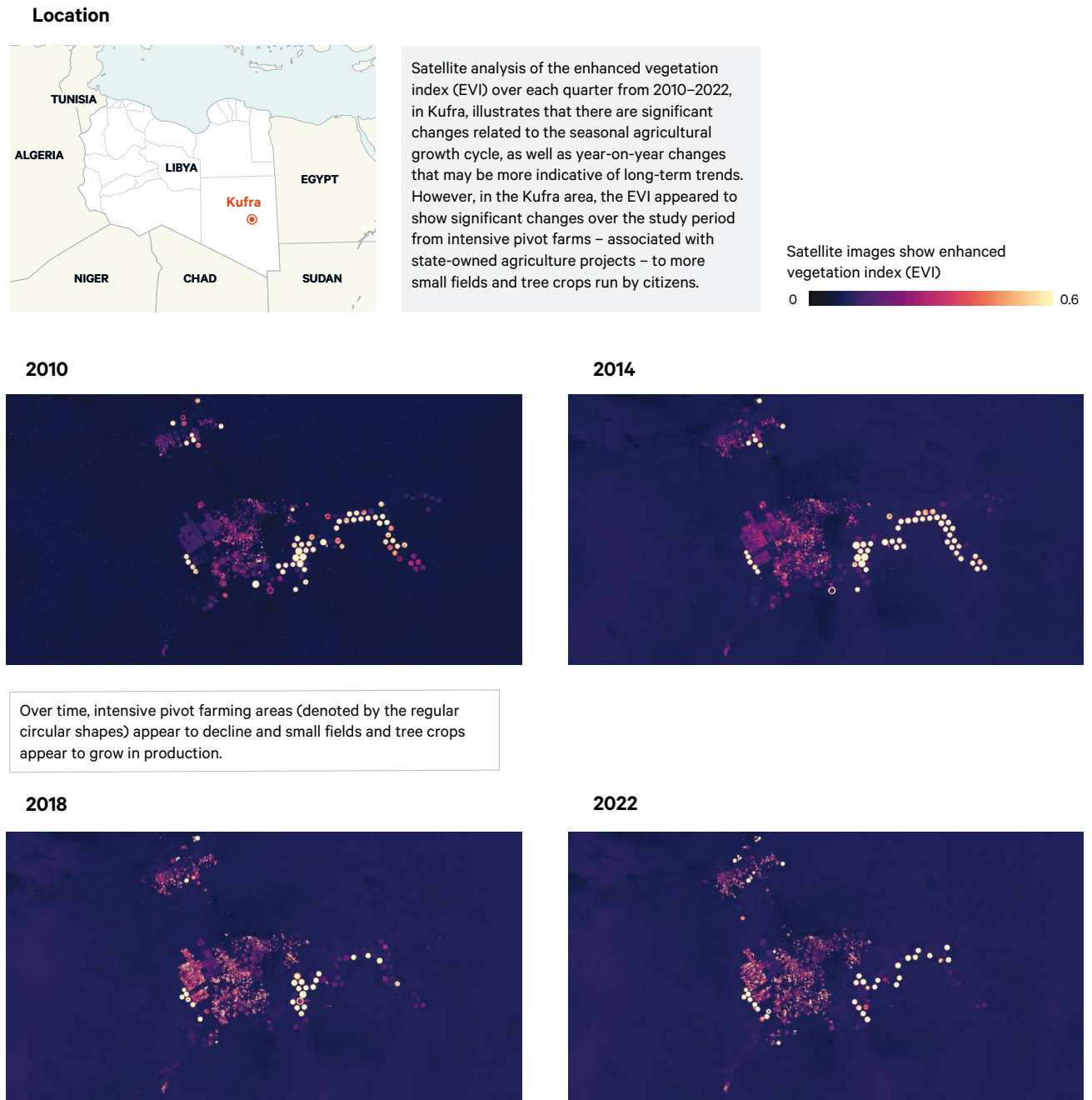

Source: Environment Systems Ltd (2023, unpublished), 'Agricultural Change in Libya and Niger 2010 – 2022', commissioned by XCEPT and Satellite Applications Catapult for Chatham House.

Figure 7 shows how production has fluctuated over time. Only 6 per cent of respondents to an XCEPT-commissioned consumer survey in Kufra listed agriculture as the main source of income for their household.[47]

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47 Emani (2022, unpublished), 'Economic Assessment for Zawiya, Sebha and Kufra'.

Figure 7. Activity within agricultural projects in Kufra 2010–22

Location

Satellite analysis of the enhanced vegetation index (EVI) over each quarter from 2010–2022, in Kufra, illustrates that there are significant changes related to the seasonal agricultural growth cycle, as well as year-on-year changes that may be more indicative of long-term trends. However, in the Kufra area, the EVI appeared to show significant changes over the study period from intensive pivot farms – associated with state-owned agriculture projects – to more small fields and tree crops run by citizens.

Satellite images show enhanced vegetation index (EVI)

0   0.6

2010

2014

Over time, intensive pivot farming areas (denoted by the regular circular shapes) appear to decline and small fields and tree crops appear to grow in production.

2018

2022

Source: Contains modified Landsat (courtesy of the US Geological Survey), and Copernicus Sentinel data.

Limited support from the state, increased prices and the black market

As in other locations across Libya, the state is the main employer. However, local residents interviewed for the Emani report said that local businesses had become far more reliable employers, 'paying wages in cash and on time' rather than the unreliable, sometimes ad hoc salary payments to government workers.[48] 'The state is completely absent', said one male interviewee, 'and local organizations affiliated with civil society organizations collect donations from merchants and redistribute them to those who deserve them, as they play a very large role considering their limited resources'.[49]

Residents of Kufra noted that currency devaluation and poor management of subsidized goods, such as fuel and cooking gas, led to a significant rise in prices. This conclusion appears to be borne out by available data from the REACH Initiative's joint market monitoring project (see Figure 8), which illustrates that the cost of the minimum expenditure basket (MEB) of key elements in Kufra, comprising a range of food and hygiene items, has fluctuated considerably. The cost of the MEB went from Libyan dinar (LYD) 1,023 in January 2019 to LYD 668 in May 2020, only to climb back to LYD 1,077 in March 2023.[50]

Figure 8. Cost of minimum expenditure basket key elements (LYD) in Kufra, January 2019–March 2023
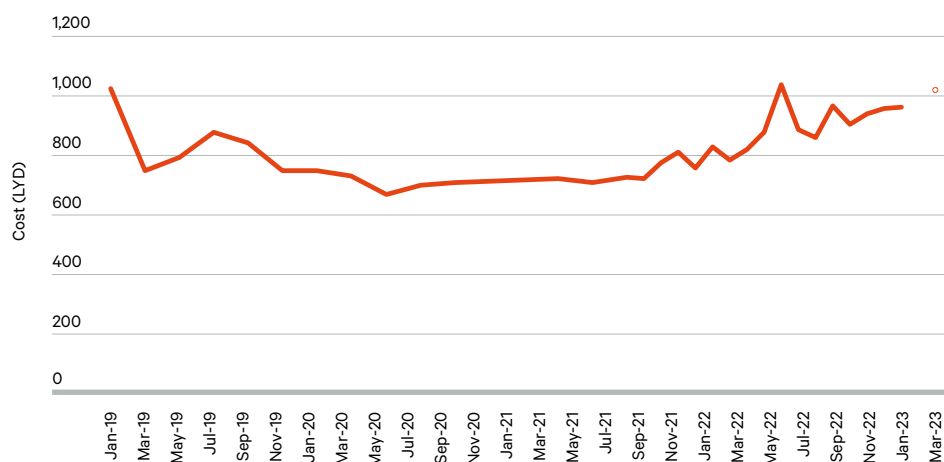
Source: REACH Initiative (2024) figures compiled from the Libya Joint Market Monitoring Initiative, available at: https://www.impact-initiatives.org/resource-centre.

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48 Emani (2022, unpublished), 'Economic Assessment for Zawiya, Sebha and Kufra'.
49 Ibid.
50 A US dollar equivalent is not added here as the Libyan dinar was devalued in December 2020, from LYD 1.4: $1 to LYD 4.48: $1. The new rate was implemented from January 2021.

Kufra residents noted that the black market had expanded rapidly in this context, with at least 86 per cent of respondents to the XCEPT-commissioned survey noting that they had used the black market at least once in the previous two years, most commonly to buy gas and fuel.[51] By contrast, only 46 per cent reported using the black market prior to 2011.[52]

Post-2011 expansion of cross-border trade and the competition for its control

Cross-border trade was the pre-dominant source of income for the Kufra economy even prior to 2011.

Kufra residents enjoyed relative economic well-being under Gaddafi, for example with the smuggling of electronics and importing of cattle. These semi-legal activities were encouraged by the customs authority, whose employees from big cities, such as Tripoli and Misrata, competed to work at the desert Oweynat border crossing in order to benefit personally.[53]

Kufra's Zway and Tebu fiercely competed for control over border crossings and desert routes to secure control of profitable semi-licit and illicit activities, including human trafficking and trade of bango weed, a cannabis derivative.[54] The competition over these local economic opportunities complemented other existential elements of local conflict. In 2012, in an effort to attain exclusive control of the local cross-border economy, with the support of formal authorities, the Zway constructed large sand berms (trenches) around Kufra to curb Tebu-run cross-border trade.[55] The sand berms made it impossible to enter and exit Kufra without coming across a number of fixed checkpoints, controlled by Zway armed groups. This siege fuelled intermittent conflict in 2012–2015.

Subul al-Salam and Zway management of key trade routes from 2015 onwards

Zway dominance with the armed support of Subul al-Salam led to the creation and fortification of checkpoints between the town of Kufra and the so-called market of 'Muthaleth' (Triangle), which stands at the intersection of Libya, Sudan and Egypt in the Oweynat mountain range. Figure 9 below shows one such probable checkpoint, which had a new berm constructed around it in July and August of 2022, to prevent traffic from circumnavigating the outpost. XCEPT-commissioned analysis of mobile phone data signals between March 2022 and March 2023 showed that a fixed route had emerged along this key trade artery.[56]

51 Emani (2022, unpublished), 'Economic Assessment for Zawiya, Sebha and Kufra'.
52 Ibid.
53 Chatham House interviews with residents of Kufra, January 2023.
54 Bango weed is a product of the cannabis plant. It contains the same active substance as cannabis – tetrahydrocannabinol – but in a lower concentration.
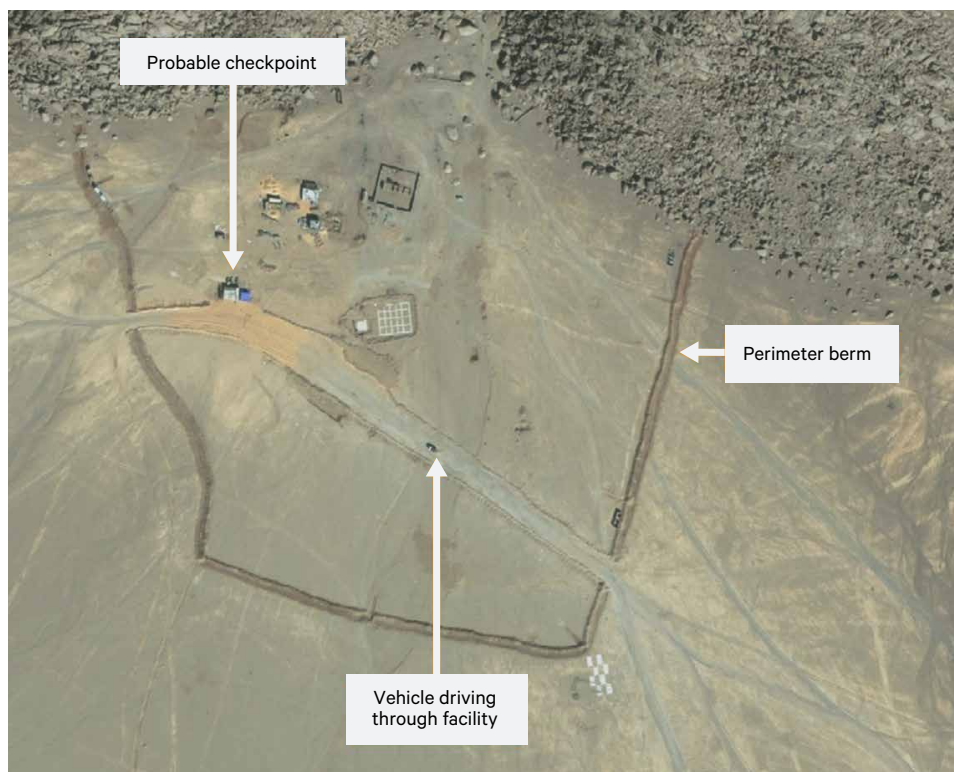**55** Murray, R. (2015), 'Libya's Tebu: Living in the Margins', in Cole, P. and McQuinn, B. (eds) (2015), *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, London: Hurst.
56 'In-depth report: Libya border mobility' (2023, unpublished, private report commissioned by Chatham House).

Figure 9. Probable checkpoint on the Libyan side of the border in the Oweynat mountain range

Location

15 January 2023

Source: Satellite image © Maxar Technologies 2023.

Impact of these dynamics on migrant smuggling, TIP and the cross-border trade of goods

Prior to 2011, migrant smuggling and TIP were associated with notorious Tebu and Zway individuals. However, in the post-2011 period, the practice became more socially acceptable, and the numbers and types of people engaging in migrant

smuggling and TIP expanded. These ranged from a younger generation who sought quick ways of making cash, to armed groups seeking to finance their activities and even border guard authorities.[57]

In 2012–15, the persistent armed conflicts and instabilities in Kufra and its hinterlands limited the numbers of people who traversed the area. Moreover, the fighting in eastern Libya spearheaded by Haftar's forces led smugglers to avoid the traditional route from Kufra to Ajdabiya, which is paved, and pursue more difficult trans-Saharan routes, via Tebu-controlled territory. While the Zway and Tebu factions were at loggerheads, the groups found a way to cooperate over the management of mutually profitable migrant smuggling and TIP routes from 2013 onwards. Interestingly, this cooperation continues at the time of writing.

A *modus vivendi* emerged between Zway and Tebu in the management of migrant smuggling and TIP, leading to a situation where interests in the illicit sector facilitated a degree of co-existence.

Consequently, a *modus vivendi* emerged between Zway and Tebu in the management of migrant smuggling and TIP, leading to a situation where interests in the illicit sector facilitated a degree of co-existence. More widely, the change in power distribution after late 2015,[58] and emergence of the Zway dominance of the trade route to Sudan, led to migrant smuggling and TIP becoming more organized, which resulted in new routes. Critically, the route from the 'Muthaleth' (Triangle) market became a secure trade artery that allowed the passage of heavy goods vehicles and 4x4 vehicles for cross-border trade. By this point, goods entering Libya from ports on the Mediterranean coast were transported by road to Kufra and on to markets in Sudan, Chad and beyond. Subul al-Salam, the group that has controlled security for the route since at least 2016, took a permissive approach to migrant smuggling and trafficking in these years. Where smugglers were detained, Subul al-Salam simply imposed a fixed tax on the smuggler to secure their release between 2016 and sometime in 2018.[59]

57 Micallef (2017), 'The human trafficking conveyor belt'; Tubiana, J., Warin, C. and Saeneen, G. M. (2018), 'Multilateral Damage: The impact of EU migration policies on Saharan routes', Clingendael, September 2018, section 3(E), https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2018/multilateral-damage/3-effects-of-eu-policies-in-sudan/#e-ties-between-sudanese-government-militias-and-libyan-traffickers.
58 Global Initiative Against Transnational Crimes (2019), *Predatory economies in eastern Libya; the dominant role of the Libyan National Army,* Geneva: Noria Research, p. 17, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/global-initiative-human-conveyor-belt-human-smuggling-in-libya-march-2017.pdf.
59 United Nations Security Council (2018), *Letter dated 5 September 2018 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council,* p. 7, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1443181/1226_1536757472_n1824384.pdf.

Zway taxation of cross-border trade via the Kufra Construction Fund

In January 2017, the formation of the local government-run Kufra Construction Fund (KCF) provided a framework for Subul al-Salam's expansive engagement in the economy. This is effectively a deal to split the revenues from the taxation of cross-border goods between Subul al-Salam and the local municipal council. The KCF is not an official state body under Libyan law – municipal councils do not have powers to impose movement taxes and, in any case, the flows are largely of illicit goods.[60] Rather, this is a local solution to entrench Zway dominance and to practically mitigate the lack of resources provided to the municipality by central government. According to XCEPT research, Subul al-Salam oversees taxes and maintains the security umbrella in return for half of the KCF revenues. There is no written agreement in this regard, it is rather based on a social pact. This perhaps also partly comes out of the Zway belief that Subul al-Salam is working for the community's protection and, therefore, needs to be adequately financed. Kufra's Zway local economy, through the KCF, generates revenues from car re-exports and other trade activities that pass from Libya through Sudan,[61] to the country's border and beyond to Central Africa, south Chad and Cameroon.[62]

Tebu-run economic activities: the convergence of migrant smuggling and artisanal gold mining

Tebu groups continue to control a significant swathe of territory to the west of Kufra town. Anonymized phone data highlights the existence of a trade route running via the Rabyanah Oasis down to the Tibesti mountains on the Chadian border.[63] In recent years, the movement of people appears to have converged with the development and expansion of artisanal gold mining operations in the Tibesti mountain area (see Figure 10 below) in connection with gold mining activity on the Chadian side of the border. Satellite analysis indicates that the mines were established in 2014, with 14 sites identified in areas under Tebu control. As Figure 11 below illustrates, mining activity had expanded significantly by 2021.

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60 The KCF uses Law no. 59 (2012) to justify itself. Article 104 of the Law states that, 'The collection and exemption of taxes and fees stipulated for local governments shall be governed by the provisions regulating the legislation on taxes and public fees.'
61 Hamed, A. S. via Facebook (2022), 'المثلث هو نقطة التقاء الحدود بين مصر وليبيا والسودان وإن كان يقع في الجانب السوداني ... كتيبة سبل السلام وهي القوة العسكرية الفاعلة في المنطقة اعلنت اغلاق الحدود لكن المشكلة المثلث في السنوات الاخيرة اصبح الوصول الى المثلث هدفا للكثير من الشباب من الكفرة وغيرها من مدن ليبيا. هي تكمن في ان الكثير من المواطنين ارزاقهم موجودة هناك سواء بضائع او سيارات وهي عرضة للنهب في ظل هذه الظروف.' [In recent years, reaching the triangle has become a goal for many young people from Kufra and other cities of Libya. The triangle is the meeting point of the borders between Egypt, Libya and Sudan, although it is located on the Sudanese side... The Pathways to Peace Battalion, the active military force in the region, announced the closure of the border but the problem is that many citizens have set up lives there, whether goods or cars, and are vulnerable to looting under these conditions], 12 January 2022, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=4705925026129079&id=100001348831990.
62 Bukhlail, F. via Facebook (2021), 'Prayers for a Kufra free zone', 19 September 2021, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2002835996538452&set=pb.100004362134541.-2207520000; the KCF is now working to enlarge its cross-border economic activities by connecting to the Benghazi Elmresia Free Zone, as a part of national transit trade to Africa. See Zaptia, S. (2021), 'Activation of Elmreisa and Kufra Free Zones discussed', *Libya Herald*, 29 September 2021, https://libyaherald.com/2021/09/activation-of-elmreisa-and-kufra-free-zones-discussed.
**63** 'In-depth report: Libya border mobility' (2023, unpublished, private report commissioned by Chatham House).

Figure 10. Gold mining areas on the Libya–Chad border, 2014–2021
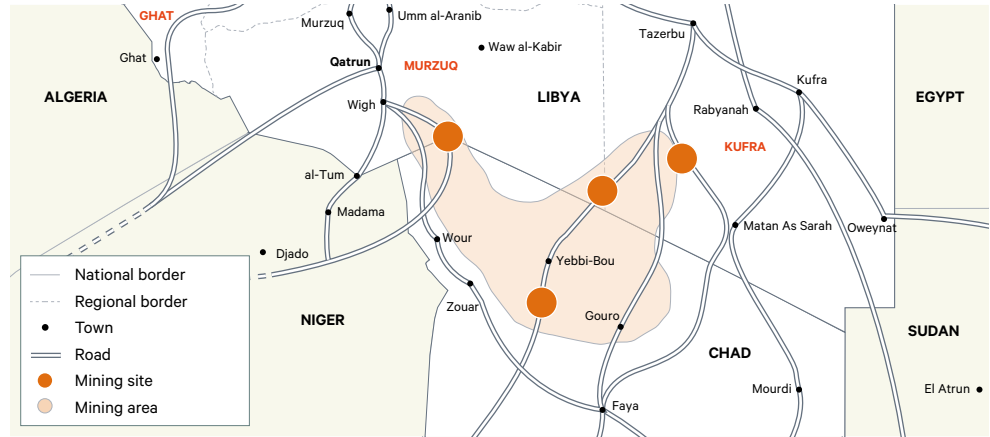
Source: Jesperson, S., Henriksen, R., Pravettoni, R. and Nellemann, C. (2021), *Illicit Flows Fuelling Conflict in the Tri-Border: Migration and Artisanal gold mining in Sudan, Chad and Libya*, Research Report: RHIPTO, XCEPT, p. 44, https://65532698-add8-432a-84d9-9de3e021baf2.usrfiles.com/ugd/655326_d804ca366a9e4aa9a2c17f4d2f531244.pdf.

Figure 11. Average activity detected and aggregated across 12 artisanal gold mining sites in southern Libya
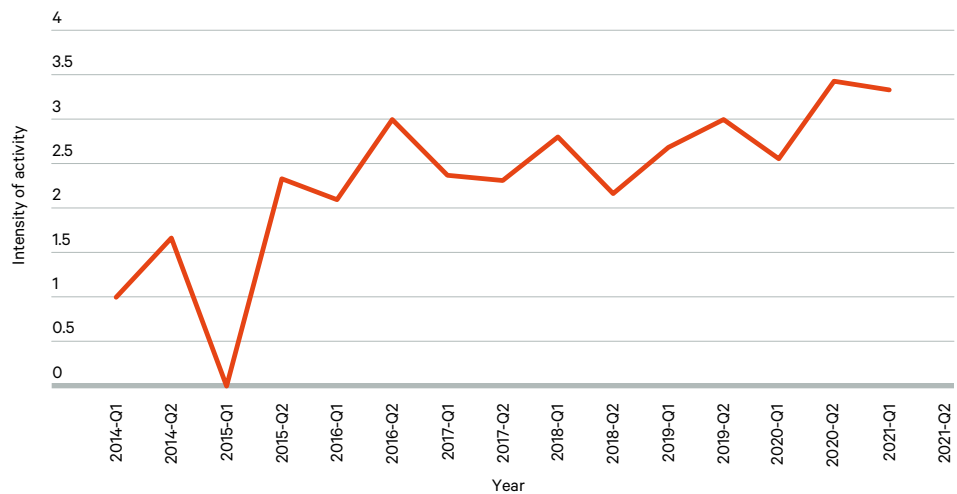
Source: Satellite Applications Catapult.
Note: The numerical figure describes the level of activity at each mining site in accordance with the amount of vehicles, equipment and people visible. 0 equates to no activity and 5 equates to intense activity.

Local responses to international demand to curb migration

Pressure to curb migration flows has filtered down to Kufra, albeit with limited effectiveness. The local unit of the national Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM) and the Subul al-Salam armed group are tasked with disrupting

migrant smuggling and trafficking. These actors navigate a delicate balance of competition and cooperation, driven by economic incentives. Notably, a high degree of coordination exists between the Kufra DCIM and Subul al-Salam.[64]

The DCIM, while officially responsible for managing migration issues and combating trafficking and smuggling, finds itself operating within a milieu where these activities are deeply entrenched economic practices. In this context, the DCIM's actions – or at times, its inactions – can indirectly influence the economic patterns of smuggling and trafficking. Some reports claim DCIM officers are complicit with smuggling groups and that the application of justice is selective. For example, one public display of enforcement took place in Tazerbu in August 2022, where the Kufra DCIM stormed a farm freeing 231 migrants that appeared to be held in captivity.[65] While the operation was lawful and within Kufra DCIM's mandate, local sources saw this action as a selective means of enforcement. In their view, selective enforcement is a way of increasing patronage from a smuggling network rather than a genuine attempt to shut it down.[66]

Both Subul al-Salam and the DCIM fit into Kufra's economic pattern of illicit activities as regulators and beneficiaries of the status quo. Their interactions with smuggling networks – ranging from taxation to negotiated management of migrant flows – underscore a pragmatic acknowledgment of smuggling and trafficking as integral components of the local economy. This relationship, while complex, highlights the challenges of eradicating smuggling and trafficking in a context where economic incentives, security considerations and humanitarian concerns are deeply intertwined.

The Sudan conflict and Kufra's economic boom

Kufra's cross-border trade is shaped by market dynamics beyond the region. A series of shifts in northeastern Libya since 2022 have led to a dramatic expansion of fuel smuggling as the amount of fuel diverted to the Libyan domestic market has significantly increased. When combined with growing demand from Sudan following the outbreak of conflict in 2023, the increase of supply led to the emergence of a vibrant fuel smuggling route into Sudan via Kufra.[67] As a result, fuel smuggling in Kufra is displacing migrant smuggling, as more and more young people from the town – including former migrant smugglers – have sought to move into fuel smuggling instead.[68]

Coming in the other direction, official numbers of Sudanese citizens present in Kufra are believed to be a significant underestimate. The Global Initiative cited local sources saying that 'several thousand' Sudanese were crossing the border each week after January 2024, albeit with most travelling onward to Benghazi

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64 The Kufra DCIM commander is the nephew of the Subul al-Salam commander.
65 DCIM Media Office via Facebook (2022), 'Follow-Up: The Department for Countering Illegal Migration, Kufra', (متابعات جهاز مكافحة الهجرة غير الشرعية فرع الكفرة), 30 August 2022, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=3842880 70552385&id=100069135853007&rdid=o5nNDePzNmZxVvJc.
66 Research interviews with Kufra residents, June–July 2024.
67 Herbert, M., Horsely, R. and Badi, E. (2023), *Illicit economies and peace and security in Libya,* Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, p. 12, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Matt-Herbert-et-al-Illicit-economies-and-peace-and-security-in-Libya-GI-TOC-July-2023-1.pdf.
68 Now segments of Tebu youths in Kufra are also partaking in fuel smuggling, directly passing through the Subul al-Salam channels, and following the KCF smuggling codes.

or Tripoli.[69] Yet, the arrival of the Sudanese fleeing conflict encountered little local resistance,[70] probably owing to the fact that a community of Sudanese already exists there and a sense of cultural proximity.[71] In fact, the presence of the migrant community is seen to have contributed to a local economic boom. The already vibrant cross-border trades in electronics, fuel and other smuggling have led to an expansion of the local economy, with new restaurants and cafes opening, house rental markets growing, along with small enterprises such as car repair centres and taxi services.[72] The increased presence of the Sudanese has also provided professional workers and academics, contracted both in education and health sectors. The Sudanese arrivals since 2023 are, however, first and foremost refugees fleeing armed conflict, and while many of them have found work and contribute to the local economy, they also constitute a very vulnerable population. Large numbers live in makeshift camps in very dire conditions, relying on scarce humanitarian aid.

Consequently, while Kufra's relationship with the Libyan state remains distant and the underlying dispute between Zway and Tebu unresolved, the town has established a degree of stability and prosperity.

The consolidation of spheres of security control has allowed for the smooth management of expansive cross-border trade, which has brought prosperity and limited the negative impacts of the unresolved conflict between Tebu and Zway. Perhaps counter-intuitively, conflict in Sudan and the growth of predatory activities within the Libyan oil sector have benefited Kufra's cross-border trades, with mutually beneficial understandings struck between the LAAF command and Kufra's local forces. This economic boom is seen locally to have contributed to peace and stability.[73] Consequently, there is little imperative for Kufra to counter smuggling and trafficking activities in the region. To younger generations, such trade is justified by necessity, given a deep sense of marginalization and disadvantage felt by those in Kufra. Libyans living on the coast are perceived to receive much more from the central state.[74]

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69 Herbert, M. and Badi, E. (2024), 'Sudan conflict drives mass refugee movement and fuels human smuggling', Global Initiative, October 2024, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Matt-Herbert-Emadeddin-Badi-Sudan-Conflict-drives-mass-refugee-movement-and-fuels-human-smuggling-GI-TOC-October-2024.v2.pdf.
70 Libya Review (2024), 'WFP Seeks $14.1 Million to Address Food Insecurity & Poverty in Libya', 11 May 2024, https://libyareview.com/44102/wfp-seeks-14-1-million-to-address-food-insecurity-poverty-in-libya.
71 The initial shock of the increase in the number of displaced Sudanese coming to Kufra, prompted Kufra citizens to organize local initiatives to collect donations, provide food, blankets and assistance. The acceptance of displaced Sudanese families fleeing war strengthened and resulted in organized meal giveaway events during the Ramadan month. Unlike other foreign working communities in Kufra, including Nigerians and recently increasing numbers of Egyptians, the Sudanese in Kufra are perceived relatively positively by locals. Hamed, A. S. via Facebook (2024), 'The Table of Rahman in front of the post office || For the second year in a row, charity works continue at the table in front of the headquarters of the postal company, so that Ramadan breakfast is provided to all workers at the farm and the market. There is a private kitchen for preparing meals. Funding from good people. Donations required money or (dates - milk - oil - flour - tomato paste - meat - poultry - drinks) Timing of the Committee's Presence: Daily after the Prayer', 15 March 2024, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=7297486093639613&id=100001348831990&rdid=MJiqaBGstPsQghiK.
72 Research interview with taxi driver from Kufra, July 2024: the taxi driver claimed he collects LYD 150–200 per day – this makes an average of LYD 4,500–6,000 per month. The current system that supplies one week's worth of fuel is inadequate for his needs and he has turned to buy fuel from the black market.
73 Eaton, T. (2023), 'Stability at what cost? Smuggling-driven development in the Libyan city of Kufra', Chatham House Expert Comment, 10 February 2023, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/02/stability-what-cost-smuggling-driven-development-libyan-city-kufra.
74 Research interview with Kufra resident, July 2024: he also criticised the state's stereotypical and historical 'security-lens' view of south Libya.

03
Sebha: A socially diverse and competitive trade post

Long a site of interaction among communities and competition for trade, Sebha's complex social fabric is riven by conflict. The city is divided into fragmented zones of influence in which migrant smuggling and TIP are organized along communal lines.

The city of Sebha, located in the southern region of Libya known as the Fezzan, originated as a transit point for trans-Sahelian trading routes[75] that form the basis of contemporary transnational smuggling routes. The social fabric of the city is diverse and complex, comprising trans-Sahelian communities such as the Tebu and Tuareg, along with Arab tribes such as the Awlad Suleiman, Hasawna, Muhamid and Qadhadfa. Shifts in power and control over the city have led to waves of exile and return, most notably under the Gaddafi regime, which sought to implement a degree of social engineering to maintain its control.[76] The Gaddafi regime empowered some clans of tribes over others – most notably within the Awlad Suleiman – while also favouring some tribes, such as the Qadhadfa (Gaddafi's own tribe), over others. These dynamics produced intra-community

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75 Ahmida, A. A. (2009), *The Making of Modern Libya: State Formation, Colonization, and Resistance,* Second Edition, State University of New York Press, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.18253247.
**76** Stocker, V. and al-Fallani, R. (2023), 'Violence, Displacement and Social Transformation in Sebha', in Collombier, V. and Lacher, W. (eds) (2023), *Violence and Social Transformation in Libya,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

divisions, adding a further layer of complexity to the city's social fabric. However, the 2011 revolution disrupted this balance of power, prompting other ethnic and tribal groups to challenge the long-established status quo.

Systems analysis of Sebha (see Figure 12 below) reveals a complex situation since 2011 where multiple fissures between and within community groups remain, resulting in the creation of an atomized security sector and contested governance. In keeping with the city's history, Sebha remains a site of intersection and competition for trade, with migrant smuggling and TIP becoming an increasingly important source of income in the post-2011 period. Sebha's confluence of geography and conflict has cultivated an economic landscape where illicit activities not only bolster the local economy but also provide vital revenues to an otherwise marginalized region.

Figure 12. Systems analysis of the relationship between conflict and migrant smuggling and TIP in Sebha since 2011
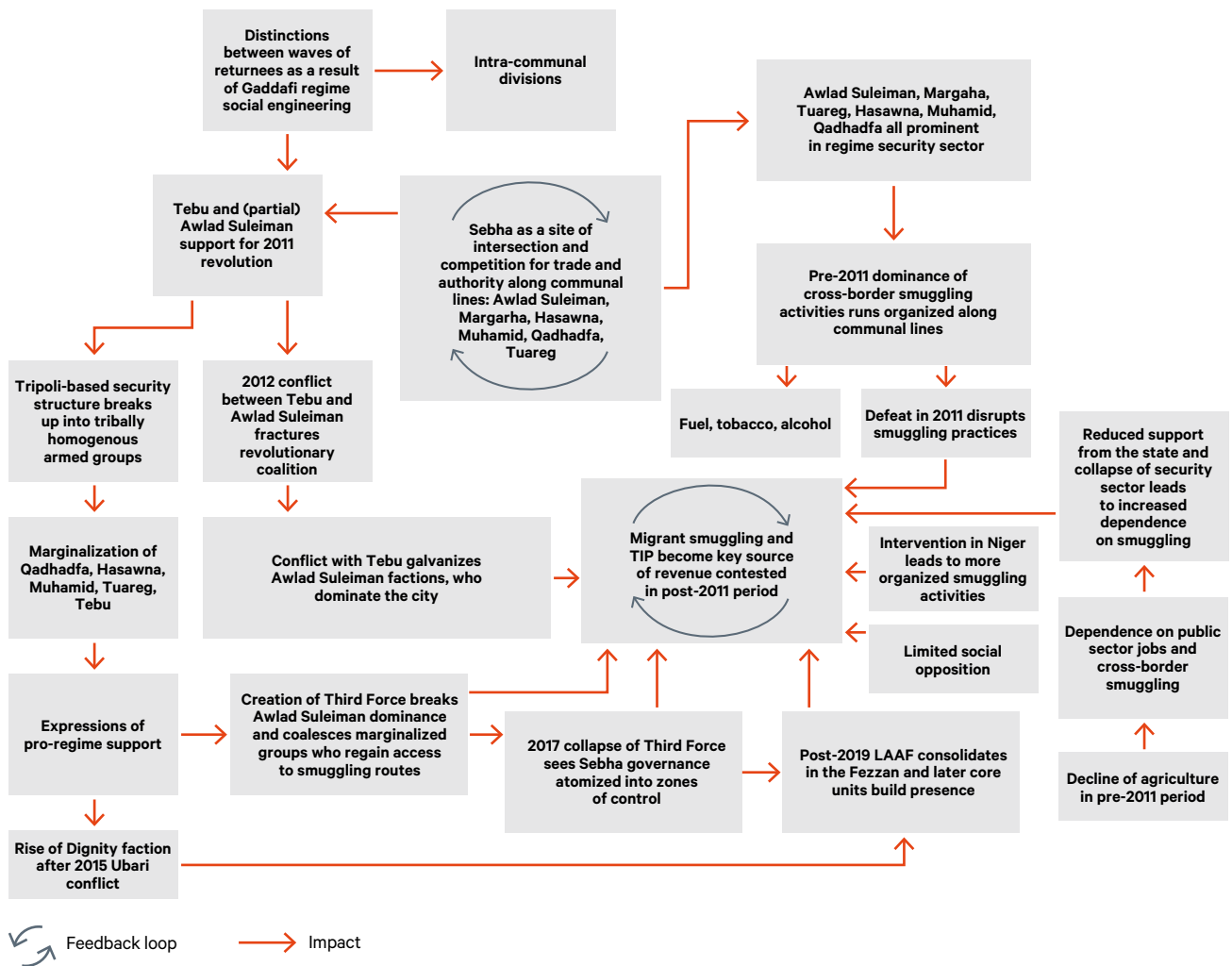
Source: Compiled by the authors.

Post-2011 reconfigurations of power

Experiences of the 2011 conflict in Libya varied considerably across the country. The rebels captured the capital, Tripoli, in August 2011, heralding the defeat of the regime. But it was not until September 2011, weeks after the regime's defeat that rebel fighters from various factions took control of Sebha. While the city had been spared the intense fighting of cities on the northern coast, Sebha's social fabric would face significant upheaval in the post-2011 period.[77] In the aftermath, 'tribal and ethnic identities became more salient and politicised as a result of collective punishment in 2011'.[78] During the 2011 uprising and in the months that followed, acts of retribution and violence that included human rights violations and war crimes were committed by rebel fighters against regime elements and their communities.[79]

The most defining tribal conflict in Sebha after 2011 was between the Awlad Suleiman and the Tebu, starting in March 2012.

There was a violent shift in social relations. Pro-revolutionary armed groups from the Nafusa-mountain city of Zintan (see Figure 3) expanded the territories under their control into the Fezzan region. The Awlad Suleiman, which had been toppled from its pre-eminent position in the Fezzan under the Gaddafi regime sought to restore its political dominance.[80] The city and its environs was subsequently carved up into Awlad Suleiman and Tebu areas of control.[81] Sebha's crime rate increased drastically after 2011.[82] Robberies, carjackings and kidnappings for ransom became a daily occurrence.[83]

The fracturing of the anti-Gaddafi revolutionary coalition and competition for control

The most defining tribal conflict in Sebha after 2011 was between the Awlad Suleiman and the Tebu, starting in March 2012.[84] The conflict with the Tebu galvanized the Awlad Suleiman factions – which had fought on either side of the 2011 war – and thereby fractured the revolutionary coalition. Following the Awlad Suleiman's effective victory Qadhadfa, Hasawna, Muhamid, Tuareg and Tebu interests were all marginalized.

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77 Ibid. p. 79.
78 Ibid. p. 69.
79 These were mostly documented in northern Libya: Rebel forces executed prisoners from Gaddafi's inner circle, and committed other acts qualifying as war crimes, as documented by human rights organizations. For example, see: Human Rights Watch (2012), 'Death of a Dictator', 16 October 2012, https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/10/16/death-dictator/bloody-vengeance-sirte.
80 Stocker and al-Fallani (2023), 'Violence, Displacement and Social Transformation in Sebha', p. 81.
81 Ibid. p. 82.
82 Reitano, T. and Shaw, M. (2017), 'Libya: The Politics of Power, Protection, Identity and Illicit Trade', *United Nations University Centre for Policy Research*, May 2017, p. 9, https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:6427/Libya_politics.pdf.
83 Stocker and al-Fallani (2023), 'Violence, Displacement and Social Transformation in Sebha'.
84 Wehrey, F. (2017), *Insecurity and Governance Challenges in Southern Libya*, Research Paper, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2017/03/insecurity-and-governance-challenges-in-southern-libya?lang=en.

The second major phase of armed conflict unfolded in early 2014 once again between the Tebu and Awlad Suleiman, and quickly drew in other tribes that were caught in the crossfire or allied with either of the warring factions.[85] Elements of the Qadhadfa and Magarha tribes took advantage of the turmoil to seize Tamanhint airbase outside Sebha and present their advance as a resurrection of the Gaddafi regime but were quickly pushed out and several men were arrested. This incident alerted revolutionary factions in western Libya and prompted the deployment of a contingent of forces from Misrata city to contain the 'insurrection' and secure Sebha. The deployed group, known as the Third Force, would remain in the city for over three years, backing the dominant Awlad Suleiman factions. While the Third Force contained tribal tensions, it would be responsible for the mass killing of over 140 young soldiers at the Brak al-Shati airbase to the north of Sebha in 2017.[86] Those killed were affiliated with Khalifa Haftar's forces that were contesting power with the government in Tripoli, which was supported by the Third Force. Subsequently, the Third Force was disbanded and removed from the Fezzan.[87]

LAAF consolidation and a divided city

Following its gradual expansion into the south of Libya in 2016–18, the LAAF considerably reshaped the Fezzan's security landscape, centralizing chains of command and promoting a small number of privileged forces, while chipping away at rival networks of allegiance.[88] Its most prominent forces in the region expanded geographically while absorbing smaller local factions. Haftar and his inner circle gave direct orders to the commanders of these forces and exerted authority through regional command structures.[89]

Despite broad affiliation with the LAAF, security dynamics in the city became fragmented, with tribes coalescing in areas that 'their' armed groups controlled. A study of post-revolution Sebha concluded that 'daily life in Sebha has been profoundly shaped by violence'.[90] The city is now divided into fiefdoms and a much greater degree of segregation is present than ever before. Revolutionary violence and subsequent local conflicts led to large-scale displacement and tribespeople flocking together for mutual protection.[91] The city's urban geography has been unable to contend with these pressures, with chronic housing shortages in the city's centre.[92]

85 Ibid.
86 Shennib, H. (2017), 'The Barak Al Shati massacre shows a weakened UN supported government and a fractured country', Atlantic Council, 25 May 2017, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-barak-al-shati-massacre-shows-a-weakened-un-supported-government-and-a-fractured-country.
87 Eaton, T. et al. (2020), *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014: Community Dynamics and Economic Interests*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, p. 37, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/CHHJ8001-Libya-RP-WEB-200316.pdf.
88 Stocker, V. (2020), 'Libya crisis: How Haftar is quietly building forces in the Fezzan', Middle East Eye, 24 April 2020, https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/node/167491.
89 While still in place and largely aligned with the LAAF, the formal military zones (Sebha, Brak, Ubari-Ghat) have little actual authority. Major General Al-Mabruk Sahban, as head of the so-called South Operations Force, has since 2019 been Haftar's main 'relay agent' in the Fezzan.
90 Stocker and al-Fallani (2023), 'Violence, Displacement and Social Transformation in Sebha', p. 90.
91 Interview with Qadhadfa woman from Sirte displaced to Sebha, 2021.
92 Stocker and al-Fallani (2023), 'Violence, Displacement and Social Transformation in Sebha', p 91.

Migrant smuggling and TIP as key sources of revenue

Informal trade had long been a lifeline for those in Sebha and became all the more essential for the population during the 1990s when international sanctions hampered formal trade flows. However, the main catalyst for the rise in transit migration and smuggling was the fall of the regime in 2011 and the ensuing power vacuum in the absence of a central state authority.[93] While Libya's transitional government had other priorities, the collapse of the old order and reconfigurations of power and security structures in the southwestern region resulted in porous borders.[94] This meant that there were now fewer entry barriers to the smuggling sector, and thus a multitude of new actors appeared, with little to no prior experience. After 2011, numbers of small players involved in Niger–Libya cross-border smuggling rose dramatically.[95]

Economic decline of state-supported industries

The decline of Sebha's state supported industries began long before the fall of Gaddafi, and this deterioration accelerated in the immediate post-2011 period. This trend is observable in the state-run agricultural sector. Agriculture is of major importance to Sebha and surrounding municipalities, which are barely industrialized. A 2018 study found that more than half of households in Sebha reported being engaged in agricultural activities.[96] Yet, agricultural labour is not seen as particularly desirable. As a result, public and private farms have long relied on seasonal workers from neighbouring countries. Agricultural production in state-led crop farming has declined in the post-2011 period (see Figure 13 below). Only one agricultural project, Al-Aril, has witnessed increases in production since 2011. The sector is reported to have been suffering from a lack of structural investments and state oversight, electricity shortages affecting water supply, unavailability of machinery and maintenance, and insecurity affecting the transportation of crops. In 2017, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) found that 25 per cent of those previously engaged in agricultural production in Sebha had abandoned the sector.[97]

Analysis of the 262 companies on the Sebha commercial register in 2024 demonstrates that Sebha's commercial sector remains limited. As Figure 14 (below) shows, more companies focus on agriculture and livestock (37) than any other sector, while sectors associated with cross-border trading – automobile (22), import-export (14) and logistics/trucking (12) – account for a significant proportion of businesses. Of these companies, only 18 are listed as employing more than 100 people, while 94 companies are listed as employing 19 people or fewer.

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93 Research interview with interlocutor working on migration issues, March 2023.
94 Altai Consulting (2013), *Mixed Migration: Libya at the Crossroads – Mapping of Migration Routes from Africa to Europe and Drivers of Migration in Post-revolution Libya*, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/unhcr/2013/en/98160.
95 United States Agency for International Development (2020), *Human Trafficking, smuggling and governance in Libya: implications for stability and programming*, Chicago: NORC, University of Chicago, p. 40, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00X3JD.pdf.
96 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2018), 'The impact of the crisis on agriculture: Key findings from the 2018 Multi-sector Needs Assessment', p. 3, www.fao.org/3/ca3099en/ca3099en.pdf.
**97** Ibid.

Figure 13. Production (hectares) of state-run agricultural projects 2010–22
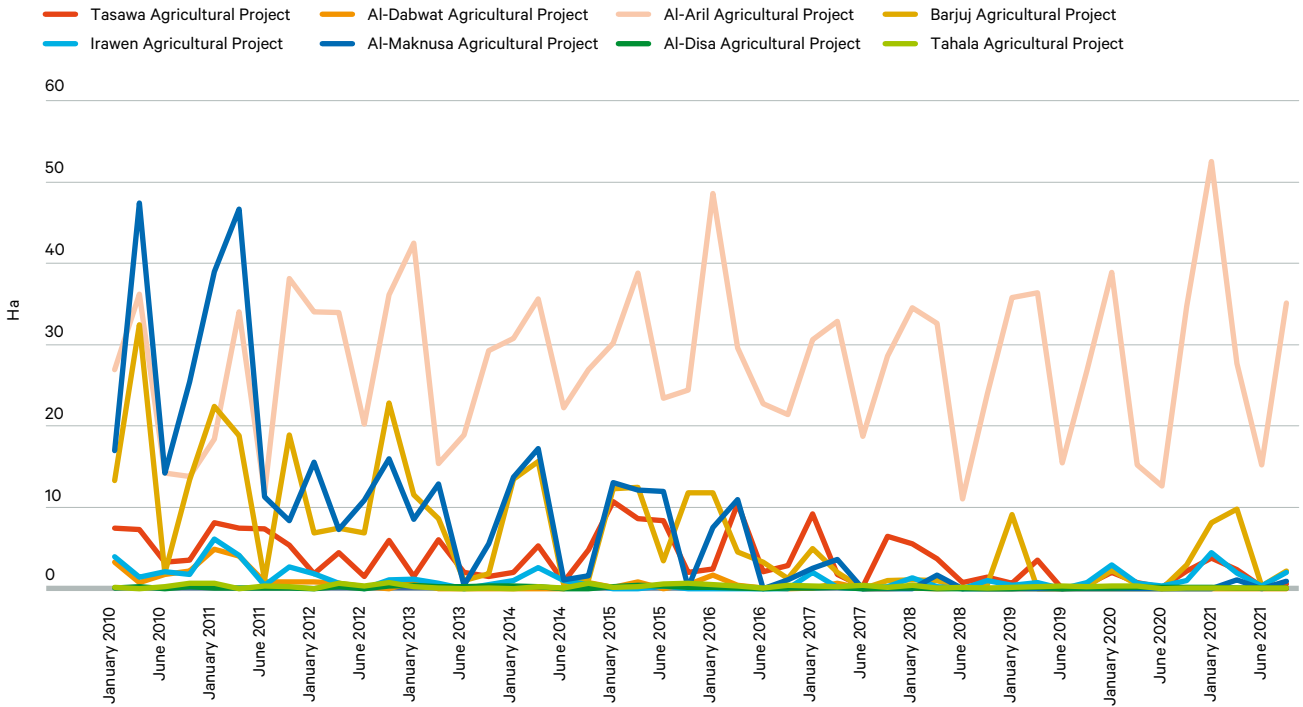
Source: DSM Geodata (unpublished), 'Agricultural assessment in Southern Libya', Commissioned by XCEPT
and Satellite Applications Catapult for Chatham House.

Interviews with Sebha residents indicated that a lack of other economic opportunities for residents of Sebha was one reason that more people had become involved in smuggling, which provided much higher income compared to salaries from the state or other official agencies in the city.[98]

**Figure 14.** Sectoral focus of companies listed on the Sebha commercial register, 2024
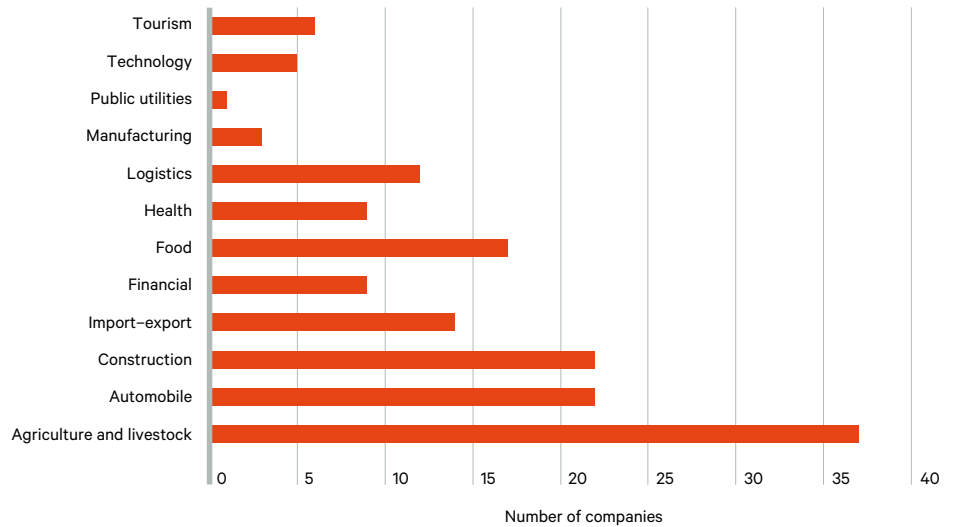
Source: Sebha Commercial Register, figures compiled by authors.

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98 Chatham House interview with Tebu civil society activist, 12 July 2022. The executive director of a local CSO indicated that these shifts were primarily driven by the fact that illicit trade was much more profitable than other work and because security agencies had become involved in the sector.

Price increases and the black market

The above economic trends were accentuated by price inflation (see Figure 15) and the lack of availability of subsidized goods.

Figure 15. Cost of minimum expenditure basket key elements (LYD) in Sebha, January 2019–March 2023
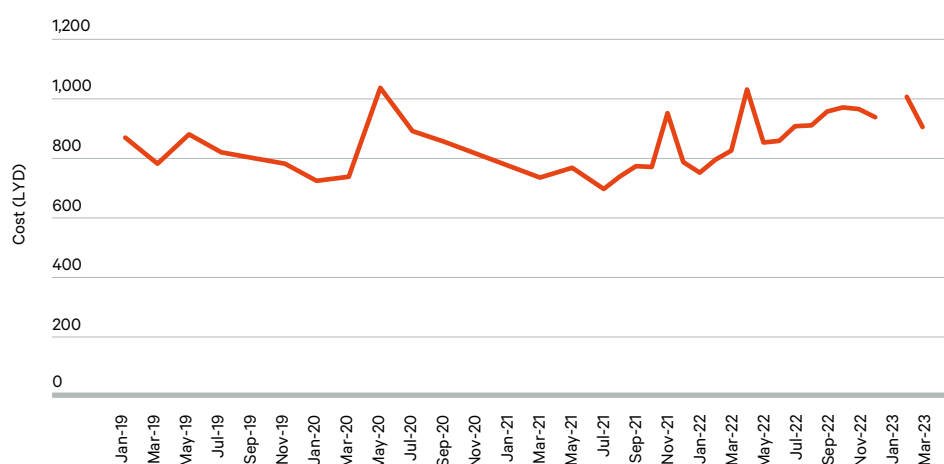
Source: REACH Initiative (2019–2023), 'Libya Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI)', available at https://www.impact-initiatives.org/where-we-work/libya.

Perhaps most notable in this context is the expansion of the black market in Sebha. An overwhelming 99 per cent of Sebha residents who responded to the XCEPT-commissioned survey said, in 2022, that they bought from the black market for availability (rather than price) reasons. This was in sharp contrast to 2010, when 86 per cent said they had not bought anything on the black market.[99] A female resident noted that, 'Recent years have witnessed a huge rise in prices, and this is due to the absence of the state and supervision. We have dealt with the matter by dispensing with some unnecessary goods and replacing them with some other goods that are usually cheaper and more affordable.'[100]

Smuggling-led development?

In this context, illicit and informal trade, particularly migrant smuggling, injects vital economic benefits into Sebha, supporting not only the smugglers themselves but also the broader community through various trickle-down effects. Tribes such as the Tebu and Magarha have wielded their influence over smuggling routes to not only amass wealth and power but also reinvest in their communities, thereby enhancing their influence in local markets and solidifying the role of smuggling within the economy.

According to a Tebu civil society activist interviewed, smuggling is one of the main income streams in Sebha, especially for Tebu, Tuareg, Qadhadfa, Magarha, and Awlad Suleiman. He added that for many young people, it was otherwise difficult

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99 Emani (unpublished), 'Economic Assessment for Zawiya, Sebha and Kufra', May 2022.
100 Ibid.

to gather enough capital to get married and start a family. According to a journalist interviewed for this paper, young smugglers can make enough money within a year to buy a car for LYD 50,000 (approximately $11,160) and build a respectable house.[101] Another interviewee said: 'We live at a time when money all comes from smuggling, in one way or another. People have built houses, got married, bought cars, with smuggling money. The state has closed all doors [to income], even salaries that arrive in one's bank account often cannot be withdrawn.'[102]

The accumulated wealth manifests in the smuggling actors' lifestyles and progressively in their home areas. The smuggling sector has catalysed economic development in Sebha.

Part of the service economy that depends on smuggling operators are transporters and caterers. The transportation sector has most obviously benefited from the expansion of people smuggling in the past decade.[103] For car dealerships in Sebha (and northern cities) smugglers and traffickers are a valuable clientele.[104] Car rental agencies in Sebha participate in the business. Migration also promotes the transportation sector by creating a demand for inner-city taxi services. Many locals use their private vehicles to transport migrants, to their workplaces or from one smuggling location to another. A civil society activist stated that there were various areas of local business that depended upon smuggling, not only with regard to transportation, but also in supplying food, drink and rental apartments, which contributed to the circulation of money in Sebha.[105]

The accumulated wealth manifests in the smuggling actors' lifestyles and progressively in their home areas, too. The smuggling sector has catalysed economic development in Sebha. Researchers and interviewees noted visible changes in areas connected to migrant smuggling, namely the peripheral neighbourhoods Hay Abdelkafi (north), Hijara and Al-Nasiriya (east), and to a lesser extent Mahdiya (northeast). These areas have in recent years experienced a boom in commercial activities and real estate construction. Contrary to what could be expected from smuggling hotspots, these neighbourhoods have become safer, with local armed groups keeping order instead of formal police forces, combating petty crime, and deterring armed actors from outside. Smugglers have arguably contributed to neighbourhood security by funding these armed groups and making security arrangements to keep their facilities and homes safe.[106]

101 Research interviews with prominent Sebha-based journalist and head of a CSO that supports local media, under the condition of anonymity, Sebha, 12 January 2023.
102 Research interview with civil engineer and parliamentary candidate acquainted with Magarha smugglers, under the condition of anonymity, Sebha, 7 January 2023.
103 As stated by various interviewees, including a Tuareg resident of Sebha.
104 Chatham House interview civil engineer and parliamentary candidate acquainted with Magarha smugglers, Sebha, 7 January 2023.
**105** Chatham House interview with civil society activist from Sebha, 12 August 2022.
106 Chatham House interview with prominent Sebha-based journalist and head of a CSO supporting local media, Sebha, 12 January 2023.

A case in point is Abdelkafi, which has become a desirable area for business and residence, prompting the relocation of families and private companies, and even leading public institutions, companies and banks to establish branches there.

Against the backdrop of reduced state financial support, agricultural production actually appears to have increased due to the vibrant, illicit and informal economy, particularly from 2014 onwards, a period in which migrant smuggling and trafficking was rapidly expanding (see figures 16 and 17 below).
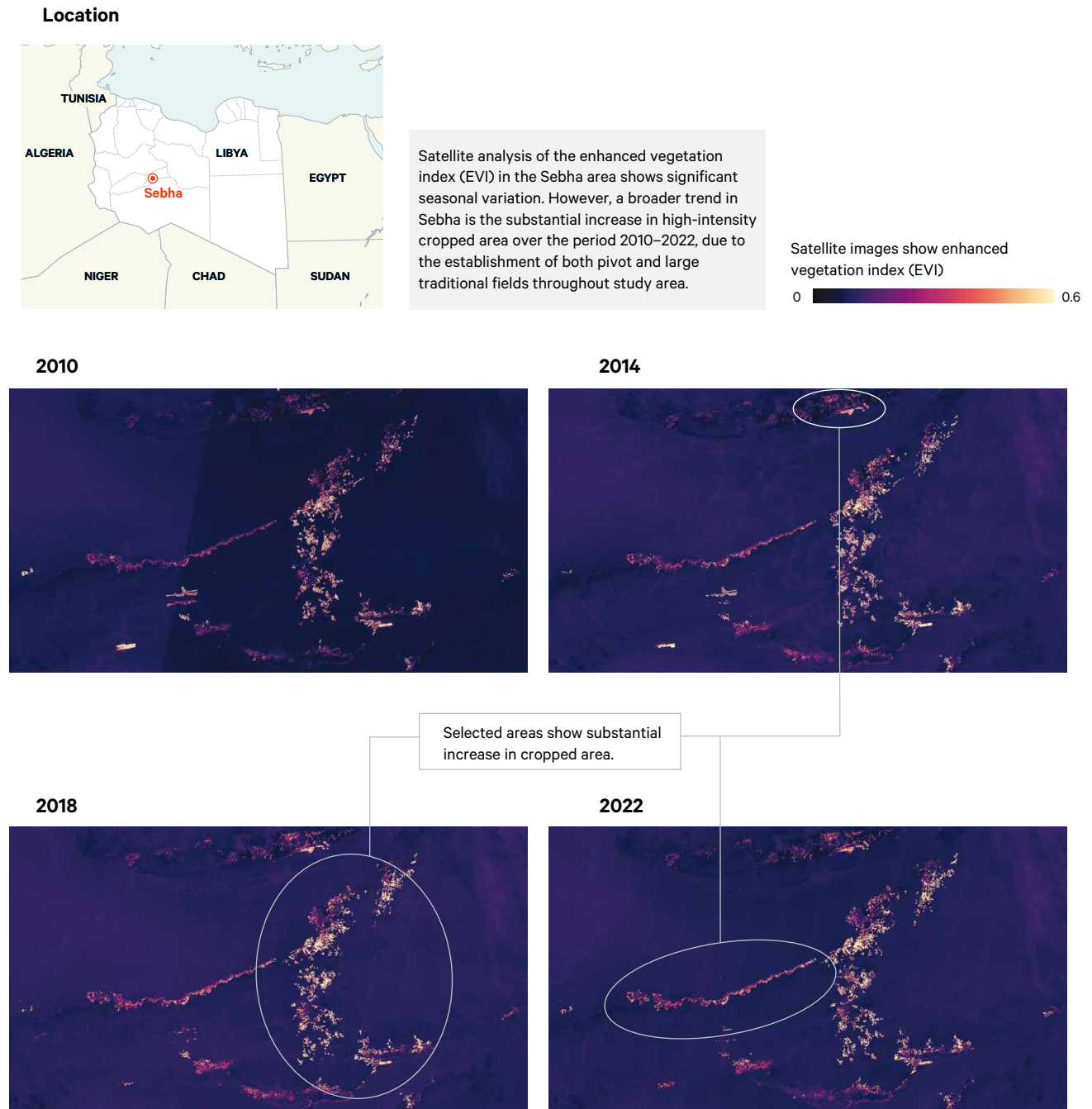
Figure 16. Agricultural production in Sebha and the surrounding area, 2010–22 (hectares)
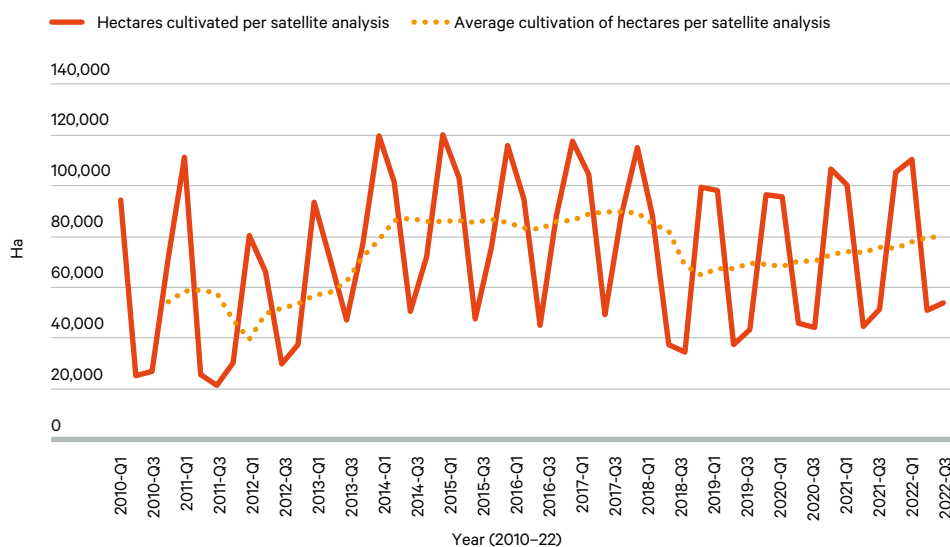
Source: Environment Systems Ltd (unpublished), 'Agricultural Change in Libya and Niger 2010 – 2022', commissioned by XCEPT.

Figure 17. Enhanced vegetation index of agricultural production in Sebha and the surrounding area, 2010–2022

Location

Satellite analysis of the enhanced vegetation index (EVI) in the Sebha area shows significant seasonal variation. However, a broader trend in Sebha is the substantial increase in high-intensity cropped area over the period 2010–2022, due to the establishment of both pivot and large traditional fields throughout study area.

Satellite images show enhanced vegetation index (EVI)

0   0.6

2010

2014

Selected areas show substantial increase in cropped area.

2018

2022

Source: Contains modified Landsat (courtesy of the US Geological Survey), and Copernicus Sentinel data.

Permissive social attitudes result in a lack of enforcement

Many locals argue that it is legitimate to assist people who flee poverty and neglect.[107] 'Those you call smugglers see themselves as transporters. I refute the term "smuggler" because migration is a human right, and migrants come to Libya by their own free will,' said a Magarha engineer.[108] Society has never frowned upon the act of transporting people over borders, explained a migrant rights activist, recounting that in transit hubs he has heard people readily make statements such as 'my son works in migration',[109] or 'my son smuggles slaves'.[110] The idealized depiction of migrant transportation overlooks the trafficking and exploitation practices that characterize the industry.

Smuggling operations are closely tied to tribal mechanisms of control. Prior to 2011, the Tebu were the dominant tribe involved in smuggling in Sebha, followed by the Tuareg, as well as much smaller numbers of the Qadhadfa. Yet, the post-revolutionary power shifts altered the makeup of the sector. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the Awlad Suleiman consolidation of power in Sebha and its environs saw the tribe play a significant role in smuggling activities.

In recent years, however, following the re-emergence of other armed tribal interests in the city, the Awlad Suleiman have played barely any role at all.[111] In turn, Qadhadfa smugglers – having lost their pre-2011 privileges – have regained a market share. Magarha smugglers have also become more prominent since 2011, especially in the Wadi al-Shati area where they control routes.[112] With these shifts, some areas of Sebha have become less connected to smuggling operations, while others, especially in the north and east of the city, have become more associated with these activities.

To the south of the city, Tebu tribal elements control the critical southern routes connecting Niger and Chad to Libya, including key areas around Sebha, operating primarily in lawless areas such as the 'Indian Company' – the neighbourhood is named after a company that operated there – and Tayuri areas on the outskirts of the city. Conversely, the Tuareg manage routes and transit points from the Niger–Algeria borders to northern Sebha, facilitating the northward movement of trafficked individuals through loosely controlled desert areas. These dynamics have the impact of entrenching migrant smuggling and TIP, where actors balance roles as city security guarantors and traffickers, injecting money into both the migration market and the city's economy.

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107 Research interview with Sebha-based journalist, under the condition of anonymity, 12 January 2023.
108 Research interview with civil engineer and parliamentary candidate acquainted with Magarha smugglers, under the condition of anonymity, Sebha, 7 January 2023.
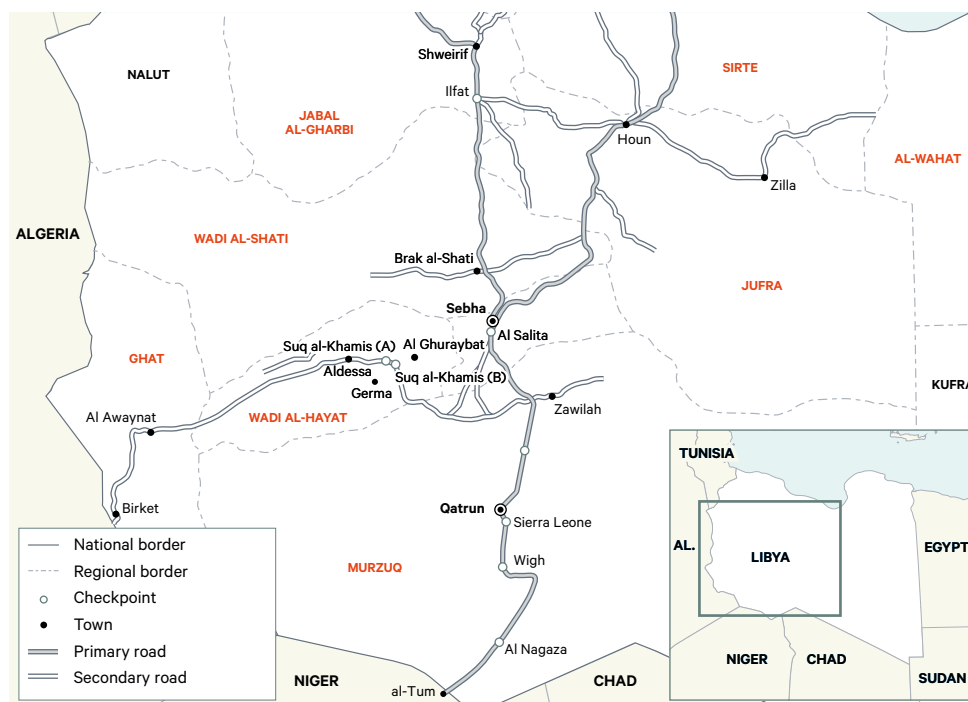109 Research interview with representative of Beelady Organization for Human Rights, under the condition of anonymity, 6 June 2023.
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.; Research interview, under the condition of anonymity, with local researcher, 2023.
112 Chatham House local researcher fieldwork, 17 July 2023.

**Figure 18.** The fortification of checkpoints in the Fezzan

Satellite analysis (Figure 19) commissioned by XCEPT illustrates the presence
of a number of checkpoints periodically positioned along key transit arteries
(see Figure 18). In most instances, these checkpoints pre-date 2011. The pictured
satellite imagery of the Suq al-Khamis checkpoint (west of Sebha), the Ilfat
checkpoint (north of Sebha) and the Wigh checkpoint (south of Sebha) show that
in each case the fortifications of the checkpoints have been developed, illustrating
the increased securitization of movement and the importance placed upon
controlling key transit arteries.

Figure 19. Satellite analysis of checkpoints controlling movement

Locations
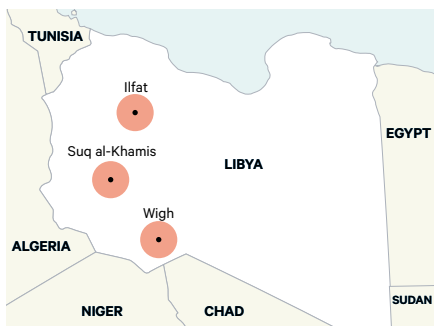
Suq al-Khamis

20 September 2014

17 September 2021

Road dividers and barriers appeared in 2011, and in 2013 a number of buildings were erected. The road, which runs from the east, has significantly changed with curves being more exaggerated and the placement of further barriers on the road.

Ilfat

11 August 2014

15 December 2018

10 December 2021

The Ilfat checkpoint was present in 2010, and barriers appeared in 2014. A sand barrier to the east of the checkpoint emerged in 2018, which expanded to surround the whole checkpoint in 2021.

Wigh

13 March 2017

2 November 2021

Security barriers were fitted at Wigh in 2015 as the location emerged as a checkpoint. Sand barriers have expanded to surround the checkpoint, making it more difficult to bypass. As a result, activity levels at the checkpoint peaked in 2017–2019.

Source: Satellite Imagery © Maxar Technologies 2023.

In its pursuit of domestic and international legitimacy, the LAAF leadership sought to appear more dedicated to combating migration than its Tripoli adversaries.[113] But priorities soon shifted. The LAAF's actions in Sebha have often been more about the optics of maintaining influence and control than effectively countering migrant smuggling. For instance, after the LAAF's withdrawal from northwestern Libya in 2020 following its defeat in Tripoli, southern fighters returned to their hometowns. Prominent LAAF groups, Brigade 128 and the Tareq Bin Ziyad Brigade, scaled up their presence in Sebha and nearby areas in the south. There is a correlation between the return of these groups and the development of the smuggling industry. Some therefore believe that where the LAAF is present in the south it is misleading the public with superficial policing that only captures the small players, rather than addressing the core issues.[114]

This pattern of involvement suggests a complex relationship between the LAAF and the smuggling networks. While the LAAF presents itself as a stabilizing force aiming to combat smuggling and trafficking, its actions often facilitate these very networks. LAAF-affiliated groups also offer protection services to smugglers, ensuring safe passage in return for financial remuneration.[115] This symbiotic relationship between armed groups and smugglers illustrates how illicit activities become institutionalized, as these groups often assume quasi-official roles that should be occupied by state security forces.

International intervention in Niger and on the Mediterranean coast bypasses Sebha

The international context of refoulement, border externalization and bolstering counter-migration actors has exacerbated violence in the smuggling industry in Sebha. The introduction of an anti-smuggling law in Niger in 2015 – passed under pressure from European policymakers – was followed by a crackdown on the mobility economy in the north of Niger. A 2024 XCEPT study of dynamics in Niger argued that such shifts have 'pushed migrant smuggling networks underground, displaced traditional itineraries, placed migrants at greater risk and accelerated a transition to other economic activities'.[116] Incidents of migrants becoming

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113 Libyan Interim Government Department for Combating Illegal Migration via Facebook (2019), 'الى سبها عودة بعد حضن الوطن بفضل جيشنا البطل مركز ايواء طريق المطار سبها التابع لجهاز مكافحة الهجرة غير الشرعية المنطقة الشرقية و بالتعاون مع مديرية امن سبها و القوات المسلحة و منظمة الهجرة الدولية IOM تمهنت مطار طريق عن النيجيرية الجنسية من اطفال و رجال و نساء بين ما غير شرعي مهاجر١٦٤ عدد بترحيل يقوم' [Following the return of Sebha to the arms of the homeland thanks to our heroic army, the Sebha Airport Road Shelter Center of the Department for Combating Illegal Migration in the Eastern Province, in cooperation with the Sebha Security Directorate, and the Armed Forces and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), deports 164 illegal immigrants between women, men and children of Nigerian nationality through Tamanhint Airport], 21 February 2019, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0ivb1Ccb1hFgKs7M3KVUqimcQBUqsc322UM6RTd9KJhjpLfLVSdn67GBZNPb3wW5zl&id=1462258020584342; International Organization for Migration (2019), 'Latest Voluntary Humanitarian Return Charter from Libya Brings Total Returnees to Over 40,000 Since 2015', 22 February 2019, https://www.iom.int/news/latest-voluntary-humanitarian-return-charter-libya-brings-total-returnees-over-40000-2015; and 218TV via Facebook (2019), 'مُهاجرين تسفير | سياسة' [Politics: deportation of migrants], video, 24 February 2019, https://www.facebook.com/218tv/videos/2023431601106914.
**114** Chatham House interviews with two Sebha residents, June and July 2022.
115 Ibid.
116 Tinti (2024), *Tackling the Niger–Libya migration route*.

stranded in the Sahara Desert increased, costs for those travelling spiralled and the potential for physical violence on the route from Niger to Sebha grew.[117] This has left migrants more vulnerable to traffickers.[118]

European efforts to cultivate support for anti-smuggling among armed groups and to place Libyan authorities in charge of rescues in the Mediterranean led to a significant drop in arrivals of migrants on European shores in 2018. However, these transnational interventions were far less consequential in Sebha and the Fezzan.

Subsequently, the rise and fall of migrant numbers in the Fezzan and Sebha appear to be somewhat out of sync with national trends, and with arrivals to Europe. For example, International Organization for Migration (IOM) data showed a significant increase of migrants in Sebha between 2017 and 2018,[119] while arrivals to Libya and arrivals to European shores dropped during the same period (see Figure 20 below). This can be attributed to bottlenecks in northbound travel and reverse flows, i.e. migrants stuck in Sebha or returning from the coastline when sea crossings were prevented. Also, the number of migrants in Sebha at a given point in time depends on circular migration trends between the Sahel and Sebha (seasonal/temporary labour), which are disconnected from developments further along the migration route.[120]

Figure 20. Numbers of reported migrants in Sebha 1 February 2017–1 March 2024
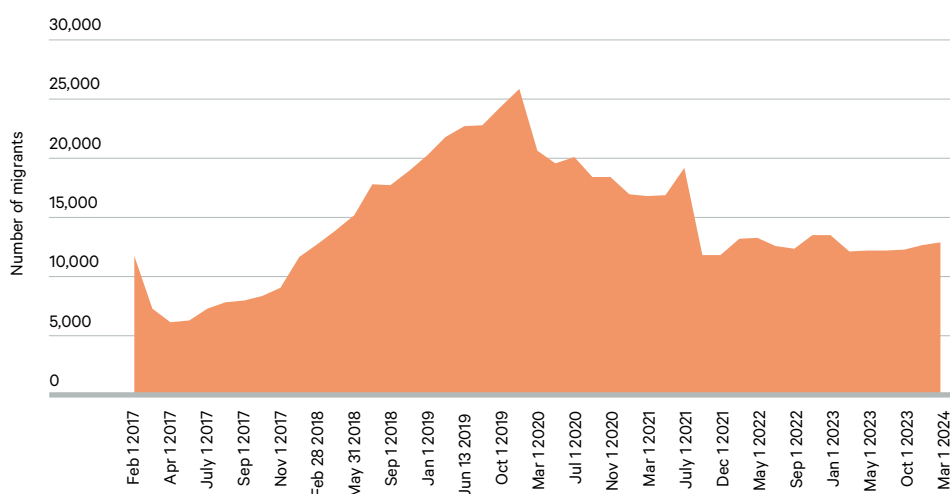
Source: International Organization for Migration (2024), 'The Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)', https://dtm.iom.int/libya.

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117 Ibid.

118 Malakooti, A. (2019), *The Political Economy of Migrant Detention in Libya: Understanding the players and the business models*, Global Initiative and Clingendael Institute, April 2019, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Final-Report-Detention-Libya.pdf.

119 Previously varying between 10,000 and 20,000 across the Fezzan, it rose to 38,815 in August 2018, of which 35,040 were recorded to be in Sebha municipality. UN Habitat (2018), 'Rapid City Profile Sebha', https://unhabitat.org/rapid-city-profile-sebha.

120 Migration routes were also impacted by the development of artisanal gold mining in remote parts of southern Libya, northern Chad and Niger. Firstly, the gold rush opened new labour opportunities for Saharan populations, creating new circular migration trends. While mostly attracting poor Chadians and Nigeriens, young Tebu men from south Libyan towns soon also flocked to Kouri Bougoudi (at the Libya–Chad border), Djado and Tchibarakaten (in Niger), and other mining districts.

04
# Zawiya: Human trafficking and the criminalization of the state

Zawiya's armed groups leverage state roles as well as control over resources and illicit networks to consolidate power and maximize profits. As a result, migrants are seen as commodities in Libya and as security threats in the Mediterranean.

The coastal city of Zawiya, with a population of a little over 350,000 people,[121] has many of the representative characteristics of Libya's conflict economy. The city's vital gas pipeline, electricity powerplant and oil refinery, have attracted actors vying for influence and control over illicit markets.

The rise and fall of Zawiya as a political power in post-revolutionary Libya is key to migrant smuggling and trafficking in the city. Zawiya's criminalized economy is a manifestation of a wider governance system in Libya where armed groups and criminal networks thrive.

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121 Bureau of Statistics and Census Libya (2024), 'Population Estimates 2021 [Arabic]', January 2024, https://bsc.ly/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2021-تقديرات-السكان.pdf.

Figure 21. Systems analysis of the relationship between conflict and migrant smuggling and TIP in Zawiya since 2011
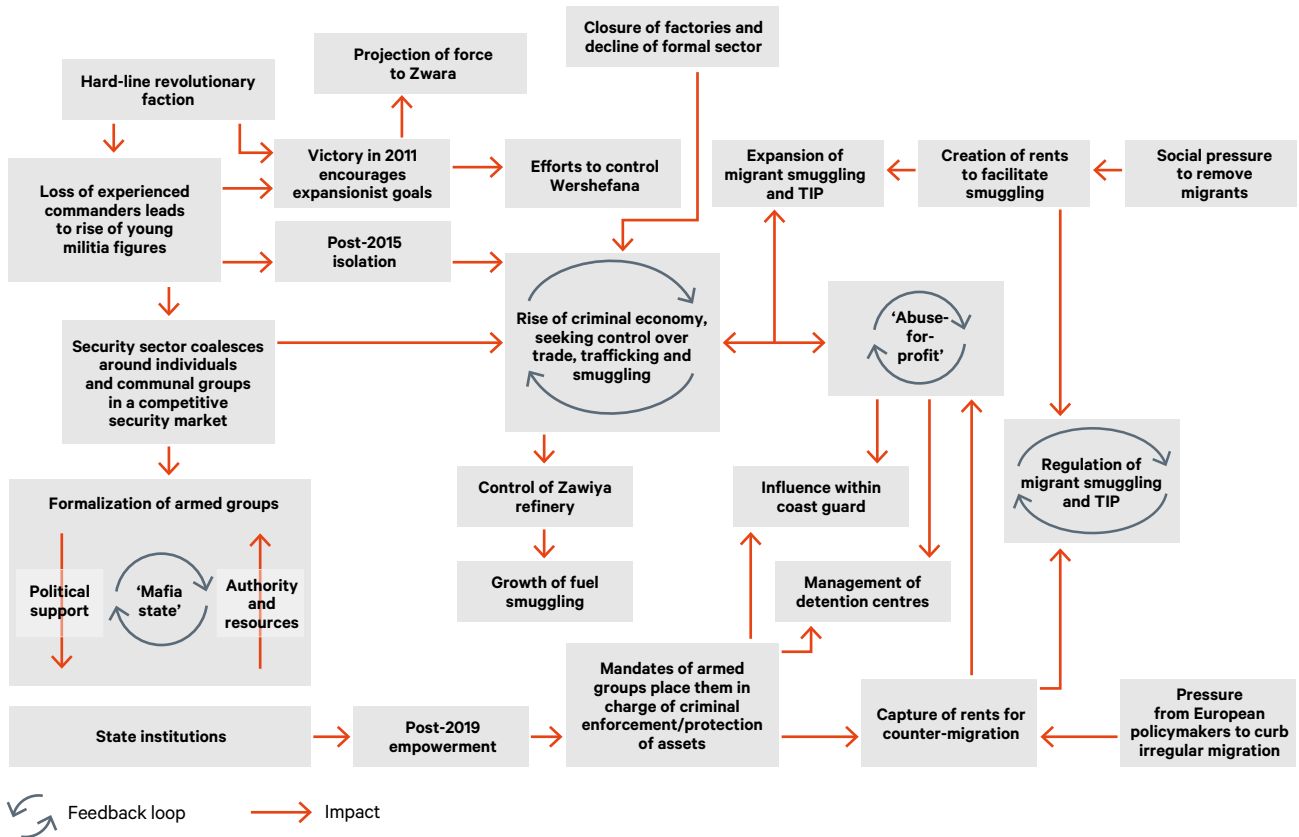
Source: Compiled by the authors.

The systems analysis in Figure 21 above illustrates these dynamics, showing how political support has been traded for authority and resources. These dynamics have, in turn, led to a situation in which combating migrant smuggling and TIP is just as profitable as facilitating these practices, creating de facto regulation of the sector in Zawiya but also blurring the boundaries between state and criminal activities.

Post-2011 partnerships and the battle for influence

Soon after Gaddafi was ousted, the revolution's various armed actors began strategizing to secure a share of power and resources that matched their contributions to the cause. Actors in Zawiya were seen as a significant force, with influence felt across the northwestern region. The city's armed groups competed with those from the cities of Misrata, Zintan and Tripoli, each carving out spheres of territorial control in Tripoli. The political manoeuvring of Zawiya's armed groups was bolstered by the city's geographic location and strategic assets, such as the oil refinery.

While Zawiya-based actors were less influential than those in Misrata within the revolutionary camp, the former played a crucial role in the post-2011 restructuring

of the security sector. In 2013, under the leadership of the Zawiyan commander Shaaban Hadiya (also known as Abu Obeida al-Zawi), the Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room (LROR) united Islamist armed groups from across the country.[122] Zawiya's strong security sector, combined with its proximity to Tripoli, meant that Zawiyan armed groups could directly impact certain critical assets in the capital, including access to electricity and gas. Combined with the opportunities for revenue generation, this turned the city and strategic assets like its oil refinery into sites for contestation between armed factions looking to exert influence over the capital.

The projection of force and tensions with neighbours

Following the 2011 revolution, Zawiyan armed groups and smugglers expanded their partnerships and influence along the coastal road extending to Tunisia. Initially, Zawiyan groups shared a unifying revolutionary identity with western rebel strongholds such as Zintan, and later formed a security bloc in Tripoli post-Gaddafi.[123] This bond extended to smaller cities and towns like Zwara and Sabratha. These latter towns, known for their longer involvement in smuggling operations, particularly migrant smuggling, had well-established networks and supply chains that featured prominently in media coverage.[124]

While fuel and gas smuggling activities established routes along the coast, the shift to an illicit economy centred on migrant smuggling and human trafficking emerged only after 2014.

Zawiya's smugglers likely utilized the same coastal routes for transporting fuel across the Tunisian border and Mediterranean through cooperation with armed groups like the al-Nasr Brigade – an armed group led by Mohammed Khushlaf, a prominent militia leader from Zawiya – that controlled the city's oil refinery, and counterparts in Zwara.[125] But despite a degree of coexistence between actors from different areas, Zawiyan groups wanted absolute control over the territory, which they pushed for (and acquired) in 2019 after the formation of the state security

122 Eaton, T. (2023), *Security actors in Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan since 2011: How local factors shape Libya's security sector, and What This Means for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135942.
123 Williams, S. T. (2023), 'Libya's hybrid armed groups dilemma', Brookings, 28 April 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/libyas-hybrid-armed-groups-dilemma.
124 Hudson Institute (2015), 'EU Turns Blind Eye to Fuel for Arms Smuggling as Migrants Drown', 16 October 2015, https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/eu-turns-blind-eye-to-fuel-for-arms-smuggling-as-migrants-drown.
125 Farrah, R. (2021), *Zuwara's Civil Society Fight Against Organized Crime,* Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, December 2021, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Zuwara-PB-web.pdf.

Stability Support Apparatus (SSA).[126] The Western coastal branch of the SSA was placed under the command of Zawiya's Hassan Buzriba.[127]

On the eastern front, Zawiya is separated from the capital by the Wershefana tribal area, whose influence expands southwest of Tripoli, with several lucrative smuggling routes cutting through its lands. Wershefana's history as Gaddafi loyalists, and its shifting security alliances over the past decade, have meant that it has frequently clashed with Zawiya's armed groups.[128]

While fuel and gas smuggling activities established routes along the coast, the shift to an illicit economy centred on migrant smuggling and human trafficking emerged only after 2014. Until then, Zawiya's leadership focused on securing state funds through political and security influence.[129]

As leadership sought national relevance, younger local armed groups in Zawiya exploited access to fuel and gas to generate additional income.[130] This reflected competing priorities: leadership seeking political leverage while local groups capitalized on economic opportunities.

Zawiya's security landscape was influenced by a number of key players: Mahmoud Bin Rajab, commander of the 52 Brigade; Mohamed Bahrun (also known as 'Al Far' or 'The Mouse'), who leveraged his position as commander of the First Security Division; and the Buzriba brothers (Essam, Hassan and Ali).[131] These figures operated within a fragmented system where security actors oscillated between cooperation and competition. They competed for resources and government funding while exploiting Zawiya's strategic location for smuggling operations. This competition intensified after the 2015 Skhirat Agreement and the formation of the Government of National Accord (GNA), which left many local actors out of the formal political process.

Post-2015 isolation and the rise of the Zawiyan militia smuggler

Between 2014 and 2019, several developments disrupted access to resources and power in Zawiya. The first major change was the ouster of key Zawiyan leaders from Tripoli, which significantly reduced the influence of the city and marked

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126 The Stability Support Apparatus (SSA) is a security body established by Libyan Presidential Council Decision No. 38 of 2021. It comprises two forces, Tripoli and the Western Coastal region. Its headquarters are in Tripoli. The SSA's mandate is to ensure state security, combat threats and support national stability. Its functions include protecting state facilities and officials, securing events, conducting raids, combating riots, apprehending individuals threatening national security, promoting disarmament and coordinating with other security bodies. The SSA's broad mandate has made it a powerful actor in western Libya, extending influence from Zawiya to Zwara.
127 Small Arms Survey (2024), *A Political Economy of Zawiya: Armed Groups and Society in a Western Libyan City*, Geneva: Graduate Institute of International Development Studies, https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-SANA-Report-2024-Zawiya-EN.pdf.
128 Eaton, T. (2023), *Security actors in Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan since 2011*.
129 Small Arms Survey (2024), *A Political Economy of Zawiya*
130 Faucon, B. (2015), 'Smuggled Libya Gas Fuels Conflict', *Wall Street Journal*, 22 March 2015, https://www.wsj.com/articles/smuggled-libya-gas-fuels-conflict-1427064365.
131 Small Arms Survey (2024), *A Political Economy of Zawiya.*

a shift in power dynamics in Zawiya, consequently intensifying competition between local groups for Zawiya's resources and ultimately creating space for illicit activity to grow, which evolved into migrant smuggling and TIP.

Meanwhile, internal conflicts among rival armed groups in Zawiya continued to escalate. In June 2017, the killing of Ibrahim Hneesh, a young militia leader, triggered further violence among competing factions.[132] This incident exemplified the volatile and fragmented nature of power within the city, as different groups vied for dominance. The ensuing violence destabilized the city and surrounding areas and created opportunities for new leaders to emerge amid the chaos.

Around the same time, Mahmoud Bin Rajab, the aforementioned leader of the 52 Brigade, was arrested in Saudi Arabia and later transferred back to Libya, where he was placed under LAAF detention.[133] His absence created a power vacuum that Mohamed Bahrun quickly filled. Bahrun's rise marked a significant shift in Zawiya's power structure, as his First Security Division began to exert considerable influence over local armed groups from 2016 onwards. This allowed him to control key security operations and engage in smuggling.

During this period, Bahrun consolidated his power, while a new player Abd al-Rahman Milad ('al-Bidja') was appointed as commander of the coast guard. The two actors, leading different security bodies, would go on to have a relationship characterized by rivalry, especially after al-Bidja would become an actor synonymous with migrant smuggling. This appointment signalled the expansion of a lucrative, predatory business exploiting migrants.

With its coastal location, Zawiya appealed to migrants and human traffickers as a launch pad to Europe. Meanwhile, the oil refinery, a coveted asset, became a linchpin for smuggling operations, with armed groups jockeying for control and profits. The heavy securitization of the port led various actors to seek institutional appointments with Ministry of Interior agencies to secure their claims as protectors of the port, thereby legitimizing their control over this critical infrastructure.[134]

The reports of severe human rights abuses in detention centres and the growing number of migrants in the city underscored the close relationship between armed groups and criminal enterprises. This nexus gained international recognition in June 2018, when Ali Ahmed al-Dabbashi, a migrant smuggler from Sabratha, and Khushlaf and al-Bidja in Zawiya were sanctioned by the UN for their roles

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132 Cousins, M. (2017), 'Clashes reignite in Zawia as both sides reinforce', Libya Herald, 6 June 2017, https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/06/06/clashes-reignite-in-zawia-as-both-sides-reinforce.
133 On the afternoon of 25 June 2017, Saudi authorities detained Mahmoud Bin Rajab and another Libyan man at King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah as they prepared to return to Libya after performing the Umrah pilgrimage. Bin Rajab, who operated a religious tourism business, initially assumed the questioning was related to a previous visa overstay. However, the detentions were linked to their alleged inclusion on a terrorism list by Egypt – Saudi Arabia's ally – due to suspected ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and alleged involvement in the kidnapping of Egyptian diplomats in Tripoli. See Wehrey, F. (2021), 'A Libyan Revenant', *New Lines Magazine*, 14 July 2021, https://newlinesmag.com/first-person/a-libyan-revenant.
134 It is crucial to note that Zawiya's groups and traffickers operate in a distinct political and security landscape compared to those in Kufra and Sebha. While factions in Sebha and Kufra have to carefully navigate relationships with both the GNU and House of Representatives, Zawiya's groups are free from the burden of managing any physical presence or heavy influence of actors from the eastern region.

in human trafficking and smuggling.[135] These sanctions highlighted the extent to which smuggling and trafficking had become integral to the operations of Zawiya's armed groups.

Resurgence of Zawiyan influence in post-2019 'mafia state'

The competition among militias over resources has resulted in a fluid and often volatile security situation in Zawiya itself, as different local actors jostled for control. The offensive launched by the LAAF on Tripoli between 2019 and 2020 introduced new tensions among Zawiya's actors, with divisions emerging among local actors in relation to the LAAF.

Following the failure of the LAAF to capture Tripoli, an internationally convened political process appointed the Government of National Unity (GNU) in March 2021. However, the failure of the GNU to hold elections in December 2021 saw divisions re-emerge. A rival Government of National Stability (GNS) was formed in March 2022. Zawiyan groups were crucial in the negotiations to form the GNS. The Buzriba brothers' positions in this rival authority demonstrate this key contribution: Essam served as the minister of interior of the GNS, Hassan led the Stabilization Security Apparatus West[136] – a major armed group – and Ali served as a prominent politician within the House of Representatives and was also a notable social figure. The Buzribas' positions provided them with significant influence in Zawiya's political and security landscape.

Zawiya's armed groups' relationships with the Libyan state are marked by their integration into national security frameworks. Many of these groups are officially affiliated with the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Defence of the GNU or GNS, providing them with a semblance of legitimacy while allowing them to operate autonomously.

Despite Zawiya's substantial fishing industry and being the home of Libya's largest oil refinery and power station, the city's licit economy is constrained by ongoing internal conflicts and a decline in opportunities for legitimate income, which have resulted in factory closures and an increased dependence on imports. Since 2011, the city's economy has been volatile due to a combination of conflict and political dynamics that have disrupted supply chains and reduced the availability of goods and services.

Compounding the country's financial situation, families face rising food prices without the funds to meet those increases. Between 2019 and 2022, Zawiya's minimum expenditure basket (MEB) went through several fluctuations (see Figure 22). In one instance, the MEB rose over 13 per cent in a five-month

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135 Amnesty International (2018), 'Libya: UN Security Council sanctions of prominent human traffickers a welcome step in the right direction', 8 June 2018, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/06/libyaun-security-council-sanctions-of-prominent-human-traffickers.
136 The SSA presence outside of Tripoli and towards the west is usually referred to as the 'SSA West'. The SSA West presence in Zawiya is constituted by an alliance between various armed groups that already existed within and outside the city of Zawiya, but now operate under the SSA umbrella.

period from LYD 745 ($152.42 approximately) in March 2019 to LYD 845.23 ($172.83 approximately) in July 2019.[137] The MEB returned to previous levels after this period, likely pointing to a brief disruption caused during the Haftar offensive to take Tripoli in early 2019. Respondents to an XCEPT-commissioned survey noted that significant price rises in the city had accompanied previous wars and conflicts during the past 10 years.[138] Once again, the shift towards the black market is very pronounced in Zawiya; 88 per cent of respondents to the survey in the city said that they had not used the black market to purchase items in 2010, but by 2020 more than half (52 per cent) had bought something from the black market in the last year.[139]

Figure 22. Cost of minimum expenditure basket key elements (LYD) in Zawiya, January 2019–March 2023
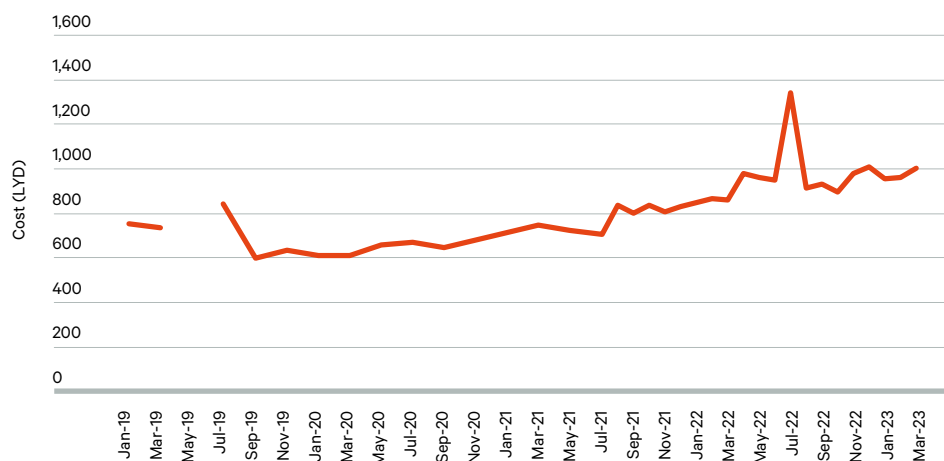
Source: REACH Initiative (2019–2023), 'Libya Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI)', available at https://www.impact-initiatives.org/where-we-work/libya.

In this economic atmosphere, Zawiya's armed groups draw recruits from the local population, many of whom came of age amid the turmoil of civil war; to some extent these fighters find allure in militia membership for its promise of stability and prestige. With the economy in decline, some residents turn to armed groups for economic security, exposing themselves to violence and involvement in illicit economies.[140]

Successful operations for armed groups in Zawiya's illicit sector rely on territorial control and the ability to facilitate the movement of illicit goods. Essentially, the infrastructure and capabilities needed for different forms of smuggling overlap significantly. Much of the conflict in the city is perceived to revolve around

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137 Consolidated data from REACH Initiative (2019–2023), 'Libya Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI)', available at https://www.impact-initiatives.org/where-we-work/libya.
138 Emani (unpublished), 'Economic Assessment for Zawiya, Sebha and Kufra', May 2022.
139 Ibid.
140 This takes different forms. Interviews with Zawiya residents revealed that many depend on armed groups to secure access to essential services and resources, such as obtaining government documents and licences, acquiring fuel, borrowing money, accessing foreign currency to sustain businesses and livelihoods, or even seeking medical treatment. With patronage systems in place, and militias' access to resources through predation and violence, they are primed to act as 'service providers' and 'good Samaritans' when it serves their interests.

controlling illicit markets, evidenced by clashes over warehouses, checkpoints and other physical infrastructure. Tensions escalated, for instance, when the SSA West assumed control of checkpoints in Ajilat, a popular location utilized by smugglers.

In the southern part of the city, strategic partnerships in the illicit sector have emerged, notably between the Khushlaf and the Buzriba families. The Khushlaf's al-Nasr Brigade exploited its control of Zawiya's refinery to divert oil and gas to the black market while leveraging its semi-official status to deflect attention from allegations that the refinery served as a safehouse for migrants awaiting smuggling.[141] Meanwhile, Bahrun and al-Bidja navigated the market through extensive networks of actors and government-backed security operations.

On the other hand, Zawiya's economy increasingly relies on migrant labour, particularly in construction and services, despite concerns over links to criminal networks. Migrants contribute through labour, spending,[142] and with illicit revenues often funding public projects unknowingly. This criminalized economy creates 'pull factors', sustaining smuggling networks and ensuring Zawiya remains a hub for migrants seeking to cross the Mediterranean.

The duality of smuggling and TIP in Zawiya

Migrant Smuggling and TIP, while risky ventures, remain lucrative enough to attract entrepreneurial armed groups in Zawiya that have navigated dual roles as both counter-migration bodies and facilitators of smuggling. This blurring of roles challenges traditional perceptions of smugglers as solely nefarious actors, as they often present themselves as humanitarian or security-focused actors.[143] Through strategic community engagement and investment, armed groups like Mohamed Khushlaf's al-Nasr Brigade cultivate local support,[144] further solidifying their grip on power and criminal activity.[145] At the same time, despite facing terrorism charges in Libya, Bahrun's influence in Zawiya continued to grow. Likewise, up until his recent assassination, al-Bidja's legal entanglements had little impact on his activities.[146] Between these three men and their groups, migrant

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141 Research interviews with Zawiya residents and activists, 2022; Porsia, N. (2017), 'The kingpin of Libya's human trafficking mafia', TRT World, https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/the-kingpin-of-libyas-human-trafficking-mafia-13088061.

142 *Hawala* is an informal value transfer system that operates through a network of brokers, facilitating financial transactions without the need for formal banking infrastructure. It is based on trust and personal relationships, enabling funds to be transferred efficiently and discreetly, often across borders. For more, see International Monetary Fund (2005), *Regulatory Frameworks for Hawala and Other Remittance Systems*, Chapter 2, International Monetary Fund; Reports suggest that detained migrants are allowed to use mobile phones to contact friends or family, who then transfer money via black market channels to the armed groups detaining them in exchange for their release. In some cases, payments are made in cash by other migrants already in Libya or by the migrants' smugglers to secure their freedom.

143 Author interviews with INGO staff and locals in Zawiya (2022).

144 Khushlaf's investments garnered public attention due to his status as a 'UN-sanctioned trafficker' with public-facing ties to armed groups. News of the medical centre spread across social media and national news outlets, linking these investments to money laundering. Almarsad (2019), '' تقرير | تيمناً باسم كتيبته .. القصب يحتفي بـ " مشروعه الإستماري '
الجديد' [Report | Following the announcement of his battalion, Al-Qasab celebrates his new 'investment project'], 13 October 2019, https://shorturl.at/hgFde.

145 This dynamic has been seen in other areas, as with the well-known smuggler Ahmed al-Dabbashi in Sabratha who sought to act as a paternalistic figure, providing jobs and stability in economically distressed areas.

146 North Africa Post (2024), 'Libyan Authorities identify suspects in killing of "al-Bidja"', 6 September 2024, https://northafricapost.com/80039-libyan-authorities-identify-suspects-in-killing-of-al-bidja.html.

smuggling took two main routes: through state-affiliated counter-migration operations, such as those led by the coast guard, and organized criminal trafficking and smuggling networks.

International intervention re-shapes the sector

With increasing international pressure on Libyan authorities to curb migrant smuggling, the 2017 crackdown on smuggling hubs like the city of Sabratha,[147] to the west of Zawiya, reshaped the landscape across the coast. One key event was the altercation between members of the Shuhada al-Wadi Brigade, formed by civilian Salafists, and smugglers under the command of Ahmed al-Dabbashi (AKA Al-Ammu).[148] As a result, al-Wadi Brigade established control over Sabratha, under the pretence of fighting against ISIS – which had a presence in Sabratha at that time – while pushing al-Dabbashi.[149] As al-Dabbashi focused on survival, new players filled the gaps left in the market. This shift was evident in the statistics from Libyan Marine, a local NGO, which alleged a 91 per cent decrease in departures from Sabratha in 2017 compared to 2016.[150] When compared to the reported number of arrivals to European shores in the first 95 days of 2018, as noted by IOM, which showed a 50.78 per cent decline from 2017, it is clear that the Libyan Marine statistics reflect a broader downturn in departures from Libya's coast.[151]

Efforts by the EU to curb migration through Libya have had complex consequences, especially where migration security agencies like the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration and the coast guard are said to be involved.

Efforts by the EU to curb migration through Libya have had complex consequences, especially where migration security agencies like the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM) and the coast guard are said to be involved. Funding and resources[152] intended to enhance border security could end up aiding smuggling groups with connections to formalized security structures cooperating with the

147 Before the ousting of Ahmed al-Dabbashi in late 2017, Sabratha, a coastal city in the northwest of Libya was a central hub for migrant smuggling operations along Libya's western coast. Al-Dabbashi's militia played a pivotal role in facilitating the departure of migrants across the Mediterranean to Europe. His group's dominance in the region allowed them to control significant portions of the smuggling networks, making Sabratha a primary departure point for migrants seeking passage to Europe.
148 Elumani, A. (2017), 'Migrant smuggling crackdown triggered clashes in Libyan city: armed group head', Reuters, 29 September 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-libya/migrant-smuggling-crackdown-triggered-clashes-in-libyan-city-armed-group-head-idUSKCN1C41ML.
149 Alwasat (2017), ' هروب «العمو» واشتعال النار في منزله بصراتة ' [Al-Ammu escapes while his home catches fire in Sabratha], 6 October 2017, https://alwasat.ly/news/libya/145677.
**150** Libyan Marine (2021), private documents shared with the research team.
151 International Organization for Migration (2018), 'Mediterranean Migrant Arrivals Reach 15,289 in 2018; Deaths Reach 517', 30 March 2018, https://www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-reach-15289-2018-deaths-reach-517.
152 European Commission (2021), 'Annex II: Action Document for EU Support to Border Management Institutions in Libya and Tunisia', https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/f121a40e-fa70-4264-813a-1bfd18264720_en?filename=C_2021_9615_F1_ANNEX_EN_V3_P1_1639231%20Annex%20II%20BM%20LY%20TU.PDF.

EU.[153] These groups are positioned to use their access to intelligence and support to strengthen their control over migration routes and potentially bolster their smuggling operations.[154]

This blurred line between counter-migration and migrant smuggling complicates international partnerships with DCIM and SSA West-affiliated actors,[155] as their ranks often include individuals involved in exploitation and trafficking.[156] Consequently, these enmeshed groups operate with a degree of legal protection under the Ministry of Interior,[157] facilitating complementary activities by other actors such as Moez Kara, commander of the counterterrorism forces in Zawiya, and Al-Kabawat armed groups, all incentivized by political or profit incentives.[158]

Figure 23. Numbers of migrants recorded in Zawiya, February 2017–March 2024
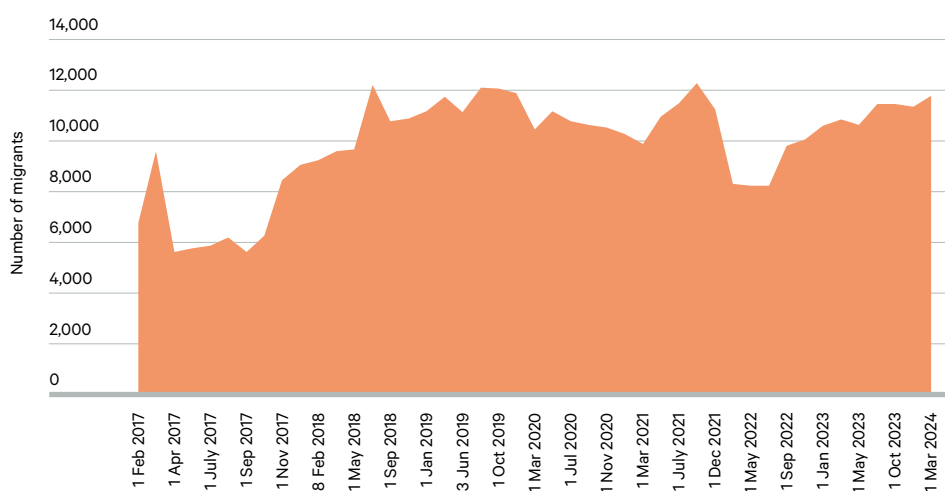
Source: International Organization for Migration (2024), 'The Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)', https://dtm.iom.int/libya.

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153 Michael, M., Hinnant, L. and Brito, R. (2019), 'Making misery pay: Libya militias take EU funds for migrants', Associated Press, 31 December 2019, https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-tripoli-ap-top-newsinternational-news-immigration-9d9e8d668ae4b73a336a636a86bdf27f.

154 Author interviews with key informants from Zawiya (2022).

155 Amnesty International (2022), 'ليبيا: حاسبوا قادة ميليشيا جهاز دعم الاستقرار' [Stabilization support agency hold militia leaders accountable], 4 May 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/ar/latest/news/2022/05/libya-hold-stability-support-authority-militia-leaders-to-account/; Reuters (2018), 'تقرير للأمم المتحدة: مهربو البشر في ليبيا على صلة بأجهزة الأمن' [UN Report: human smugglers in Libya connected to security agencies], 7 February 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/--idUSKBN1FS0A0.

156 United States Department of State (2023), *2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Libya,* Washington, DC: US State Department, https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/libya/#:~:text=According%20to%20various%20UN%20agencies,%2C%20traffickers%2C%20and%20criminal%20gangs.

157 Human Rights Watch (2016), 'Libya: End 'Horrific' Abuse of Detained Migrants', 14 December 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/14/libya-end-horrific-abuse-detained-migrants.

158 During the interview process with residents and activists from Zawiya in 2022, the Libyan proverb 'Hamiha Haramiha' was used to describe the local population's thoughts of the role some security agencies play in counter migration. This proverb translates to describe 'guardians' of something or a place to be the 'thief' this place should be protected from. Research interviews with 15 residents from Zawiya draw an image of a security apparatus and counter-migration agencies whose involvement in smuggling is often questioned. If not overtly – due to fear of reputation – then privately. This includes DCIM and the coast guard in the Zawiya chapter, the latter (as an agency in Libya) supported by the EU through equipment, and formally commanded by smuggler and trafficker al-Bidja; Salah, H. (2023), 'Already Complicit in Libya Migrant Abuse, EU Doubles Down on Support', Human Rights Watch, 8 February 2023, https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/08/already-complicit-libya-migrant-abuse-eu-doubles-down-support.

The intertwining of counter-migration operations and smuggling networks in Zawiya exacerbates the vulnerability of migrants. Any interaction with these two categories of actors exposes migrants to further extortion, compounding their already dire circumstances.

Figure 23 shows IOM displacement tracking matrix estimates for the numbers of migrants in Zawiya. These numbers illustrate broad trends rather than exact figures. The drop in mid-2017 coincides with the initial crackdown on migrant smuggling along the Libyan coast. Since then, migrant numbers in Zawiya have remained stable, despite a decline in Mediterranean crossings, suggesting that while sea crossings fell, broader migration and smuggling activities continued.

Systematic 'abuse-for-profit'

Upon their arrival in Zawiya, migrants – both those who are willingly smuggled and those trafficked through abduction and coercion – encounter three distinct actors during their journey and stay. First, smuggling and trafficking groups, both Libyan and non-Libyan, organize the journey. Second, migrants face armed groups at checkpoints along smuggling routes that levy taxes on smugglers and migrants alike. Successful passage depends on smugglers' connections to armed groups and their ability to pay.[159] Third, Zawiya's security forces, including the Department for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM) and Zawiya's coast guard, intercept migrants and take them to detention centres, where cycles of exploitation continue.

The treatment migrants receive hinges on the specific actors they encounter and their own nationalities, as well as whether they are trafficked or smuggled. In many instances, these activities blend into a continuum of violence and exploitation.

The treatment migrants receive hinges on the specific actors they encounter and their own nationalities, as well as whether they are trafficked or smuggled. In many instances, these activities blend into a continuum of violence and exploitation.[160] When waiting to depart, migrants report instances of physical and verbal abuse, as well as document confiscation. Many migrant journeys are not fully organized and planned from the start. As a result, they often end up in hubs like Zawiya where they are expected to pay for the next leg of their journey.[161] Here, smugglers resort to human trafficking tactics to extract money, coercing migrants into contacting their families for more funds or subjecting them to forced labour until payment is made. Ultimately, for those who manage to reach a boat, the crossing remains perilous. Zawiya's armed factions, such as the Office for Counterterrorism and Combating Destructive Acts, the First Security Division, and the SSA, further

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159 Research interview with international aid agency workers, under the condition of anonymity, in Libya, 2022.
160 Bish, A., Cockbain, E., Walsh, P. W. and Borrion, H. (2023), 'Exploring the 'Blurred Boundary': Human Smuggling and Trafficking on the Central Mediterranean Route to Europe', *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, 5(1), p. 70–94, https://doi.org/10.31389/jied.214.
161 de Haan, Aghedo and Eaton (2024), *Tracing the 'continuum of violence' between Nigeria and Libya*.

complicate the landscape as they operate under state-sanctioned security roles. At this stage of the smuggling cycle, Zawiya's coast guard intercepts migrant boats as part of an EU agreement to tighten patrols in the Mediterranean. Here, Zawiya's formalized security forces play a dual role.[162] They take advantage of the EU's policies on exporting border securitization, benefiting from EU funds allocated for counter-migration efforts. Under the guise of counter-migration, intercepted migrants are apprehended at sea and returned to Libya. However, local sources reveal that after interception, migrants are either relocated or coerced into paying ransom fees for release. Testimonies from late 2022 indicate that migrants at the al-Maya detention centre, operating under the SSA, were being blackmailed for release.[163]

Regulation of migrant smuggling and TIP in Zawiya

Armed groups involved in human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Zawiya actively market themselves internationally as indispensable security partners and reliable border control agents in the absence of a strong central authority in Libya. They leverage this image to gain support and legitimacy from international actors, such as the EU, presenting themselves as stabilizing forces that are essential for maintaining order in a volatile region.[164]

Locally, these groups have pivoted to fill the security vacuum left after the revolution, positioning themselves as necessary protectors and service providers in the absence of effective government institutions. As residents in cities like Zawiya face ongoing security challenges, they often have little choice but to rely on these armed groups for protection and public service delivery.[165]

This delicate balance enables actors engaged in migrant smuggling and human trafficking to operate with minimal resistance from local communities, despite residents' discomfort with the growing migrant population. This tolerance stems from two main factors. First, residents tend not to recognize migrant smuggling as a violent and coercive criminal activity, often viewing it as a form of 'service provision' for migrants seeking to reach Europe. Second, some residents are reluctant to accuse armed groups with which they are affiliated of involvement in human trafficking, fearing the perpetuation of their city's reputation as a hub for smuggling and trafficking. Networks involved in smuggling and trafficking adeptly portray their crimes as essential services for migrants, exploiting the state's security gaps and presenting themselves as a solution to the city's challenges, despite being the architects of the migration crisis and its associated abuses.

While residents of Zawiya disapprove of smuggling activities in their city, they tend to believe that these armed groups are performing a service in removing migrants, albeit through smuggling.[166] Conversely, although some armed groups and security agencies are not directly involved with smuggling networks, some members,

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162 Yousef, L. and Eaton, T. (2023), 'The dual face of migrant smuggling in Libya', The New Arab, 30 March 2023, https://www.newarab.com/opinion/dual-face-migrant-smuggling-libya.
163 Research interviews with civil society activist from Zawiya and fellow Zawiya resident, under the condition of anonymity, November 2022.
164 Eaton (2023), *Security actors in Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan since 2011*.
165 Research interviews with residents, under the condition of anonymity, in Zawiya, 2022.
166 Research interviews with residents, under the condition of anonymity, in Zawiya, 2022–23.

particularly in Zawiya, periodically engage in migrant transport for a quick profit. Commanders may turn a blind eye to this behaviour as a means of compensating for the lack of funds available for militia members and to potentially prevent predation on locals.[167]

Local residents in Zawiya demonstrate a contradictory understanding between human trafficking and smuggling, with one stay-at-home mother asserting, 'I don't believe there is trafficking or anything akin to slavery here. Migrants come here on their own, but they are taken advantage of by smugglers.'[168] While residents acknowledge the role of smugglers, their frustration is often directed towards migrants themselves.[169] The city's inhabitants are cognizant of the perils migrants face, yet against the backdrop of pervasive violence, they struggle to emotionally engage with their plight. Another city local shared, 'we see the dead bodies washed up on the shore. It's painful to see them, but at the same time we have got used to it'.[170] Instead, many dehumanize and criminalize migrants, enabling them to overlook the human rights violations inflicted by local security forces and smugglers. The increasing presence of migrants in public spaces has heightened unease among locals, particularly with the emergence of migrant neighbourhoods.[171]

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167 Ibid.
168 Research interviews with 15 residents from Zawiya, under the condition of anonymity, September–November 2022.
169 Ibid.
170 Ibid.
171 Remote research interview with a civil society activist from Zawiya, under the condition of anonymity, 18 November 2022.

05
Distilling
a national-level
analysis

Systems analysis of the development of migrant smuggling and TIP in Libya reveals three broad phases, illustrating how international intervention has led to de facto regulation of migrant smuggling practices.

The Kufra, Sebha and Zawiya systems analyses presented in this paper highlight more similarities between these locations than differences. The individual systems analysis of each site has revealed two interconnected feedback loops. The first is a dispute over authority in each location, which spurs competition that leads to violent conflict. In turn, this violent conflict further aggravates the dispute over authority. The second is grounded in economics: the structure of the economies in the three locations is reliant on informal and illicit cross-border trade and the movement of people. As state support has diminished and the informal and illicit sectors have expanded, reliance upon the latter to support wider economic activity has grown. In this context, migrant smuggling and TIP are not perceived negatively and serve as a significant source of revenue, especially in a context where state support is in decline. These two feedback loops have contributed to entrenchment of armed groups that fight over authority and over control of economic activity, feeding a pervasive conflict economy. Consequently, the current context continues to frustrate hopes to establish unified and accountable governance in Libya.

This chapter distils the dynamics observed across the three case study locations into a national-level systems analysis. Given the multifaceted nature of social systems and the practices in question, this overarching systems analysis has been simplified as far as practicably possible. The purpose of the national-level analysis,

which divides the development of the migration sector into three broad groups, is to identify entry points for policy interventions that can mitigate the harms caused by migrant smuggling and TIP.

Phase one: Expansion amid the development of Libya's war economy 2011–17

Figure 24 identifies six causal loops that, together, shaped the dramatic expansion of migrant smuggling and TIP practices in the post-2011 period. As this paper has shown, bouts of violent conflict in Libya are representative of a struggle for power among a wide range of social groups.[172] As loops 1 and 2 in Figure 24 illustrate, disputes over legitimacy, both local and national, control of territory, and the system of governance remain unresolved.

At the national level, this has led to governance actors seeking to sustain local alliances through patron–client relationships – such as the LAAF with the armed faction Subul al-Salam in Kufra, or the Government of National Unity with Mohamed Bahrun's forces in Zawiya – rather than through the delivery of public goods (loop 1). The ongoing disputes over legitimacy have created cyclical relationships whereby patronage networks are sustained at the cost of strengthening formal state institutions. This is mirrored at the local level (loop 2) where disputes are ongoing over who has the right to govern the area – as witnessed in Kufra, Sebha and Zawiya – leading to a fragmentation of legitimate authority and a relative decline of law and order. Again, this is seen to be a cyclical relationship that inhibits state building at the local level. These two loops have led to the fragmentation of security actors in Libya.

Following the collapse of the Gaddafi regime's security apparatus in 2011, the Libyan security sector became a site of open competition, with local groups – based on kinship and locality – developing their own armed factions (loop 3). While the role of armed groups is much criticized,[173] local communities continue to see the existence of their own armed groups as necessary for protection. The character of these groups varies significantly by location, with some resembling little more than organized criminal factions – as is the case in Zawiya – while others have developed into more professionalized forces and continue to play a significant role in providing security services. Other groups share characteristics with both ends of this spectrum, Subul al-Salam in Kufra is a good example of this.[174]

172 Lacher, W. (2023), 'Libya's New Order', New Left Review blog, 26 January 2023, https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/libyas-new-order; The Sentry (2023), 'Libya's Kleptocratic Boom', https://thesentry.org/reports/libyas-kleptocratic-boom.
173 There are many such examples. It has been argued that 'militias' are a key cause of political instability: see, for example, Badi, E. (2022), 'Armed Groups No Longer: Libya's Competitive Political Militias', Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 6 July 2022, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/armed-groups-nolonger-libyas-competitive-political-militias-35656; Militias have also been criticized for being responsible for widespread human rights abuses: see, for example, Amnesty International (2017), 'Libya's Violent Militias', 16 February 2017, https://www.amnesty.org.uk/libyas-violent-militias.
174 Eaton et al. (2020), *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014*.

Figure 24. How the exploitation of people on the move fuelled conflict in Libya
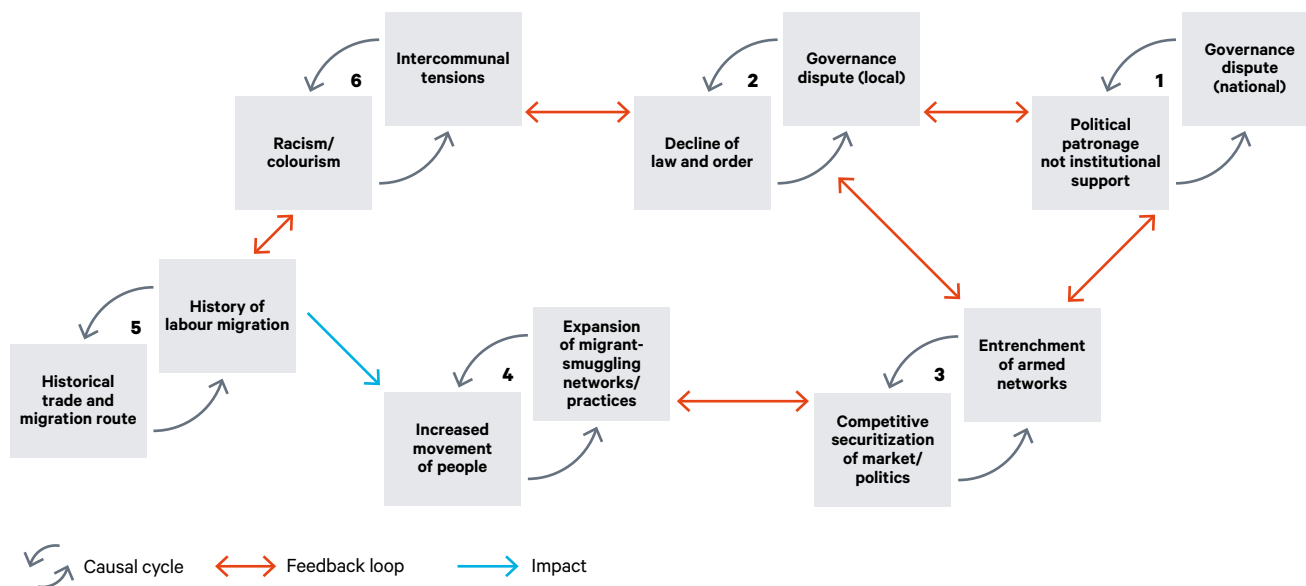
Source: Chatham House XCEPT research.

In the absence of an accepted national security apparatus, these interlocking local and national dynamics entrenched the role of armed actors across the country. In all three locations, and across the country, armed groups became direct participants in the economy, building their business interests in all sectors (loop 3). This created a feedback loop with the governance crisis at local and national level, further inhibiting a transition to coherent national governance.

In this context, the illicit economy boomed in post-2011 Libya, with migrant smuggling and TIP one of its principal components (loop 4). The route from East and West Africa had been established over centuries. This pre-existing infrastructure and connections were scaled up significantly in the aftermath of the collapse of the Libyan state's oppressive security structures after 2011.

However, these historical legacies, when combined with local disputes over land ownership and governance, have created a hostile environment for foreign nationals in Libya, and laid the ground for systematic abuses (loop 6). Many sub-Saharan African people experienced racist abuse and discrimination in Libyan towns and cities such as Sebha and Zawiya due to the colour of their skin.[175] In places such as Zawiya, considerable resentment remains with the association of 'foreigners' being employed as mercenaries by the Gaddafi regime and the perceived profligacy of Gaddafi's investments on the African continent. The product of this system is the systematic exploitation of and violence against people moving as a defining feature of post-2011 Libya's illicit marketplace.[176]

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[175] Amnesty International (2020), 'Libya: New evidence shows refugees and migrants trapped in horrific cycle of abuses', 24 September 2020, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/09/libya-new-evidence-shows-refugees-and-migrants-trapped-in-horrific-cycle-of-abuses.
[176] Micallef (2017), 'The Human Conveyor Belt'.

Figure 25. How external intervention 'regulated' human trafficking and smuggling practices in Libya
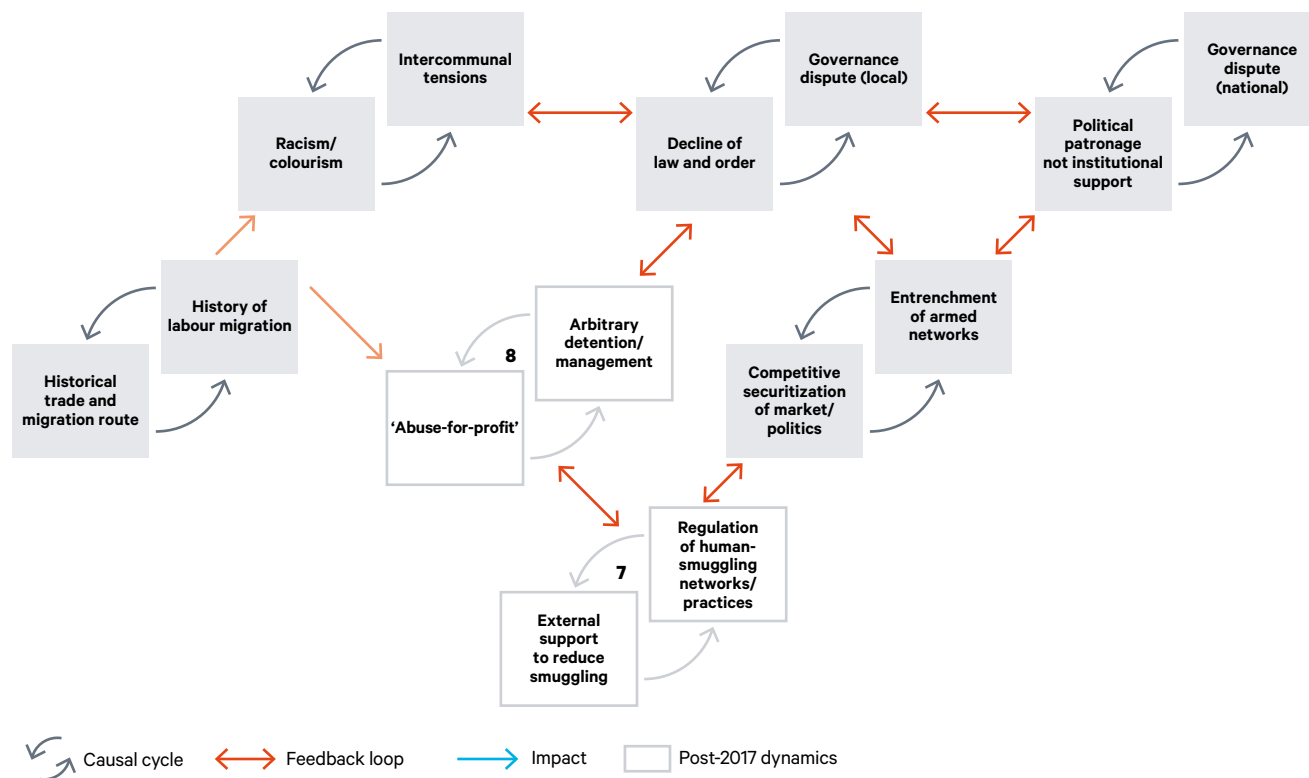
Source: Chatham House XCEPT research

Phase two: Border externalization and the rise of 'abuse-for-profit' 2017–19

The rapid expansion of migrant smuggling and TIP led to a reaction from European policymakers committed to reducing irregular arrivals to the European continent. The subsequent European border externalization policy – represented in the support for anti-smuggling legislation in Niger in 2015 and deals with Libyan authorities and armed groups in 2017 to shift dynamics in the Mediterranean – resulted in the development of a 'migration industry' approach that has delegated management of migration to a network of interlinked private and public actors in Libya.[177] The clampdown on people moving towards Europe resulted in a significant fall in the number of arrivals to European states and also created a funding stream for the (often violent) disruption of smuggling activities. It provided Libyan security actors with the incentive to clamp down on those activities in return for financial and political support from Europe via the Libyan state.[178] These shifts thus reconditioned the functioning of the human trafficking and smuggling sector, as illustrated in Figure 25 above (adding loops 7 and 8).

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177 Pacciardi, A. and Berndtsson, J. (2022), 'EU border externalisation and security outsourcing: exploring the migration industry in Libya', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(17), pp. 4010–4028, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2061930.
178 Michael, M., Hinnant, L. and Brito, R. (2019), 'Making misery pay: Libya militias take EU funds for migrants', Associated Press, 31 December 2019, https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-tripoli-ap-top-news-international-news-immigration-9d9e8d668ae4b73a336a636a86bdf27f.

The result is a vicious cycle in which people's movement and the restriction of this movement have become profitable industries for armed groups competing and cooperating in Libya's conflict economy. These dynamics have enabled what has been dubbed as a system of 'abuse-for-profit'[179] or a 'trafficking–detention–extortion complex',[180] which is intimately tied with patterns of arbitrary detention and exploitation (loop 8). The mistreatment of people moving has become a system in which fees are generated through the exploitation of people who have moved to Libya, enforced through beatings, enslavement, starvation, extortion, sexual abuse and rape.[181]

Phase three: Regulation of smuggling and its effects on state-building

After a precipitous fall in the number of arrivals to European shores in 2018 and 2019, the numbers of crossings began to rebound from 2020 onwards. In this context, the lure of income from the sector lingers with, as mentioned earlier, security actors playing both sides to benefit from facilitating the movement of people and closing down smuggling and trafficking activities. This has in effect led to regulation of the sector, as loop 7 in Figure 25 shows.[182] In the context of Libya's dysfunctional governance dynamics, a sprawling set of security actors that largely operate outside of the accountability framework of the Libyan state now play a dual role as both enforcer of the state's anti-migration policies and participant in the subversion of those policies.

In this current phase, international intervention to reduce smuggling in Libya can consequently be seen to have antagonized the governance crisis through provision of political and economic support to unaccountable networks of armed actors that themselves have deep interests in criminal practices. While European policymakers will contend that these actors are in fact law enforcement agencies, the reality is that these groups operate outside of the state's control and are responsible for widespread abuses. The scale of profits available from the sector – both to engage in and disrupt smuggling activities – have meant it has become central to the country's conflict economy. Revenues from the sector thus play a key role in sustaining local economies yet also reinforce the securitization of Libya's economy and the ever-present growth of armed networks, feeding a vicious cycle.

179 Kirby, P. (2020), 'Sexual violence in the border zone: the EU, the Women, Peace and Security agenda and carceral humanitarianism in Libya', *International Affairs*, 96(5), p. 1219, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa097.
180 Al-Dayel, N., Anfinson, A. and Anfinson, G. (2021), 'Captivity, Migration, and Power in Libya', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 9(3), https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Captivity%2C-Migration%2C-and-Power-in-Libya-Al-Dayel-Anfinson/d236a0db0bdfae935ef8946ecdf0649dcb6c1433.
181 Kirby, P. (2020), 'Sexual violence in the border zone'.
182 Yousef and Eaton (2023), 'The dual face of migrant smuggling in Libya'.

06
Policy implications

Policymakers must move beyond securitized strategies and develop a comprehensive 'whole of route' approach to tackle migrant smuggling and TIP.

This paper has utilized systems analysis to explore the development of migrant smuggling and TIP through the lens of conflict, seeking to understand how smuggling activity connects to national-level and cross-border trends. Viewing the development of migrant smuggling and TIP in this way generates three principal takeaways for Western policymakers with the potential to mitigate the factors that have facilitated the rise of these practices.

Law enforcement and border externalization have limited impact. There is a need for a 'whole of route' approach

Western policy towards migrant smuggling and TIP via Libya has been driven almost exclusively by a desire to reduce flows of irregular migration to European shores. But this has also created a political reality that prioritizes stopping arrivals at all costs. There are strong domestic political incentives in European states for such a position, as public support for a reduction of immigration is popular, especially in states where arrivals are concentrated. In this context, the focus on criminality and an emphasis on law enforcement is something that is easy to communicate to European electorates.

A dominant framework of border externalization has emerged, whereby European countries seek to enhance border controls in transit states. This has led to a series of efforts to control borders over vast territories that have never before had strict boundaries and that have historically been connected through transnational trading routes and communities – which traverse modern state borders. Moreover, a series of agreements have been made with states – including Turkey, Tunisia, Egypt, Niger, Lebanon and Libya – that prioritized the political imperative of immediately reducing flows through transactional arrangements in a form

of 'refugee rentierism'.[183] These policies have also incentivized transactionalism. There is a reason that a new route for crossing the Mediterranean emerged in Libya's east in recent years:[184] those actors in control of the area knew that they would be able to extract financial, political and economic concessions from European leaders if they leveraged their ability to facilitate a spike in arrivals in Europe.[185] Such an approach is not new, as evidenced by the fact that Gaddafi warned in 2010 that Europe would 'turn black' unless the EU provided funding to Libya.[186]

These deals have come under attack by rights groups and advocates. But, just as importantly, such agreements have been shown to be of limited effectiveness.

This paper has illustrated the flaws in the approach adopted in Libya. Enforcement on the Libyan coast has been limited and underwritten by an expansion of 'abuse-for-profit' practices in places like Zawiya. Meanwhile, smuggling and trafficking continues nearly unabated in Sebha and Kufra. In this context, EU migration and border externalization policies have become tools of 'migration proxy warfare' whereby external states have delegated migration management to armed groups affiliated to the Libyan state.[187] As this paper has shown, these practices have expanded Libya's conflict economy instead of restraining it.

More effective policy must be based on the realization that Libya's migrant smuggling and TIP activities are intricately connected to wider transnational dynamics. Policy responses must therefore account for these transnational aspects. Conflict and subsequent instability in Libya have created a fertile environment for migrant smuggling and TIP activities to develop, in turn leading to the growth of smuggling in other locations along an established route. This has led to an increase in the number of migrants entering Libya and the expansion of Libya's conflict economy.[188] To date, international approaches have sought to isolate choke points along these routes, as illustrated in the targeted interventions in Niger and on the Mediterranean.

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183 Tsourapas, G. (2021), 'The perils of refugee rentierism in the post-2011 Middle East', *Digest of Middle East Studies,* 30(4), pp. 251–255, https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12252.

184 In the first four months of 2023, over 10,000 arrivals of migrants in Italy were recorded as departing from Libya's east. This was an increase of over 150 per cent from the same period in 2022. Tharwat, H. (2023), المهاجرون، 'في ليبيا يدفعون ثمن أزمة حفتر المالية' [Migrants in Libya pay the price of Haftar's financial crisis], Mada Masr, 8 June 2023, https://www.madamasr.com/2023/06/08/feature/سياسة/المهاجرون-في-ليبيا-يدفعون-ثمن-أزمة-حفت.

185 On 4 May 2023, Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni offered to invest in eastern Libya in return for action on migrant smuggling in a meeting with Khalifa Haftar. See Wintour, P. (2023), 'Greek shipwreck highlights divided Libya's inability to stem flow of refugees', *The Guardian,* 15 June 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/15/greek-shipwreck-highlights-divided-libyas-inability-to-stem-flow-of-refugees.

186 Squires, N. (2010), 'Gaddafi: Europe will 'turn black' unless EU pays Libya £4bn a year', *The Telegraph,* 31 August 2010, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/libya/7973649/Gaddafi-Europe-will-turn-black-unless-EU-pays-Libya-4bn-a-year.html.

187 Bish, A. (2024), 'Migration Proxy Warfare: Exploring the Role of Non-State Armed Actors in Libya's Refugee Rentierism, Project on Middle East Political Science, https://pomeps.org/migration-proxy-warfare-exploring-the-role-of-non-state-armed-actors-in-libyas-refugee-rentierism. In his concept of 'migration proxy warfare' Bish refers to the delegation of migration management to 'non-state armed groups'. However, almost all of the so-called non-state armed groups are in fact affiliated to the Libyan state, making this description problematic. They are referred to as armed groups here. For discussion of the status of Libyan armed groups, see Eaton, T. (2023), *Security actors in Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan since 2011.*

188 Eaton, T. (2024), 'Violent conflict in Libya and its transnational impacts on the movement of people', *Global Policy,* https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/projects/gp-e-books/borders-conflict-navigating-policy-transnational-ecosystem.

A more effective policy approach would be to assess migrant smuggling and TIP activities from the point of origin, via transit locations, to their destination. Such an approach allows for the examination of interconnections between these locations and the identification of entry points for policy. This paper is part of a series of systems analyses of migrant smuggling and TIP (the other papers focus on Niger and Nigeria) that have identified distinct dynamics in each location, which need to be addressed through tailored policy tools. For instance, programmatic interventions aimed at local development in Edo State in Nigeria could make people less likely to become vulnerable to migrant smuggling, thereby reducing the source of those most likely to become victims of Libya's conflict economy.[189]

While this is a resource-intensive task, given the importance that European governments have placed upon countering irregular migration, such an approach could represent a sensible investment, especially when considering the significant cost of addressing the migration issue further down the chain. In 2023, the EU laid out its intent to develop a 'whole-of-route' approach to tackle issues relating to irregular migration, but this does not extend beyond policy tools directly associated with combating smuggling and trafficking and the rescue and return of migrants.[190] A truly 'whole-of-route' approach would need to be broader to be effective. Specifically, it must contain a wider suite of policy tools than simply enforcement, including sustainable local development and peacebuilding efforts to reduce demand and the perceived need for migrants to move. These have the potential to tackle the enabling environment in which criminal groups operate. As it stands, current approaches run the risk of temporarily disrupting smuggling journeys, with migrants bearing the brunt of these policies, only to be reintroduced to the conflict chain and associated economies at a later point.

There is a need to focus on conflict reduction and align policy objectives in Libya

Looking at the range of issues that influence migrant smuggling and TIP through systems analysis in Libya reveals that a more sustained focus on conflict reduction could provide the key to more sustainable policy outcomes in the medium and long term. At present, however, European states' foreign policy tools designed to reduce flows of irregular migration are often at odds with policies to support transitions to peace and accountable governance.

Systems analysis shows that attempts to counter irregular migration have, in fact, contributed towards entrenching conflict dynamics in Libya. An example of this is Zawiya's former coast guard commander and head of the naval academy, Abd al-Rahman Milad (al-Bidja), who, despite his role in migration control, was deeply involved in smuggling and trafficking activities, before his recent assassination. His agency received EU capacity-building support, including

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189 de Haan, Aghedo and Eaton (2024), *Tracing the 'continuum of violence' between Nigeria and Libya*.
190 European Commission, Brussels and President von der Leyen (2023), 'Migration routes: Commission presents new Action Plan for the Western Mediterranean and Atlantic routes', press release, 6 June 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3056.

logistical aid and coordination for border control. This dual role, as both a state-backed migration official and a criminal actor, exacerbated competition with other factions in Zawiya, leading to violent clashes over territory and resources, destabilizing the city and causing casualties.

The expansion of state-affiliated armed networks is one of the greatest impediments to reaching a political settlement in Libya. Ultimately, policies that empower these actors and shield them from accountability – as European support has done – leads to the undermining of state-building efforts. In this sense, European policies formed to counter migration are, at best, poorly aligned with stated political objectives to achieve accountable and sustainable governance.

Reducing conflict and supporting a transition to more accountable governance will enable the creation of an environment with stronger state institutions that can boost meaningful efforts at law enforcement and economic development. The challenge therefore is to explore how European policymakers can harmonize their approaches towards conflict resolution and stabilization with their attempts to reduce irregular migration. A start here would be to accept that credible reports of human rights violations should result in a halt to provision of funding to the perpetrators' armed factions. Moreover, European policymakers should seek to support the development of initiatives that establish codes of conduct for armed actors in Libya and support the development of central law enforcement to push back against the culture of impunity that has prevailed. Such initiatives would boost UN-mediated conflict resolution efforts, which could also be significantly expanded with European support.[191]

Outside of direct engagement with armed actors, indirect efforts to mitigate conflict dynamics, such as reform of national funding mechanisms could have a major impact. Strong economic incentives remain for participation in migrant smuggling and trafficking. Sebha, Kufra and Zawiya have each benefited from the revenues generated by migrant smuggling and TIP. In particular, Sebha and Kufra, as key trans-Sahelian transit points, have long relied on cross-border trade, especially following the deterioration of the Libyan economy under international sanctions from the 1990s onwards.

This is a conundrum that is very difficult to solve, requiring long-term strategic economic development and diversification rather than sudden influxes of cash. The reliance on armed factions and revenues generated from the illicit sectors in Kufra, Sebha and Zawiya since 2011 have exacerbated conflict dynamics. To tackle this, solutions must be found to mobilize state funds for the re-development of local economies to support broader forms of economic activity – in particular away from oil and gas – across different sectors, including agriculture, renewable energy, investments in small businesses and human capital. In practical terms, this requires the political will of international policymakers and their Libyan counterparts to support reform of the funding mechanisms of the Libyan state, potentially through decentralization.

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191 Thornton, C. (2024), *Progressive Realist Peacemaking: A new strategic priority for UK foreign policy?,* Report, London: Labour Together, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/64f707cf512076037f612f60/t/65f95cc 19325ab6009c30b25/1710841026768/Progressive+Realist+Peacemaking+-+Labour+Together+%5BM arch+2024%5D.pdf.

With greater support from national government, it is possible to generate leverage over local actors to reduce their engagement in the illicit sector. Conditioning the distribution of local development spending upon a requirement for reasonable attempts to reduce migrant smuggling and TIP is more likely to be accepted by the local population as it is providing a credible alternative to the citizens of Kufra, Sebha and Zawiya that does not currently exist. These efforts by no means present a silver bullet, but they do offer a means of placing conditions that enhance accountability and transparency in the spending of public funds – previous EU funds had no clear or enforceable conditions.

Address local concerns and perceptions in policy responses

There is also a crucial need to consider the societal views of migration when developing policies and programming aimed at addressing smuggling and human trafficking in conflict-affected states. Local perceptions of migration deeply influence the effectiveness of interventions. In some cases, anti-migration sentiments further embolden armed actors and traffickers and enable them to operate with impunity. Ignoring these views can undermine even the best-intentioned policies, especially as local communities increasingly feel European policies are more concerned with Europe's interests than they are with Libya's stability and security. The sentiment on the ground is that Libyans come third to European interests and migrant protection.[192]

In this context, policy and programming must be grounded in an understanding of societal attitudes in order to succeed. International policymakers should seek to engage more deeply with communities to develop 'everyday peace indicators' to understand what peace means for the local population and how these indicators interact with migration in their cities. Migration control policies that fail to address local perceptions risk reinforcing negative stereotypes about migrants. Furthermore, they may inadvertently legitimize smuggling networks that are percieved locally as migration control agencies or service providers that assist migrants in their journey to Europe. Therefore, a key policy recommendation is to include community engagement and awareness campaigns as part of broader anti-trafficking and migration strategies. These campaigns should be designed to fit Libya's unique context and aim to challenge how locals understand migration, emphasizing the rights and vulnerabilities of migrants and countering the perception of smuggling as a service.

This paper illustrates the primacy of local conflict contexts over national conflict dynamics. The prevailing international approach has sought to reach an accommodation among Libyan elites for a national settlement but has generally placed less emphasis on supporting local peacebuilding efforts. These include community-driven peace dialogues and projects designed to promote collaboration and reconciliation across gender, political, ethnic and generational divides. A sustainable and equitable accommodation must be agreed between

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192 Chatham House commissioned research and interviews with key informants and residents in Zawiya (2022).

the communities in each of the three case study areas in order to ensure local stability. To assist this, international support should seek to first understand local definitions of, and existing structures for, peace and power-sharing, and then mediate between the communities over the structure of local governance to reduce the role of security actors in economic activity. This may come in the form of support for projects that encourage rival groups to work together and boost fair representation. In addition, this approach could focus on key areas like new economic programmes (that are not reliant on the illicit sector), joint education and improved access to better services. This support could also focus on cooperation with ministries, municipal councils, civil society and private sector entities to design inclusive urban planning, as the physical segregation of communities in Kufra and Sebha remains an ongoing problem, as is the lack of opportunities for the communities to interact.

About the authors

Tim Eaton is a senior research fellow in the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House and Libya case study lead for the XCEPT research programme. His research focuses on the political economy of conflict in the MENA region and on that of the Libyan conflict, in particular. Tim was the lead author of a major 2019 Chatham House report, *Conflict Economies in the Middle East and North Africa*, which developed a comparative framework to understand conflict economies in Libya, Iraq, Syria and Yemen and developed targeted policies to reduce economic drivers of conflict. The report was selected as one of the leading papers by a think-tank in the University of Pennsylvania's 2020 Go To Think Tank Index.

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