

# The anti-human smuggling business and Libya's political end game

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The hyper focus on stemming the flow of migrants via Libya by Italy and the European Union (EU), is encouraging an anti-smuggling business to emerge. Militia leaders, sensing an imminent end to the political status quo, are attempting to launder their reputations by accepting incentives to serve as law enforcement partners of international donors. This co-option creates instability, sabotages the state-building process and further drives the exploitation and abuse of migrants in the country. A stability-first approach is needed.

## Key points

- ▶ Europe's hyper focus on stemming the flow of migrants in Libya, led principally by Italy, is encouraging the development of an anti-smuggling business.
- ▶ Militias engaged in human smuggling are now seeking to launder their reputation through co-option.
- ▶ Militia co-option is at the heart of the drop in migrant numbers coming from Libya over 2017, but is also responsible for destabilising country's west coast and is undermining state-building.
- ▶ Militias should not be allowed to reinvent themselves in new cloaks but leveraged into demobilisation and reintegration.
- ▶ A 'stability first' approach is a prerequisite for the success of the peace process but also for the chance of sustainable, long term migration management in the country.
- ▶ The UN should be allowed to lead the political process without being undermined by the bilateral actions of governments with their own agenda in Libya.

## Introduction

The significant drop in migrant numbers seen in the Central Mediterranean over the second half of 2017 is the result of the co-option of militias deeply involved with human smuggling. Whether this happened through direct engagement by Italian security services, as speculated, could not be ascertained. However, the shift is encouraged by the Italian cash-for-migration-control strategy for Libya.

This hyper focus on the stemming of migrants by Italy, but also the EU at large, is encouraging an anti-smuggling business to emerge. Militia leaders, sensing that the present political status quo may be entering an end-game phase, are attempting to launder their reputations by accepting incentives to serve as law enforcement partners of international donors.

Whether the rumours of covert action by the Italians are true or false, the de facto co-option of the smuggling militias is happening in plain sight

This type of militia co-option creates instability, sabotages the state-building process and further drives the exploitation and abuse of migrants in the country. The international community should instead adopt a stability-first approach and leverage this trend to encourage true de-mobilisation of militias. Moreover, the UN should be allowed to lead the political process without being undermined by bilateral actions of governments with their own agenda in Libya.

In the second half of 2017, at a time when trans-Mediterranean migrant boat crossings would usually be at their peak, there was a dramatic drop in the number of migrants,<sup>1</sup> asylum seekers and refugees crossing from Libya. The shift was as sudden as it was momentous. Until the end of June there had been a consistent increase in the flow, leading many to predict that 2017 would see more than 200 000 migrants arrive in Italy – a record that would have been set only a few months before the country went to the polls.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, suddenly, in July the boats stopped coming. Rescuers found themselves squinting across the calm waters of the Mediterranean, puzzled by the inexplicable gaps even on clear days when they would have expected to pick up thousands aboard the now ubiquitous overcrowded rubber dinghies. And for a few months the numbers have stayed low. July saw a reduction in arrivals of 51% over the previous year, which grew to 83% in August. In September the reduction increased, albeit moderately, to a still substantial 65%, and in October to 68%.<sup>3</sup>

The European Union (EU) was quick to welcome the news as a potential breakthrough in which to invest further.<sup>4</sup> With right-wing populism spreading across Europe, the ever-increasing arrivals have put pressure on European governments to decisively end the 'migrant crisis', which is now in its fourth year. Previous efforts, including the deployment of two overlapping

interdiction efforts in the Mediterranean, had proved ineffective at their mandate to 'break the business model of smugglers',<sup>5</sup> and were functioning predominantly as search and rescue missions. Unable to engage on land in Libya owing to the ongoing political conflict, the EU had made proactive efforts to co-opt Libya's neighbouring states to serve as its de facto external border. In Niger this was particularly successful, as the EU exchanged millions in development cooperation for the criminalisation of human smuggling and an effective clampdown on Agadez and Dirkou, two of the country's northernmost smuggling hubs.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, the sudden decline seen in the second half of 2017 is not so much as a result of these longer-range efforts by the EU than as a result of a series of measures taken unilaterally by the Italian government. Italy's multi-dimensional strategy engaged both Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) and several municipalities and tribes in smuggling hubs across the country around the broad theme of 'development aid for migration control'.<sup>7</sup> In addition, in June 2017 a controversial code of conduct was introduced for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) providing migrant rescue functions in the Mediterranean, and the Libyan coastguard's capacity was reinforced. As a result the majority of NGOs operating in these waters shut down their operations.<sup>8</sup>

The sudden decline in migrants in the second half of 2017 is a result of a series of measures taken unilaterally by Italy

There is also mounting speculation that the Italian intelligence service has co-opted militias engaged in human smuggling and other illicit activities in a bid to stem the flow of migrants – a rumour consistently denied by the Italian authorities.<sup>9</sup> Whether the rumours of covert action by the Italians are true or false, the de facto co-option of the smuggling militias is happening in plain sight. As will be discussed, Sabrathan militias that are widely known to have run a major human smuggling operation abruptly halted their activities and instead turned to policing, sanctioned by institutions that fall under the internationally recognised GNA.

Investments in building the capacity of the Libyan coastguard have become a key feature of the EU

programme, and fast boats and high-tech surveillance equipment, among others, have been deployed to units operating along Libya's western coast.<sup>10</sup> Further plans are being made to support and upgrade Libya's migrant detention centres as part of the migrant return strategy.

In each case, parts of the coastguard, several detention centres, and other key security branches of the fragile Libyan state are run by militia groups with often-nominal affiliation to the GNA.

These latest developments in the anti-smuggling agenda are taking place at a major juncture for Libya. There is a general perception that the current phase in Libya's protracted post-revolution transition is entering the end game, and that a new settlement of some kind is likely to occur in the coming months – whether by political or military means. Militias across the country are actively seeking to hedge their positions in this anticipated new order by trying to legitimise themselves. They are manoeuvring to ensure that they sit (or at least appear to sit) on the right side of important brokers/donors such as the United Nations (UN) and the EU. In the present climate, where threats of International Criminal Court (ICC) indictments or asset seizures abound, there is no greater liability than being labelled a human smuggler or a terrorist.

This report seeks to update the evidence basis and speculation around the status of the human smuggling networks in Libya, and the role they are playing and are likely to play in the unfolding landscape.

The report draws on a monitoring exercise carried out in Libya and the Sahel by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime and the Migrant Network between August 2016 and 2017. It also benefits from more than 20 interviews with policymakers, law enforcement officials, independent academics, migration and Libya watchers, NGOs and humanitarian workers engaged with migration in Libya, including several semi-structured interviews with smugglers. The interviews were carried out during August 2016, and funded by the Institute for Security Studies and the Hanns Seidel Foundation.

### **Italy's burden / Italy's bargain**

Late in June 2017, the Italian government was in a panic. In the space of just four days more than 12 000 migrants had disembarked at Italian ports, to enter the Italian

asylum system.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the internal conversation on the ‘sbarchi senza fine’ – the endless landings – had reached fever pitch.

Throughout the protracted, steadily escalating ‘migrant crisis’, other EU member states have shown little solidarity with Italy’s predicament. In the period 2013–2016 Italy received more than half a million irregular migrants by sea. Each asylum claim takes approximately six to nine months to process – plus a further year if it goes to appeal. Just processing each claim costs the Italian government an estimated €10 000 in the first year alone.<sup>12</sup> The costs associated with the rescue effort, returns, reception and integration support are higher and more difficult to quantify: the Italian government estimates that the migrant crisis has cost the country as much as €4.8 billion in total.<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, despite repeated talks of burden sharing and redistribution, Italy’s neighbours have ramped up security at their contiguous land borders, confining migrants to the Italian boot.<sup>14</sup> By 4 September 2017 only 8 451 asylum seekers had been relocated from Italy to elsewhere in Europe,<sup>15</sup> and member states had fulfilled less than a third of their relocation pledges.<sup>16</sup> With national elections imminent, Italy urgently needed to make tangible progress in reducing the number of arrivals or risk seeing another populist, right-wing upheaval.

### The La Celle-Saint-Cloud meeting cemented Haftar’s image as a legitimate political actor and power broker

In February 2017 a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni and Fayeza Sarraj, the head of Libya’s GNA. This was a turning point. The MOU saw Rome pledge support in the form of training, equipment and development investment to help the Tripoli government improve border security on the coastal and southern borders, and to fight the smuggling and trafficking of human beings and of contraband. A day after its signing, at a meeting of EU leaders in Malta, the deal was presented with some fanfare as a breakthrough that might bring about the ‘closure’ of the central Mediterranean route, similar to the deal with Turkey in the Aegean.<sup>17</sup> This had long been an objective of the EU.<sup>18</sup>

The strategy implemented in the Aegean, which blocked the so-called ‘Western Balkan Route’, was the result of a comprehensive border management deal between the EU and Turkey managed to significantly reduce the flow of migrants arriving in Europe. In addition, as a further deterrent, all irregular arrivals from Turkey into Europe would be returned to Turkey in exchange for an asylum seeker who had applied through legitimate channels.<sup>19</sup>

More than 1 million people took this route between the summers of 2015 and 2016, but once the EU–Turkey deal was implemented, that extraordinary flow slowed to a trickle. It also largely pulled the rug from under Turkish and Kurdish organised crime, which showed all the signs of having started to harness

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€4.8 billion

THE ESTIMATED COST  
OF THE MIGRANT CRISIS  
TO ITALY

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the multi-million-dollar business that had developed organically around Syrian asylum seekers.<sup>20</sup>

However, Libya presented a different set of challenges that did not allow for a carbon copy of the EU–Turkey formula. Libya lacks a central government with sufficient control over the security apparatus, or the capacity and reach to govern its borders. The country is politically divided; the main point of contestation being which of the competing power groupings has the legitimacy to unite the country.<sup>21</sup> Security – including the functions of the national military, police, coastguard and customs – is provided by an ever-changing spectrum of politically allied militia groups,<sup>22</sup> and the overall levels of insecurity make it hard for international actors to engage on land. Most importantly for the deterrent effect, returning asylum seekers to Libya, given the ongoing conflict, was declared unlawful by the European Court of Human Rights in 2012.<sup>23</sup>

The deal struck with the GNA was intended to address this context through a broad strategy, led by Italian Interior Minister Marco Minniti, that has seen Rome engage directly with various border security and local government actors in smuggling hubs across Libya, promising investment and development aid in return for help with migration control.

This exchange of financial incentives, investments in infrastructure, and equipment and capacity building for border control agencies was a familiar deal for the Libyan people, as it echoed the Treaty of Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation signed in 2008 by Muammar Gaddafi and then Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. In fact, the Treaty of Friendship is mentioned in the 2017 MOU, along with another treaty signed after the revolution in 2012. The big difference is that whereas the 2008 Italy–Libya deal was successfully sold as an example of the country’s international rehabilitation after the decade-long Lockerbie sanctions era,<sup>24</sup> the 2017 MOU was no public relations victory for the GNA. Many Libyan citizens saw this as the tenuous government’s placing foreign interests and international priorities above their own.<sup>25</sup> To quote a high-level civil servant interviewed in Tripoli in March 2017:

We live with power cuts here in Tripoli. I cannot cash my wage because there isn’t enough money in the bank, and the militias ... even the ones that say they are under the GNA do as they please and

cause chaos in the streets whenever they like. And Serraj is signing an agreement on migration? Who cares about migration?<sup>26</sup>

In fact, the MOU was challenged in court by a group of Libyan lawyers, including an erstwhile justice minister. A Tripoli court accepted the plaintiff’s plea that, under the terms of the 2015 Libya Political Agreement, the GNA had no authority to enter into such a deal without the prior approval of the elected Parliament in Tobruk, in eastern Libya. Towards the end of August the GNA managed to have this ruling overturned, but the MOU has remained a point of polarisation and contention.<sup>27</sup>

“... Serraj is signing an agreement on migration? Who cares about migration?”  
– High-level civil servant interviewed in Tripoli

When the MOU moved from talk to action with plans for a joint Italo-Libyan maritime surveillance operation, the leader of the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA), Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, harnessed this popular discontent and framed the development in anti-colonial terms. He threatened to repel any foreign vessels entering Libyan waters without the permission of the eastern government.<sup>28</sup> In an interview with the Italian national newspaper *Corriere Della Sera*, given just a few weeks after this bellicose warning, Haftar all but admitted that it was an empty threat. But the message was clearly that Italy had to go through the east, and specifically him, to make such deals.<sup>29</sup>

His profile was bolstered in July when the French hosted a joint meeting between Haftar and Sarraj. The La Celle-Saint-Cloud meeting, in which a 10-point statement and a ‘ceasefire’ were announced, cemented Haftar’s image as a legitimate political actor and powerbroker, arguably placing him on an equal footing with Sarraj.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, it also challenged Italy’s European leadership on Libya (both political and migration-related), as well as Rome’s strategy to contain Haftar’s takeover while promoting a revision of the Libya Political Agreement, which was due to expire in December 2017.

It is no coincidence then, that immediately following the La Celle-Saint-Cloud meeting, Italy moved aggressively to speed up the plans for a joint naval mission in Libyan territorial waters that had been awaiting Sarraj’s consent

since February. Libyan authorities had resisted granting permission for international forces to operate in Libya's territorial waters, perceiving it as a far too visible encroachment on the country's prized sovereignty. But the La Celle-Saint-Cloud meeting and Haftar's subsequent empowerment by France had put both the Italians and Sarraj on the back foot, needing to re-assert their control over the situation.<sup>31</sup>

Evidence that the Rome discussions had caught Sarraj between competing priorities – to appear independent and in control to the Libyan people, while ensuring the international community's continued support for this authority – came via an uncomfortable dance that played out as the joint mission was launched. Just two weeks after agreeing to the operation, he denied the Italian claim that the GNA had requested Italian assistance to control migration flows. Eventually, however, his dependence on Italian support ensured that the joint mission was approved by the GNA,<sup>32</sup> and it is now operating in Libyan national waters.

The Libyan coastguard was engaged both by the EU's naval mission, Operation Sophia, and by Italy directly

In parallel, at the beginning of July, Italy set about effectively reversing the effects of its decision to launch Operation Mare Nostrum. The operation, launched in the aftermath of the Lampedusa tragedies, was the first naval exercise to prioritise search and rescue over border control. As a result, the mission moved the rescue zone to an area just outside Libyan territorial waters, changing the dynamics of the central Mediterranean and opening Italy up to the charge that it had created a pull factor. Mare Nostrum ended towards the end of 2014 but, despite some to-ing and fro-ing, subsequent naval operations have more or less held the line drawn by the Italian mission. Moreover, it was this change to search and rescue that opened the door to the new era of private rescue missions, which in 2017 was estimated to be responsible for more than 40% of the migrants brought ashore.<sup>33</sup>

The Minniti plan sought to reverse this. The government demanded that NGOs operating in the central Mediterranean sign a code of conduct designed to bring the private rescue effort under government control.<sup>34</sup> Tensions around NGO rescue efforts ranged from the more benign desire to provide a coordinated, predictable and safe response to the humanitarian emergency in the Mediterranean, to more accusatory suggestions that the NGOs were facilitating and colluding with human smugglers.<sup>35</sup>

Critically, Rome also encouraged the Libyan coastguard to officially reinstate its search and rescue area (which it did on August 10), which extends as much as 24 nautical miles off the coast. The Libyan coastguard was also engaged both by the EU's naval mission, Operation Sophia (tasked with training the Libyan coastguard),<sup>36</sup> and by Italy directly, through the above-mentioned joint surveillance operation and the delivery of refurbished patrol boats.<sup>37</sup>



PRIVATE RESCUE  
MISSIONS BROUGHT  
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Inevitably, this brought NGOs and the Libyan coastguard into more contact with each other, which in turn led to a number of hostile altercations, including repeated incidents of warning shots being fired to ward off rescue boats. As a result, and out of fear that they might be forced to return migrants to Libyan maritime crews which they said contravened the human rights of those attempting to migrate, key NGO operators reconsidered their presence in the area.<sup>38</sup>

While the diplomatic interventions and the clampdown on NGO search and rescue operations sparked international controversy, these were only two prongs of the Italian strategy to reduce irregular migration levels. And neither of these moves accounted for the rapidly declining number of migrants being put to sea.

As will be discussed further on, boat departures dropped principally in the wake of a clampdown by the militias formerly involved in human smuggling in Sabratha. The action was especially successful owing to the cooperation between these armed groups in Sabratha and their former foes among the militia-run Zawiya coastguards. These factions had been brought together by the GNA in line with the broad anti-smuggling plan agreed to with Italy.

### Positioning for Libya’s ‘end game’

After news broke of the Italian MOU in February 2017, the first discernible movement on the smuggling scene was most certainly unintended: a surge in the number of people crossing. Multiple independent sources reported seeing an almost instantaneous increase in the movement of migrants from Tripoli and connection

houses in the region towards the coastal towns of Sabratha and Mutrud.<sup>39</sup> This began to be reflected in the arrival numbers in as early as April, and by May it had peaked at an almost 25% increase over the previous year (see Figure 1).

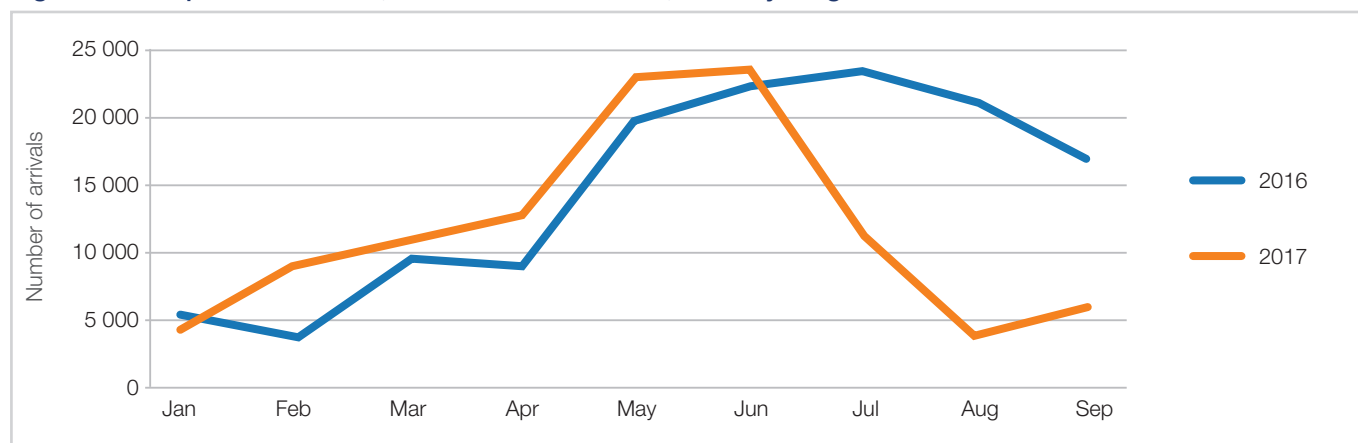
Smuggling activity had been disrupted in February and March 2016 owing to an ISIS insurgency in Sabratha, the main embarkation point in the region. Nonetheless, arrivals increased by 45% between February and April 2017, after Italy signed the agreement with the GNA, before settling into a pattern of arrivals in May and June similar to the previous year.

The Italian MOU fuelled fears that the sea route from Libya might soon be shut down

According to reports from Tripoli and various smuggling hubs along the west coast, the announcement of Italy’s agreement with the GNA fuelled fears that the sea route from Libya might soon be shut down, and that the window might be closing for migrants wanting to cross to Europe.<sup>40</sup> The level of activity in February and March was thus atypical for the season, as the rate of departures usually declines because of the variable weather conditions, which make it hard for smugglers to reliably plan departures. This year, however, there was a clear effort to send the boats out early.<sup>41</sup> As a security official recounted via text message in February:

*Mandubs* [migrant brokers] are telling the migrants the route is going to close soon so they need

Figure 1: Comparative arrivals, central Mediterranean, January–August 2016 & 2017



Data source: UNHCR/ <http://data2.unhcr.org/>

to leave now. I think they are trying to make the best in case the coastguards start catching more boats or they are just using it as an excuse to create more business. I don't think the deal will have any effect but you never know ...<sup>42</sup>

From April to July the numbers continued to rise, despite increasing activity by the newly equipped and reinforced coastguard, whose patrols were bringing it in more direct confrontation with smugglers. In April one such standoff ended badly for a group of seven smugglers who were engaged by a crew from the Zawiya Refinery Coastguard, led by Amdurahman Salem Milad (known as al-Bija). The incident, which saw the coastguard chase down a smuggler vessel near Zawiya, about 45 km west of Tripoli, ended with a heavy exchange of fire. Four of the smugglers were killed and three arrested.<sup>43</sup>

The Mutrud municipality officially repudiated the smuggling trade and tasked its own militia to drive smugglers and their trade out of town

The incident had significant consequences. All but one of the smugglers that night had come from the town of Mutrud, a small city used by smugglers as a coordination hub but whose involvement in smuggling had been overshadowed by the more intense activity elsewhere along the coast. Their deaths had a twofold impact: firstly, Mutrud was now clearly marked on the smuggling map, drawing an unwanted degree of attention; and secondly, the incident sparked conflict between the smugglers' families and the Abu Hmeira tribe from which many of the coastguard officials and al-Bija himself hail.<sup>44</sup>

Yet many people also refused to be dragged into a conflict they had nothing to do with. In response, on 21 April, a meeting was organised by the Mutrud municipality that brought together the military council, community leaders and town elders. At this meeting the municipality officially repudiated the smuggling trade in its entirety, and tasked its own militia, the West Zawiya Anti-Crime Unit, to drive the smugglers and their trade out of town. By the end of the month the unit had carried out raids on three warehouses where approximately 600 migrants were found.<sup>45</sup> Vehicles and other equipment found at the properties were seized or burned. No smugglers were arrested, but the crackdown had its intended effect, moving all warehousing activity out of town.<sup>46</sup>

This community-led rejection of the smuggling trade echoes a similar move by the Amazigh (Berber) town of Zuwara in 2015. Zuwara had been one of the most active coastal staging posts for human smuggling since the early days of the phenomenon in the late 1990s. However, growing international scrutiny of the town and the increasing number of fatalities after the revolution caused human smuggling to be understood as a threat to the community. Sixty smugglers were arrested and charged, while the rest were driven out of town. Since then there has been no evidence of large-scale human smuggling, although the town is still deeply involved in other smuggling economies, most notably fuel.<sup>47</sup>



SIXTY SMUGGLERS  
ARRESTED AND CHARGED



The Zuwaran example, which remains surprisingly under-reported internationally, has proven to be the most sustainable anti-smuggling operation to date. It is still too early to say if the developments in Mutrud will also prove to be durable, but the shift needs to be understood in the context of the broader changes that took place after the second civil war in 2014, which saw various political and armed factions attempt to legitimise their positions.

These kinds of actions need to be viewed in the context of the wider political and military changes taking place in the country. In 2017 Libya went from three to two effective governments – the GNA and the government based in the east, which is also home to the internationally recognised Parliament and the allied LNA. The former National Salvation Government (NSG), which had controlled Tripoli between 2014 and the first quarter of 2016, has virtually disappeared from the scene following a decisive armed confrontation in May that. That clash also reverberated onto the country's third power base, Misrata.<sup>48</sup>

'Right now, in Libya, you are either in the smuggling business or in the anti-smuggling business'

The city's cohesion was further undermined by an internal rift in the political and armed factions supporting the NSG and those behind the GNA, as well as the unseating of its forces from the strategic trade nodes, military and oil installations it had been holding since 2015 in the country's critical south-west region. Meanwhile, the LNA successfully crushed the coalition of Islamists that Operation Dignity had set out to defeat in May 2014, and now controls most of Cyrenaica and the Oil Crescent installations seized in March. Derna, the eastern coastal city holdout, has been subdued through a siege said to be intended to 'choke' the town into submission.<sup>49</sup>

This expanded territorial influence thus placed Haftar in a markedly improved negotiating position and also sent a message to politically opposed militias and towns to start taking cover. The La Celle-Saint-Cloud meeting further telegraphed domestically that the France–Italy schism opened more room for different players to manoeuvre between competing EU interests. It

also reinforced the idea that presenting oneself as a champion in the battle against terrorism and human smuggling would help bend the rules of international diplomacy in one's favour. These messages trickled down through the various strata that make up Libya's human smuggling industry, fuelling a positioning exercise among the various militia groups to ensure that, at the culmination of any negotiated political solution, they would find themselves on the right side.

The phenomenon was encapsulated during an interview in August 2016 with Farouk\*, an insightful lieutenant in one of the militia groups involved in human smuggling along the west coast. 'Right now, in Libya, you are either in the smuggling business or in the anti-smuggling business,'<sup>50</sup> he said. His point was that his militia outfit's so-called smugglers, was no different from the militias that were taking on law enforcement or coastguard roles. In each case, their objective was to maximise the resources they could secure in a situation of perpetual uncertainty. The changes taking place on the national landscape now make the conversion to the latter type of business model critical.

### Set a thief to catch a thief

Over the past six years, since the overthrow of Gaddafi, the coastal smuggling industry has undergone three broad transformational phases. The business transitioned from a liberalised market in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution to a protected market around 2013/14. The final shift started to take shape from 2014 onwards, in the aftermath of Mare Nostrum, when the militias that had previously just protected and in some cases extorted the smugglers, began to actively engage in smuggling and took over the business themselves.<sup>51</sup> It was in this phase that the number of departures really began to escalate.

The closure of Zuwara as an embarkation hub for migrants smuggled to Europe in late 2015 ended the dominance that the town's smugglers previously had over the trade, and displaced the business eastward. The towns of Sabratha and Zawiya – both densely militarised and highly fractured – came to the fore in the new phase of the smuggling economy. The toxic rivalries that marked dynamics within and between these small towns created polarisations in the market, where militia groups brokered alliances to try to secure control of key coastal access points, inland entrepôts, and trafficking

routes to the coast. Amid intense fractures, with various armed groups divided along multiple lines of contention (national, ideological, territorial, tribal and familial), what really binds the various smuggling syndicates is their common enemies rather than shared ideological agendas, political alliances or even financial gain.

Moreover, the human smuggling industry and the fuel smuggling trade and other illicit flows are interdependent. Although human smuggling has been a highly profitable industry, fuel smuggling remains the far more lucrative financial backbone of the west coast's illicit economy. Zuwarans may not have been in a position to renounce human smuggling in 2015 had they not had such an important stake in the illicit fuel economy to sustain them.<sup>52</sup>

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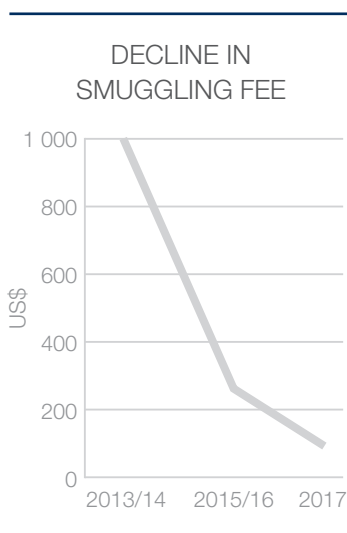
The factionalisation in the market, together with the regional cooperation required by fuel smuggling, hastened the development and consolidation of consortia consisting of militias and smuggling kingpins from towns in the region. They would join forces to exploit the full smorgasbord of smuggling markets: fuel, human beings, drugs and weapons, among others. In this sense, the logic of many militia-dominated smuggling outfits in Libya differs somewhat from the profit motive one would normally ascribe to organised criminal networks.<sup>53</sup>

While Libya remains at war, the bottom line for many of the armed militia groups is to maintain and, if possible, extend their territory, as well as their influence over the political and social space of the locality where they are based. The relationship with the community they spring from is at times symbiotic – or, at least, that is how armed group leaders envision it. The point is illustrated in the following justification, given by the leader of an armed group deeply engaged in illicit activity when asked why he chose the life of a militiaman after the revolution.

I have no way out now. I didn't plan to become a number [a player], it just happened. During the war, I became a leader, I would lead the front line, and important people started turning to me. I got involved in one battle and then in another and then I started being asked to get involved in resolving problems that affect our people [tribe/town]. When we had trouble with Warshefana, for instance, I would be called in to discuss how we should react to it. Now I cannot leave even if I wanted to.<sup>54</sup>

Whether this militiaman cannot or does not want to abandon his newfound power is arguable. The underlying point, however, is that he frames his actions and motivations within a social and communitarian context.

There are variations, of course, but this dynamic partly explains why the price for sea crossings dropped dramatically in the coastal areas from 2013



onwards, more or less in tandem with militias' takeover of the market. In more traditional settings, one would expect the formation of syndicates to lead to some sort of cartel effect, locking prices. Yet the price slid from an all-time high of about US\$1 000 (roughly LYD 2 000–2 500 at the time) for a spot in the hull of a wooden boat in around 2013–14, to approximately US\$250 (LYD 1 000–1 500) in 2015–16 for a roughly equivalent spot on a crowded rubber boat, and finally an unprecedented low of US\$60–90 (approximately LYD 500–750) in June 2017.<sup>55</sup>

There were other market forces that also contributed to this drop, including the decrease in Syrian asylum seekers after 2014–15, who had much more purchasing power than sub-Saharan migrants, and the reduction in costs for smugglers owing to the shift from wooden to rubber boats and the need for less fuel.<sup>56</sup>

These factors notwithstanding, a fundamental element driving the price competition was that militia leaders were more concerned with taking business away from their rivals than with the profits they made on the flow of migrants. This reached a point where small-scale smugglers were being driven out of business because they could not sustain their operational costs and pay protection fees with the going rate that migrants were being charged. *Manadeeb* (plural of *mandub*, or migrant brokers) began working directly with militias, eventually completely undercutting smaller Libyan smugglers.

The *manadeeb* started competing with each other, one would say (LYD) 700 another 800, then it became 600 until it reached 500. Below 500 nobody wants to work for that fee, it doesn't bring you any profit ...

Now, there is the militia, you understand? They all carry guns, they protect themselves, like the regime in Sabratha, before they weren't armed ... Places like Warshefana, Az Zawiyah, Surman, Sabratha they are working through the militias. So, someone like me cannot do his business anymore ...<sup>57</sup>

As the number of migrants rose, the international community began using a wider variety of tools to see which would have an impact in stemming the flow, and to sift through the various ranks of the state security institutions to find counterparts within the militias with whom they could work. Diplomatic tools, including the use of sanctions, were being considered for those involved in human smuggling and trafficking.

In May 2017 the prosecutor of the ICC told the UN Security Council that her office was considering launching an investigation into alleged migrant-related crimes in Libya, including human trafficking.<sup>58</sup> Then, in June 2017, the UN Panel of Experts report recommended extending international sanctions to those 'committing serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law',<sup>59</sup> with the treatment of migrants by human smugglers and traffickers in Libya falling under this definition.

Once the international community began to name names, and with an upset to the present political status quo in sight, militia groups were under great pressure to launder their reputations, and to ensure that, fairly or unfairly, they were not scapegoated for the entire migrant smuggling industry under the new regime.

Once the international community began to name names militia groups were under great pressure to launder their reputations

It is no coincidence that the main protagonists in the clampdown on the west coast, Ahmed al-Dabbashi and the head of the Zawiyah Refinery Coastguard, al-Bija, were both singled out by the Libya Panel of Experts report as smuggling kingpins located within the wider illicit economy of the region.

On the coast, the main facilitators are based in Zawiyah, Zuwarah and Sabratha. They include the armed group commanders Mohamed Koshlaf and Ahmed Dabbashi (alias Amu). Coastguard commander Abd al-Rahman Milad (alias Bija) collaborates with Koshlaf (see paras. 59, 105 and 245). The main departure site appears to be Talil Beach, in the resort complex in Sabratha.<sup>60</sup>

The Zawiyah Refinery Coastguard unit, in particular, was ripe for rehabilitation, having also been singled out in the press for abuse of migrants and collusion with human smugglers.<sup>61</sup>

Without doubt, al-Bija runs the most successful maritime crew with the highest interception rate of migrant boats all coastguard units operating in western Libya. According to data collected by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Zawiyah Refinery Coastguard was responsible for more than half (5 707) of

the 10 989 migrants intercepted at sea between January and 31 June 2017 by 13 coastguard units (including two in Zawiya) spread across a 250 km stretch of sea from Al-Khums, east of Tripoli, to Zuwara, in the west.<sup>62</sup>

At the same time, however, al-Bija was accused by the Panel of Experts of exploiting his position to run a protection racket and make money from the al-Nasr Detention Centre in Zawiya, with which he is associated. While he did admit to selling outboard motors seized in interception missions during extensive discussions with the authors in August 2016, he rejected the claim that he or his crew received money connected with either human or fuel smuggling. Instead, al-Bija proclaimed proudly that he was single-handedly responsible for the slowdown in the migratory flows along the west coast, as well as having been at the centre of some of the biggest interceptions of tankers smuggling fuel in recent years.<sup>63</sup>

The Zawiya Refinery Coastguard was responsible for more than half of the migrants intercepted at sea between January and 31 June 2017

The first signs that something had changed on the west coast came early in June, when the 48th Battalion started running patrols along the Sabrathan coast. The relatively new outfit was formed in 2016 during the war on ISIS in Sirte before being sanctioned on 31 January 2017 by the Libyan Defence Ministry.<sup>64</sup> Towards the end of the month the battalion published pictures on its Facebook page of a raid it had carried out on a warehouse for migrants close to the shore in Sabratha. Around 120 migrants, mostly West Africans, were arrested and eventually transferred to a detention facility in Tripoli. No smuggler was arrested, but some vehicles were seized and the warehouse where the migrants were kept was bulldozed.<sup>65</sup>

The strange thing about this raid was that it was carried out on Dabbashi territory, close to the Tellil beach in Sabratha. Yet no retaliatory firefight ensued. The 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion could apparently act freely on the territory of one of Sabratha's strongest militias, the Anas al-Dabbashi Battalion. In fact, multiple sources spoken to during this period reported that the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion and the Anas al-Dabbashi were effectively one and the same thing; the former simply acted as a respectable façade for the Dabbashi militia, whose de facto leader, Ahmed al-Dabbashi, was the other kingpin named in the Panel of Experts' report.

The June raid was a one-off, but the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion had also started carrying out surveillance work on land. Critically, its work was coordinated with the sea patrols carried out by the Zawiya Refinery Coastguard headed by al-Bija on the Zawiya side and with a maritime crew from the Anas al-Dabbashi on the Sabratha side. For Libya watchers, this cooperation was extraordinary. Only a few months before Ahmed al-Dabbashi and al-Bija had been sworn enemies – a fact confirmed by the authors in person with the latter in August 2016.

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10 989

THE NUMBER OF  
MIGRANTS INTERCEPTED  
AT SEA BETWEEN  
1 JANUARY AND  
31 JUNE 2017

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Rumours began to swirl across the west coast's smuggling hubs, especially in Sabratha, that this volte-face was the result of a deal between these erstwhile enemies and the Italian security services. This immediately began creating a narrative of foreign intervention through the back door, which was eventually picked up by the international press.<sup>66</sup> Locals spoke of extraordinary sums of money being transferred to both men, along with assurances that they would not face international prosecution.

Italy rejected the allegations out of hand,<sup>67</sup> and it was not possible to confirm these rumours beyond hearsay. However, for the purpose of this analysis, whether or not Italian agents covertly paid militias directly is only relevant up to a point.

It is a fact that by this time both militias had become official law enforcement entities of the GNA: the Anas al-Dabbashi and the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion connected to the interior and the defence ministries respectively, and al-Bija's crew recognised as an official coastguard unit well before this point. The official letter sanctioning the Anas al-Dabbashi brigade was issued on 20 August 2017.<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, while the Dabbashis were busy building their new anti-smuggling force, the Zawiya Refinery Coastguard consolidated its position as the main anti-smuggling unit in the region. Al-Bija posted on his Facebook a picture of a military-grade rigid-hulled inflatable boat powered by four 250 HP Yamaha outboard motors, and declared that another was on the way. His crew was also soon seen in a Bigliani Class patrol boat, one of four 35 m crafts returned to Libya after being repaired and refurbished in Italy.<sup>69</sup>

The two units' information sharing and coordination of law enforcement actions saw them cover the key embarkation points in the region, enabling early interception at sea as well as disruptive interventions on land to counter smuggling. Each continued to operate in its own respective territory; the Dabbashi militia and the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion in Sabratha, and the coastguard unit mostly off the coast of Zawiya, Mutrud and Surman. However, their coming together created a formidable early warning system that acted as a major deterrent, as the non-co-opted militias feared being caught in the act and being blamed for the entire industry. Thus this partnership created an almost complete blockade on departures for all of the towns between Zawiya and Sabratha.

## The battle for Sabratha

The strategy of co-opting certain parts of the region's syndicates and not all, not only robbed the militia groups that were left out of a revenue stream but, in the context of end-game positioning, also presented an unacceptable existential threat.

The most prominent loser in the new west coast paradigm was the al-Wadi Battalion, arch rival of the Dabbashi militia. The battalion draws its name from the central Sabratha area (*wadi* means valley) from which it operates, which is also a major embarkation point for human smuggling.<sup>70</sup>

Following the closure of Zuwara as a smuggling hub in August 2015, Sabratha became the epicentre of an interconnected area of coastal activity that stretches for about 40 km, from the Mellitah Oil and Gas Facility to Mutrud. The area has some of the most intense overlaps between militia groups and smuggling activities, and is highly factionalised. Divisions in the town stem from long-standing familial disputes specific to Sabratha, but also follow the national east and west political schism and the religious and ideological fault lines among Islamist groups. Securing lasting control over Sabratha equates to unprecedented influence and financial return.

The strategy of co-opting some of the region's syndicates robbed the militia groups left of a revenue stream

The new legitimacy and backing acquired by the Anas al-Dabbashi Battalion caused a small tidal wave in the volatile Sabratha politics, prompting full-scale warfare in the town in September and October. As the momentum grew behind the Dabbashi militia's anti-human smuggling operations, via the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion, it became clear to the opposing coalition that it needed to act, as time was running out.

You think we're going to accept that *al-Amu* [‘the uncle’ and head of the Dabbashi battalion] becomes the King of Sabratha? This is what we have been fighting for all these years. Do you think we're going to let him take control of us? Do you think we are stupid?<sup>71</sup>

The fallout started surfacing in August, when various elements of the Anas al-Dabbashi Battalion and other

allied militiamen rioted against a decision by the Anti-ISIS Operations Room Sabratha. The Operations Room was born in the wake of a month-long ISIS insurgency in the town, provoked by a United States airstrike on a hideout of the terrorist group that had killed more than 40 people in February 2016.<sup>72</sup> By June that year, the group had obtained official sanction from the GNA and was being supported by various civilian and military entities to become Sabratha's official security arm, subsuming, or at least drawing on, all of the major militias in Sabratha. While nobody could publicly argue with the logic of a centralised security apparatus that was above the town's divisions, the various strongmen and powerbrokers operating in the town and the periphery strongly opposed this move.

The Anas al-Dabbashi Battalion also resisted the move, despite endorsing it on paper on at least two occasions.<sup>73</sup> It represented a coalition of armed groups, including at least part of the al-Ghrabli Martyrs Battalion and other armed militants from the Ghrablja clan – the third military force in Sabratha.

The Operations Room was borne in the wake of a month-long ISIS insurgency in Sabratha, provoked by a United States airstrike on a hideout of the terrorist group

The Ghrablja were wary of the presence of anti-revolution or pro-Haftar sentiments in the Operations Room and the coalition of militias supporting it (chiefly the al-Wadi Battalion). While, on the surface, the move to consolidate the Operations Room went forward, in the background the Anas al-Dabbashi Battalion and al-Wadi were competing for influence in the official security structures. The former aligned itself with the Central Security Unit and al-Wadi cemented its position in the Operations Room – both bodies answerable to the GNA. In July the al-Wadi Battalion donated 10 technical vehicles and seconded men to the Operations Room, while Anas al-Dabbashi gave the Central Security Unit five police cars and other hardware in August.<sup>74</sup>

On 18 July there came a turning point. Sami al-Gharabli, aka al-Cru, the head of the Sabratha Central Security Unit, and his cousin were gunned down close to Dabbashi territory, apparently while they were giving chase to suspected smugglers.<sup>75</sup> The two families have a mixed history, but militiamen from both had been broadly united since 2011, first during the uprising itself and then as a result of their mutual concern over the Regime era and Haftar-supporting elements in the coastal town. However, the killing of Sami al-Ghrabli ignited conflict between elements of the two families two days after the murder. Eventually, the confrontation subsided when the two men believed to be the actual killers were apprehended (one of them was killed), but relations between the two sides had been soured.

The first sign of this break-up came when the new coordinated force was deployed around Sabratha to man checkpoints in the beginning of August. The Operations Room came under attack from several militiamen, including several Dabbashis and others from Essam al-Ghul's militia, but no Ghrabli

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15 000

PEOPLE WERE DISPLACED  
IN THE TWO MONTH  
BATTLE FOR SABRATHA IN  
SEPT/OCT 2017

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stood against the Operations Room. The Dabbashis appeared to have lost major allies among the Ghrablja just as the bubbling tensions with al-Wadi were reaching boiling point.

At the same time, news that Italy had invited Haftar to a meeting in Rome ruffled feathers in the camp led by the Dabbashi militia. On 16 September, the invitation was condemned by the Sabratha Military Council, led by Taher al-Gharabli, a prominent exception to the Ghrablja's distancing from the Anas al-Dabbashi Battalion.<sup>76</sup> The Military Council objected that the invitation was made just as the field marshal came under the spotlight for potential human rights abuses and war crimes perpetrated in the east of Libya.<sup>77</sup>

A day later came the decisive flashpoint. On 17 September, two members of the Anas al-Dabbashi Battalion were killed at a checkpoint manned by al-Wadi militiamen operating under the Operations Room. As with every other story in the town, there are two diametrically opposite versions of why this incident happened in broad daylight at a checkpoint in the centre of town. While both versions conclude that it was a deliberate act designed to initiate conflict, one version points the finger at al-Wadi militants, and the other at the Dabbashis.

The conflict engulfed Sabratha for almost 19 days. The Operations Room's forces were bolstered by LNA-aligned groups, including a unit from the Saiqa Special Forces. As a result, on 6 October the Operations Room declared a decisive victory over the Anas al-Dabbashi in Sabratha. The Dabbashi, el-Ghul militia and 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion fled overnight, their exact whereabouts unknown. More than 40 people were killed and almost 350 injured in the fierce urban fighting that displaced more than 15 000 people from around 3 000 households.

In the first two days after the hostilities had ended, the al-Wadi battalion acted fast to bolster its image as a 'genuine' anti-smuggling actor. It corralled hundreds of migrants into the city centre, where they were paraded before the cameras before being transferred to detention centres in the region in dump trucks and flatbed trucks normally used for cattle.<sup>78</sup> Another 3 000 migrants simply walked about 15 km west to the nearby town of Zuwara, where they sought refuge. By 8 October the IOM had recorded 4 000 migrants in Zuwara.<sup>79</sup> Ten days later the UN High Commissioner for Refugees revised the number up to between 14 500 (recorded) and 20 000

(an estimate of the number of migrants still in smuggling warehouses). The vast majority of the migrants were unaccounted for.<sup>80</sup>

There is no evidence yet that any co-option arrangement has been reached with the al-Wadi Battalion or any other factions on its side to keep migrant numbers low. Moreover, the Operations Room extended its reach and sponsored an anti-smuggling operation in the nearby town of Ajeelat, home of a major ally of Ahmed al-Dabbashi. This can again be explained by the 'end game' logic, and the importance of keeping one's hands clean as the political resolution is on the cusp of being determined. As one Sabratha militiaman explained:

After accusing al-Amu of human smuggling they [the broad coalition behind the Operations Room] are not just going to turn around and send boats themselves, irrespective of whether they are being paid or not. That is why they quickly took the migrants to the detention centres. Everything in order. This is worth much, much more than a few million euros now. This is a long game.<sup>81</sup>

The Italian intervention on the coast was the proverbial flap of the butterfly's wings that triggered a tornado

Ironically, both the GNA and the LNA claimed the victory as their own, despite the former having made several attempts to stop the fighting and bring the warring parties to declare a truce. Whether Haftar can claim to control the whole of Sabratha, let alone the western region right up to the border with Ras Ajdir, as he has done, is dubious at best. But certainly, when military players across the west coast convened meetings to re-evaluate the balance sheet of their alliances, many read the developments as an unequivocal victory for Haftar. For example, one such meeting on 16 October in Zawiya was followed by a public announcement by two Anas al-Dabbashi-allied militia that they were dissolving and turning their men and weapons over to the Defence Ministry.<sup>82</sup>

### The implications of a co-option strategy

In the vast territory that is Libya, the Italian intervention on the coast to quell smuggling was the proverbial flap of the butterfly's wings that triggered a tornado. What started

out as a local rivalry in the microcosm of Sabratha between the Dabbashi and the al-Wadi militias ended up in a national confrontation, with profound implications for the coast of Tripolitana, as well as for the coming political settlement.

While it may have temporarily caused a decrease in the number of boats being allowed to launch from Libya's west coast, the strategy clearly illustrated the dangers it posed to Libya's stability.

Co-option strategies invariably empower some groups at the cost of others, providing little basis for a lasting peace in the long term

A series of questions are crucial to the final analysis of what had taken place over 2017.

*Firstly, how sustainable is the co-option strategy likely to be, both in the short term and in the longer term?*

Much of the cooperation currently being generated by the militia groups has less to do with the value of the incentives being offered than with the assumption that the Libyan landscape is open to change. The political process has been mercurial for more than six years now, and the role of militias in distorting and derailing the process has been well documented. Many of the most destabilising elements thus far have been those militia groups and ethnic tribes that have felt marginalised or insufficiently rewarded in the evolving political process. Many have turned to the illicit economy as a result.<sup>83</sup>

Co-option strategies invariably empower some groups at the cost of others, providing little basis for a lasting peace in the long term. Moreover, in the short term it is likely to result in more localised outbursts of violent competition, which in turn will have knock-on effects in other cities.

As a decisive military victory remains improbable on either side, this is likely to cause the 'end game' resolution to recede. Militia power is critical to political success, and militia power is contingent upon continuous access to resources. If a political resolution is too long in coming, the incentives for militias' sustained cooperation in curbing the smuggling trade are likely to wane. Human smuggling remains a highly lucrative illicit industry in a period in which the legitimate Libyan economy is in massive difficulty. It is arguable how long the militias will wait to see the dividends of their cooperation.

*Secondly, is this strategy indeed congruent with the goals of better managing irregular migration and mitigating risks to migrants?*

Co-option interventions are likely to cause localised instability and conflict. This, as the Sabratha case demonstrated, is likely to result in displacement both for migrants already in the country and for Libyan nationals.

Overall, conflict and instability will be fundamental stumbling blocks to the long-term sustainable management of migratory flows in the central



HUMAN SMUGGLING  
REMAINS A  
HIGHLY LUCRATIVE  
ILLICIT INDUSTRY

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Mediterranean. Anything that exacerbates rather than calms the conflict should be seen as counterproductive.

Furthermore, much of the justification for intervention has been the poor treatment of migrants in Libya. Cutting off the sea crossing, even temporarily, will do nothing to enhance migrant protection. If anything, this risks worsening the exhaustively documented mistreatment and abuse of migrants and asylum seekers, as smugglers who remain responsible for migrants in connection houses will find alternative ways to monetise their investment. Incidents of forced labour, including highly abusive, life-endangering kinds,<sup>84</sup> are already on the rise, as is the extortion of migrants in detention centres.<sup>85</sup>

*Finally, may the short-term co-option strategy end up being costlier and more counter-productive in the medium to long term?*

Appeasing militias and paying off armed groups has been a staple strategy among various political actors in post-revolution Libya.<sup>86</sup> However, this internal trend is now being channelled by Europe's hyper focus on stemming the flow of migrants coming out of Libya and the North African and sub-Saharan regions more broadly. Indiscriminate partnerships forged in pursuit of the goal to 'stem the flow of migrants' play into the country's current culture of resource predation.<sup>87</sup>

There is a clear interdependence between different forms of illicit activity, with restrictions on one form potentially resulting in an increase in another. Human smuggling and fuel smuggling are inter-related on the coast, and while fuel smuggling may not be of immediate concern to the international community, it is undoubtedly one of the biggest priorities for Libyans themselves. Along the land borders, particularly in the south, the trade-off in a reduction of human smuggling may see groups turning increasingly to arms smuggling, drug smuggling, kidnapping or other hard security concerns.

The counter argument is that this process of co-option could be the first step in bringing armed groups into the state's fold. However, co-opting militias to fight human smuggling is not the same as demobilising and integrating them into a national security apparatus – one of the undisputed goals of the Libya Political Agreement. Warlords are strengthened by co-option because they are legitimised, while their militias retain

their organisational structure, their agendas and, likely, their stake in the broader illicit economy.

At this 'end game' turning point, militias must not be provided with lifelines that allow them to cloak themselves in legitimacy while being forgiven for past transgressions. Rather, the current climate should be exploited to try to achieve true disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) into a planned and managed national security apparatus.

### **An alternative approach to the end game**

Italy's three-fold intervention can largely be credited with the drop in migrant arrivals in the second half of 2017. The country has taken politically expedient and unilateral steps, motivated (it is speculated) by impending elections and the need to deliver results in the short term to an increasingly frustrated electorate.

These motivations are perhaps understandable, given the limited burden sharing by other members of the EU bloc. However, they are likely to prove counterproductive to the ongoing peace process, at this critical phase. In contemporary Libya, anything that prolongs political instability is detrimental to a sustained effort to manage irregular migration flows. Instead, state actors with a genuine stake in the future of Libya – which both France and Italy unquestionably have – should commit to a 'stability first' doctrine.

Indiscriminate partnerships to 'stem the flow of migrants' play into the country's current culture of resource predation

The UN should be given the space to lead the political process to fruition, without being undermined by the bilateral actions of governments seeking to deliver their own agendas. The new UN Special Envoy for Libya, Ghassan Salamé, has made promising progress in establishing himself as a credible broker, and should be given support (both financial and political) to deliver on his mandate.

While the goal of reducing the volume of migrants crossing the Mediterranean is an important humanitarian priority, given in particular the lackadaisical approach to human life demonstrated by the smugglers, militia co-option is a poor strategy. As was demonstrated by

the case of Sabratha, co-option of armed groups fuels instability. Instead, armed groups' quest for legitimacy should be exploited to induce a genuine DDR and security sector reform process that sees militias transition appropriately into state structures under an agreed governance framework.

UN Security Council sanctions and possible ICC indictments can be used effectively as a deterrent against smuggling, and as an incentive to engage in a genuine national security apparatus.

One such (broadly positive) example comes from the work of the Fuel and Gas Crisis Committee. The group, which technically falls under a company owned by the National Oil Corporation and therefore has a remit on hydrocarbons in 2017, ventured into the policing of all sorts of smuggling activity, ranging from fuel to contraband goods, illegal fishing and even currency abuse<sup>88</sup> – all of which are far more relevant to the average Libyan family than the fight against human smuggling.

The committee has been active since 2015, in different forms. After its high-profile Mediterranean Storm anti fuel-smuggling operation in May,<sup>89</sup> in which it successfully collaborated with the navy and air force in Tripoli to tackle seaborne fuel smuggling, it actively sought to broker anti-smuggling partnerships with municipalities, law enforcement outfits and armed groups across the west coast of Tripolitania as well as Fezzan (south-west Libya).

### Engagement at a municipal level is critical in taking the national reconciliation process to the people

Much of this is unrecognised internationally because the myopic focus on Libya is blind to those illicit economies that fall outside human smuggling. But in the words of a Zuwaran security official independent of the committee, the body has effectively harnessed 'people's anger' to draw power from an internal legitimacy that enables it to cast itself as a credible and legitimate law enforcement body despite technically not having the legal purview to police many of the areas in which it has become involved.

Both Haftar and the GNA are demanding that the arms embargo be lifted, in part to help fight terrorism and human smuggling. This is inadvisable until there is a unified security apparatus that can monitor weapons transfers. The Panel of Experts has highlighted multiple transgressions of the arms embargo on all sides of the conflict and which happen with impunity. Breaking the culture of impunity, which is increasingly the norm as a trade-off for migration control, should be a priority.

### Migrants are, and will continue to be, a vitally important pillar of the Libyan economy

The EU in particular needs to engage with greater conflict sensitivity, and broaden both its footprint and its messaging beyond migration control, which is of limited domestic interest. Italy has recognised this by introducing fuel smuggling in its MOU. It has taken a tangible step in this regard with the recent arrest warrant issued against a smuggling ring with links to the Italian mafia and organised crime in Libya and Malta. This resonated well locally.<sup>90</sup>

Overall, however, if the international community is to have relevance for the Libyan people in the long term, and does not wish to undermine the fragile GNA even further in the short term, it must demonstrate its commitment to end fuel smuggling by expending the same levels of effort as on countering human smuggling.

Engagement at a municipal level, and a closer understanding of local political–economy ecosystems, is critical in taking the national reconciliation process to the people. In doing so, again, it is advisable that this be a 'stability first' approach, and to avoid nurturing an anti-human smuggling business.

Libya has a long history of poor treatment of irregular and sub-Saharan migrants, which was the subject of serious human rights concerns even during the Gaddafi era.<sup>91</sup>

Migrants are, and will continue to be, a vitally important pillar of the Libyan economy. Greater tolerance, increased protection of their human rights and sustainable efforts towards their positive integration will all be beneficial for long-term stability.

## Notes

- 1 For the purposes of this paper, the term 'migrant' is used as a catch-all term to refer to all migrants moving irregularly through the central Mediterranean, be they economic migrants or asylum seekers. This is because the leg of the journey that is the focus of this report precedes an application for asylum in the vast majority of cases.
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- 4 G Baczyńska, EU leaders seek greater reductions in Africa immigration, *Reuters*, 19 October 2017, <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN1CO2PY>
- 5 European Naval Forces Mediterranean (EU NavFor Med), later renamed Operation Sophia, was launched on 22 June 2015 with the mandate to 'destroy the business model of smugglers', but has made limited operational progress and has functioned largely as a search and rescue mission. Operation Triton is an air- and seaborne border security mission run by Frontex, the EU border security agency for the Mediterranean, whose three ships have done extensive search and rescue missions but limited intelligence gathering. See P Roberts, The militarisation of migration: From Triton to Sofia: assessing the credibility of the EU's naval interventions against migrant smuggling in the Mediterranean, in T Reitano, S Jespersen and LB Benitez de Lugo, *Militarised responses to organised crime: war on crime*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.
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- 7 *Middle East Eye*, Italy brokers deal with Libyan tribes to help curb migrant influx, 2 April 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/italy-brokers-deal-libyan-tribes-help-curb-migrant-influx-2063522462>
- 8 In July, three out of nine NGOs operating in the central Mediterranean had ceased operations. By the end of October only three NGOs were left. See J Henley and A Giuffrida, Aid groups snub Italian code of conduct on Mediterranean rescues, *The Guardian*, 31 July 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/31/aid-groups-snob-italian-code-conduct-mediterranean-rescues>
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- 10 Council of the European Union, Council conclusions on Libya, 6 February 2017, <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5321-2017-INIT/en/pdf>
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- 12 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Who bears the cost of integrating refugees?, in *Migrant policy debates*, Paris: OECD, January 2017, <https://www.oecd.org/els/mig/migration-policy-debates-13.pdf>
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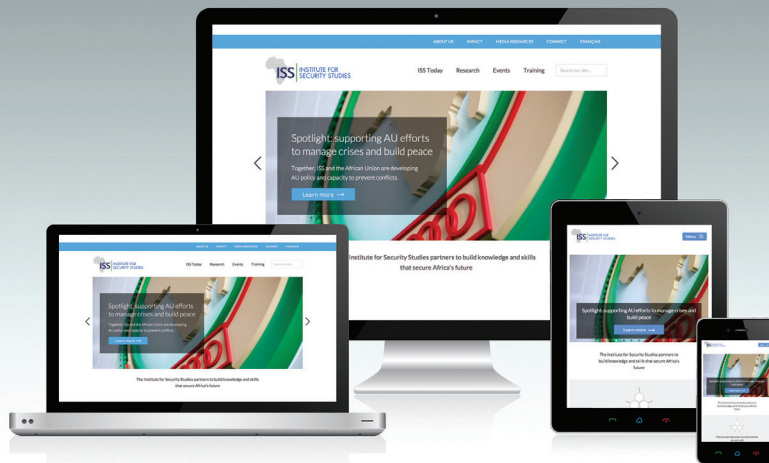
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### About the GI

The Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime is a network of prominent law enforcement, governance and development practitioners who are dedicated to seeking new and innovative strategies to end organized crime. It is a Swiss NGO whose Secretariat is based in Geneva.

### Acknowledgements



This report was made possible with support from the Hanns Seidel Foundation. The ISS is also grateful for support from the other members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the European Union and the governments of Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the USA.

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ISSN 1026-0404



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