

COMMENTARY

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In
this
Q&A,
Crisis
Group's
Senior
Analyst
for
Libya,
Claudia
Gazzini,
warns
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Claudia Gazzini

What are the latest migration figures from Libya?

Italian officials report that the number of migrants and refugees travelling from Libya along the Central Mediterranean route to Europe **fell sharply** in July and August 2017 compared to the same period last year. In 2016, approximately 160,000 people travelled on makeshift boats from Libya to Italy. Based on trends during the first six months of 2017, it appeared that these numbers would increase by 20 per cent. Instead, the number of crossings in July 2017 was half of what it was in July 2016, and in August, 20 per cent of what it was a year earlier. This comes as welcome news to European Union (EU) policymakers, particularly Italian officials who have sought desperately to curb migrant flows from Libya. But it may have come at a price that should cause concern – some international NGOs say European efforts to stop migrants from crossing the sea is **encouraging their abuse in Libya**.

As the primary gateway for migrants and refugees reaching Europe through the Mediterranean Sea, Libya is at the forefront of the EU's migration policies. In late 2014, the EU launched its Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED), also known as Operation Sophia, whose goal is to save lives at sea and to disrupt human smuggling and trafficking networks between Libya and Europe. The EU also invested in training coast guards, facilitating voluntary repatriation flights and enhancing UN agencies' migrant related activities. But until mid-2017, migrant flows from Libya to Europe continued to increase.

How do you explain recent changes in the numbers using Central Mediterranean route?

There are a series of factors behind it. First, the previously dysfunctional Libyan Coast Guard has received new equipment from Italy and training from the EU. It also coordinates with Italian naval forces in Libyan territorial waters to dissuade smugglers. Smugglers are not the only ones at risk off the Libyan coast: the Coast Guard has threatened **to shoot** the vessels of some international NGOs which both Libyan and Italian authorities **accuse of colluding** with smugglers and encouraging migrant flows – accusations the NGOs reject. The Libyan Coast Guard also has ordered that foreign rescue vessels remain 90 nautical miles off the Libyan coast, making it more dangerous to cross the Mediterranean and thus deterring migrants.

“ Until recently, militias in the towns west of Tripoli from which most migrants depart had provided protection to smuggling and trafficking groups. ”



Second, Libyan armed groups appear to have been co-opted. Until recently, militias in the towns west of Tripoli from which most migrants depart had provided protection to smuggling and trafficking groups. According to **credible reports**. Libya’s UN-backed and Tripoli-based government, possibly with Italy’s support, has made direct payments to militias and armed groups to thwart the passage of smuggler vessels and migrants. Italy has denied any role in such payments while the Tripoli-based government has downplayed financial incentives, stating they simply promised immunity for armed groups formerly involved in people smuggling and gradual integration into state security forces.

It is unclear **whether Italy made payments directly** or whether it simply funded local authorities who in turn paid off militias. The alleged payments could be an extension of the Tripoli government’s longstanding strategy to use financial incentives to win the allegiance of armed groups. With these armed groups frequently implicated in the mistreatment of migrants, the EU’s July 2017 announcement of a €46 million fund to address migration issues in Libya – much of which is being managed and disbursed by Italy – already had drawn the fire of international NGOs, even before the recent allegations against Italy.

A third possibility is that armed groups formerly involved in people-smuggling may be turning to more lucrative fuel smuggling. The Libyan state subsidises gasoline and diesel at ridiculously low prices (less than \$0.10/litre at the official exchange rate; \$0.02/litre at the black-market rate); smuggling these refined fuels out of the country can generate about \$0.30/litre in profits. The business is estimated to be worth up to \$2 billion per year.

Is the **European approach** sustainable?

European governments, particularly those facing electoral challenges from the far-right, understandably want a quick solution to their urgent migration crisis. But there is a risk the current approach could boomerang in the longer term if, in seeking quick results, the EU and member states inadvertently undermine simultaneous efforts to address Libya's economy and political crisis. This could imperil the recovery necessary for stability.

“ Even if it works in the short term, [paying off armed groups] is likely unsustainable. ”

Paying off armed groups is risky. Even if it works in the short term, it is likely unsustainable. Armed groups are fickle, as Libya's recent history has demonstrated. Their cooperation is typically based on the promise of rewards, financial or otherwise. Tomorrow they may find another patron with a different mission. As a result, any payoffs to militias should be aimed at eventually integrating them into a security structure answerable to the Libyan state to constrain the rents they could obtain from criminal activities.

More broadly, providing resources to one faction at the expense of others feeds ethnic, tribal and political bickering while reinforcing the impunity of armed groups. Whatever the short-term gains, fuelling the country's militia culture likely will impede a political solution and undermine the political project that Europeans ostensibly support: fostering a more coherent and effective Libyan state. There is also a moral dimension. The round-up of migrants by armed groups, without oversight or training, exposes them to widespread abuse, **including torture, rape and extortion**.

Paying off troublesome militias is nothing new in Libya, and has been part-and-parcel of politics there since the outbreak of conflict in 2014. Because these groups retain considerable power and cannot simply be brushed aside, payoffs may seem both necessary and inevitable. But there are other ways to encourage their cooperation -- chiefly offering armed group members, and their families, a licit alternative to the illicit economy and ensuring they end their criminal behaviour.

Ongoing UN-led efforts are bringing armed groups in Tripoli under the authority of the internationally-recognised government. It is important that attempts to co-opt armed groups involved in human trafficking outside Tripoli not contravene this effort, by accidentally empowering factions that resist government oversight. So far it appears that the deals cut with militias in Sabratha and Zawiya areas, west of Tripoli, were not coordinated with the UN representatives liaising with the Tripoli armed groups. The UN-backed government and its

international partners should coordinate efforts to ensure they are working in concert toward a unified security sector.

“Nobody should have any illusions about the difficulty of reducing militia influence, whether through financial or other incentives.”



Nobody should have any illusions about the difficulty of reducing militia influence, whether through financial or other incentives. One mistake made earlier this year was to delay payment of the Presidential Guard, a new military force charged with securing key installations in the capital. Administrative bottlenecks (and perhaps also corruption and competition between local factions) delayed the disbursement of a budget for this.

The EU's efforts to support the Libyan Coast Guard also has faced difficulties with many recruits, including former members of armed groups accustomed to receiving bribes. Wives of these coast guards, who were used to regular payments from smugglers, often opposed their husbands' training at sea without up-front payment from the EU.

It will take time to find the right model of financial incentives, institutional grounding and accountability. All of these should be factored in when seeking to dissuade people-smugglers.

You were recently in Libya's south west. Can you describe how realities on the ground there fit into the bigger picture of trans-Mediterranean migration?

South-west Libya is the missing link in the EU's action plan, **as the region, called the Fezzan, is central to the migration issue**. Due to a de facto open border with Niger, it is the entry point for a majority of sub-Saharan African migrants. Yet the EU largely has ignored the region; its officials and those of member states have rarely set foot there. Access to the south west is difficult for Westerners, with no functioning airport or hotels. Special arrangements are needed to visit, not least because the patchwork of armed groups and local tribes means territorial control changes hands every few hundred kilometres.

“Despite the challenges, Europe needs to increase its presence [in Libya's south west] to develop an accurate understanding of local challenges and needs.”



Despite the challenges, Europe needs to increase its presence to develop an accurate understanding of local challenges and needs. This is crucial to formulate any sensible plan, whether to invest in border guards or promote economic development, both of which are indispensable for revamping Libya's legitimate economy.

Locals are entirely dependent on the illicit economy, including the smuggling of people and goods. But the EU should resist the temptation of bypassing the central state to work with local authorities – who are often no less divided – on local economic initiatives. The EU should only back projects that are sustainable and fit within the framework of a united Libyan state.

How do you see Libya's future?

Libya remains politically adrift and economically unstable. The country's rival factions are in desperate need of reconciliation and stabilisation. The fragile government led by Prime Minister Faiez Serraj risks becoming a mere placeholder, used by the EU or some of its member states to pursue a European – rather than Libyan – agenda, such as curbing migration. Failure to pursue Libyan interests will further discredit this government within Libya.

Ignoring the Libyan agenda also runs counter to the goal of building a stable country, capable of serving as an effective partner with the EU for managing migrant flows and other interests. Libya's economy once absorbed millions of migrant workers, mostly from Africa. It is potentially wealthy and in need of reconstruction. Such an effort that could also create many jobs, mostly for non-Libyans. Immediate solutions, however politically expedient, should not come at the expense of progress toward a long-term solution of the conflict. If they do, the recent dip in migrant crossings could prove short-lived.

What should the international community do to address Libya's multiple crises and help rebuild a united country?

The international community should work within a coherent nationwide stabilisation plan rather than dealing with Libya through piecemeal and potentially contradictory efforts. Interested powers, particularly European, should prioritise three things in particular.

“ Libya's economic deterioration must be addressed [by interested powers, particularly

First, Libya’s economic deterioration must be addressed. Its vast oil wealth must once again become a lifeline for all rather than a weapon for various factions promoting political and personal interests. This will only be possible by stopping the pervasive predation on state resources not only by militias, but also by politicians, state officials and business people. Stabilising Libya’s economy would allow migrants to enter the Libyan labour market rather than seeking opportunities in Europe.

Second, the UN’s special representative, **Ghassan Salamé, must work on rebuilding Libyan trust** toward the international community, damaged over the past three years as the UN rushed the negotiations. This could **breathe new life into the political process**.

Third, an attempt should be made to reconcile Libya’s military factions in order to stem violence on the ground. Fostering dialogue among armed groups – starting first at the local level in the south and west and then convening nationwide talks – is vital.

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exchange rate but less than \$0.02 at the black market rate used by smugglers. Since Libya’s southern neighbours pay approximately \$1 per litre, there are huge profits in smuggling and reselling the fuel. Petrol station owners control this trade. According to a Sebha resident, “They take truckloads of fuel from the storage tanks in Sebha, but instead of taking it to the petrol station and distributing it to the people, they take it directly to smuggling routes”. ¹²⁴ There is also some smaller-scale smuggling of fuel, via passenger cars and trucks. ¹²⁵

C. Artisanal Gold Mining

Artisanal gold mining has become a booming industry since 2013 when deposits were discovered on rocky plateaus of the Libyan desert bordering Chad. ¹²⁶ The exact locations of makeshift mining settlements are difficult to pin down, but those involved in the trade said that the town of Murzuq is the main hub of this informal industry, providing services and goods to

gold-rich areas along the border with Chad and Niger. ¹²⁷ An estimated 70 per cent of the population of Murzuq works in this field (directly or in support roles and trade). At one point, about 15kg of gold (worth locally about \$400,000) were being extracted daily. ¹²⁸

For the most part, the Tebu (Libyan and Chadian) control the industry because they “brought in cheap Sudanese workers, who already have experience extracting gold”. ¹²⁹ Entering the gold business requires an initial capital outlay, but sources in Murzuq describe it as accessible for the Tebu, the only people capable of navigating the desert in this area. Some Tuaregs also are involved but need a Tebu partner to cross into the area close to the Niger-Chad border. ¹³⁰

Mining here is entirely in the hands of the miners or their local supervisors. The internationally recognised Libyan government exercises no oversight over the prospecting, nor does it derive any revenues. None of Libya’s three governments has ever attempted to crack down on the mining, though authorities in neighbouring Chad, Niger and Algeria have attempted to do so in the gold-rich areas within their own countries.

D. Vanishing Legal Economy

The deadly fighting in recent years, the gradual breakdown of government authority and the rise of pervasive smuggling have had a devastating impact on what remains of the legal economy in the south, based mainly on agriculture and the oil.

1. Agriculture

Most of the state-owned agricultural projects south of Sebha lie in complete disrepair. Even those further north or east grow only a fraction of their former crops. ¹³¹ Until 2011, there were thousands of hectares of state-owned farms in the Fezzan, developed in the 1980s along with Qadhafi’s Great Man-made River Project. These farms used fresh underground water and American centre-pivot irrigation technology to grow cereals and support livestock, part of a government policy to ensure food self-sufficiency. Seen from above, the irrigated lands appeared as perfectly round dark circles, a kilometre in diameter, amid an amber coloured desert. Today most of the circles are dry. ¹³²

The former head of one of the largest state-owned farms in the Obari area, the Maqnusa agricultural project, explained:

In 2010 Maqnusa used to generate LYD30 million [\$25 million according the official exchange rate in 2010] a year. At the time, we had 250 employees; 120 crop circles; 6,000ha of cultivated land; 15,000 heads of sheep; 500 cows and 300 camels. Now – in 2017 – we only have 300ha of cultivated land and 1,000 sheep. ¹³³

Other farms in the area are in an even worse state. ¹³⁴ Employees said that lack of security was the main problem: most of the equipment was stolen, as were the electricity generators used to irrigate during power shortages. Insecurity and the occasional outburst of violence prevented employees from working at night. Another problem was the lack of funding from Tripoli: these state-owned farms are under the administrative oversight of the agriculture ministry and require state-subsidised products like fertilisers, but budgetary bottlenecks have held up needed funds. The Development Authority for the Fezzan Region (*hayyat tanmiyat manteqat fezzan*) has submitted a funding request for more than LYD400 million (\$290 million at the official exchange rate, \$50 million at the black market rate) from the internationally recognised government to relaunch agricultural projects in the south. Many doubt the money will materialise given budgetary restrictions imposed by the Central Bank of Libya.

There is widespread support for the idea of restarting agricultural production in the south; the current high prices for agricultural produce (mostly imported and expensive because of the worsening exchange rate) should make farming highly profitable. ¹³⁵ But there is no consensus on how to do so. Some find the model of state-owned farms unappealing and support privatisation. ¹³⁶ Privately owned farms in the area, which have flourished in recent years, seem less affected by pillaging than state-owned farms, perhaps because their owners, who live nearby, take more interest in defending them. Others, however, oppose the parcelling of land into private hands, arguing that it would generate cost inefficiencies. They suggest focusing instead on large-scale industrial farming with processing capabilities. ¹³⁷

One thing is certain: Libyan authorities and international development agencies keen to help the Fezzan need to invest more thought and resources in the agricultural sector, which should not be left in its current state of disrepair. This means providing, along with financial credit, greater security and feasibility studies into marketing and distribution channels.

2. Oil industry

The Fezzan's potential to pump more than 400,000 barrels of crude oil per day plus huge reserves of natural gas (for the most part exported to Italy via the underwater Greenstream gas pipeline to Sicily), makes the oil industry central to recovery in the south west and Libya as a whole. ¹³⁸ Most of this production has been offline for the past two years because an armed group further north closed the crude oil pipeline connecting the fields to export terminals. ¹³⁹

Even after the pipeline reopened in early 2017, Tebu guards at one site (al-Feel) continued to block production for several months. They permitted it to restart only when the National Oil Corporation (NOC) started discussions about local development projects with area residents.

¹⁴⁰ Even when the fields are fully productive, however, the revenues generated do not benefit the local population directly. Many resent what they perceive as “our wealth feeding northerners”. ¹⁴¹

The oil fields employ few locals; most of the workforce rotates in and out on special flights from

the north arranged by the operating oil companies. ¹⁴² Communities living near the Sharara and Feel oil fields complain there is little interaction with local residents. “There is no development in the town close to the fields, no education opportunities for us”, said a Tuareg from Obari, noting that “even the person in charge of watering the plants in the Sharara oil field is flown in from the north”. ¹⁴³ Under Libyan law, oil companies are supposed to invest in local social development projects, but they rarely adhere to this provision either in the south or elsewhere. ¹⁴⁴ To help stabilise the local economy and soothe local tensions, oil companies, in conjunction with the NOC, should do more both to engage and employ local workers and to invest in local development.

IV. A Precarious Security Environment

Since 2011, security in southern Libya has deteriorated. Criminal gangs and smuggling rackets are now firmly established. Amid rising criminality, inter-tribal fighting and easy access to weapons, local police forces are effectively non-operational. There is neither a functioning prison nor a detention centre for illegal migrants in Sebha. ¹⁴⁵ The same is true in Obari and Ghat. ¹⁴⁶ Even the approximately 18,000 military officers from the south trained in the Qadhafi-era are largely inactive. Most have grown weary of the feuds in the area and have refused to resume active service until “the situation becomes clearer”. ¹⁴⁷

This lawlessness prevails despite the deployment of various military contingents, officially tasked with restoring peace and order, to the south from other parts of the country. ¹⁴⁸ The rationale for deploying these forces, including, at different times, troops from western Libya, Misrata and the east, was that without them “fighting between local groups and among tribes will flare up”. ¹⁴⁹ Security kept on deteriorating, however, as local wars continued.

A. Lingering Communal Conflicts

Since the Qadhafi regime’s fall in 2011, five local conflicts, each driven by unique factors, have caused hundreds of fatalities. ¹⁵⁰ There are three main axes of rivalry:

- The Tebu vs. Awlad Suleiman conflict: This erupted with extreme violence in 2012 and again in 2014. Both tribes emerged as victors following the regime’s 2011 collapse but turned against each other as they started competing over access to state funds and state-subsidised goods. They have also been involved in smuggling to neighbouring countries. ¹⁵¹
- The Qadhadhfa vs. Awlad Suleiman conflict: Fighting in Sebha in 2014 and again in 2016 pitted losers against winners of the 2011 war. ¹⁵² Such tensions persist among other tribes (and indeed the former regime’s green

flag is visible across the Wadi Hayat and in Ghat), but for the most part the pro- and anti-Qadhafi divide of 2011 has been replaced by pro- or anti-LNA (the Haftar-led Libyan National Army) allegiances.

- The Tebu vs. Tuareg conflict: Violence erupted in Obari and in Sebha in 2014-2015 over national-level political and military rifts, external funding and the inflow of foreign fighters. Barely a month after the emergence of two rival Libyan governments and parliaments in August 2014, the Tebu and Tuareg went from being close allies (united in 2012-13 in their quest for minority and linguistic rights against what they both perceived as dominant Arab exclusivism) to foes. ¹⁵³ The government in eastern Libya backed the Tebu and urged them to seize control of Obari, a southern town that both claimed had become a hotbed for jihadists. ¹⁵⁴ In contrast, the Tripoli-based government and allied Misratan military forces in the south backed the Tuareg, who consider Obari historically theirs. ¹⁵⁵ The fighting spilled sporadically over to Sebha, and continued in Obari until early 2016. The conflict also had an economic dimension as members of the two tribes competed over control of smuggling routes to Niger. ¹⁵⁶

Most of these conflicts ended without a clear winner. As of July 2017, there is no active conflict between these groups and some argue that “tensions are no longer on the front burner and tribes of the south no longer want war”. ¹⁵⁷ Not all agree; some said that ceasefire agreements remain precarious and chances of revived fighting high. ¹⁵⁸ One reason is that most of those involved in the conflicts expect monetary compensations (*diya*, blood money) for families of killed tribesmen. Qatar still has not disbursed these payments to the Tebu and Tuareg, which it had agreed to bankroll in late 2015 to pressure the two factions into stopping the war in Obari.

¹⁵⁹ An influential Tuareg from Obari stated:

The peace now is only on paper. The agreement is in your dreams. The truth is that there is no real *sulh* (reconciliation). Seventy houses of Tuareg families here were destroyed and are still in ruins. If there is no compensation, there could be return to war. Everybody here still has weapons. ¹⁶⁰

The slow pace of reconstruction of the war-torn town, where the local university has been closed for three years and several schools still show scars of war, adds to these problems.

Similar dynamics triggered by expectations of payments also affect reconciliation efforts between the Awlad Suleiman and the Tebu. Representatives of both sides convened in Rome in March 2017 under the aegis of the Italian interior ministry and the Presidency Council (represented at the talks by Abdelsalam Kajman from the Brak al-Shati area). ¹⁶¹ The Libyan participants assumed that Italy would provide monetary compensation for casualties of the

Tebu vs Awlad Suleiman conflict, as Qatar had promised to do in the Tebu-Tuareg negotiations, and as government of former Prime Minister Ali Zeidan had done in 2014 following the first Tebu-Awlad Suleiman conflict in 2012. But in Rome the issue of who would pay (and whether anyone would pay) appears to have sparked problems from the outset and continues to cause resentment and misunderstanding, mainly among the Tebu. ¹⁶²

This is not to say that peace requires monetary compensation. In fact, some tribal leaders suggest it would be better for all communities to give up these “rights for their dead”. ¹⁶³ Others argue that the problems are elsewhere and that ceasefire agreements cannot hold because they are negotiated by tribal elders who lack leverage over their youth. ¹⁶⁴ Many of the foreign tribesmen from neighbouring Chad or Niger who fight in southern Libya also feel little obligation to abide by agreements negotiated by Libyan tribal elders. ¹⁶⁵ The international community should neither overestimate the durability of ceasefire arrangements nor underestimate lingering tensions and those fuelled by external actors.

B. East-West Battlefield in the South

Since the political crisis that divided the country in 2014, the south has become a battlefield for nationwide rivalries opposing Misratan forces aligned with the GNA on one side and the Libyan National Army (LNA) loyal to the eastern government on the other.

A Misratan military contingent (called the Third Force, *al-Quwa al-Thaletha*) arrived in Sebha in February 2014 at the request of local notables and with an official mandate from the (then united) government in Tripoli. It was sent to stop the war between the Awlad Suleiman and the Tebu and, more broadly, help secure the south. This well-equipped force became the main military contingent in Sebha from 2014 to mid-2017. With more than 4,000 men on its payroll, the Third Force controlled the city’s main military airbase at Tamanhindt and brought into its fold some local armed groups that operated as the Eighth Force (*al-Quwa al-Thamina*). For some time, the Third Force also had men stationed in Germa and in the Sharara oil field farther west. ¹⁶⁶

But after three years and the deterioration of the security situation in Sebha, many local residents became weary of Misrata’s presence. A Sebha military officer not aligned to any group said:

Misrata came in 2014 to help and people here were fine with it because they thought that Misrata would stop the fighting, curb crime and reduce illegal migration. But they did nothing of this. In fact they made relations between groups even worse because they divided people and tribes – some were with Misrata, others against it. So people started to think that they were better off without them. ¹⁶⁷

Growing local dissatisfaction toward Misrata played into Haftar's hands, particularly as he imposed himself as the GNA's most formidable opponent by 2016. ¹⁶⁸ His southern forces included the LNA contingent stationed in Brak al-Shati under Mohamed Ben Nayel and the Greater Sirte Operations Room (GSOR, *urfat amaliyat sirt al-kubra*), an LNA outfit stationed further north, in Ras Lanuf and Zella. ¹⁶⁹

The Brak al-Shati contingent, after cooperating briefly with the Misratans in mid-2016, became the most vocal proponent of Misrata leaving Sebha and, more specifically, the Tamanhindt airbase. ¹⁷⁰ By doing so, they gained support of Sebha notables who also started clamouring for Misrata's withdrawal. In early 2017, Ben Nayel's men began attacking the Third Force in Tamanhindt with heavy artillery.

The aim of the Greater Sirte Operations Room was to capture the strategic Jufra airbase, which was under the control of Misrata and other forces aligned with the Tripoli-based government. These included the anti-Haftar group known as the Benghazi Defence Brigade (BDB), mostly composed of fighters from Benghazi driven out by the LNA. Since 2016, the BDB had been using Jufra, at the crossroads between southern and northern Libya, as a logistical base to attack LNA positions in the east. ¹⁷¹

Following a rapid escalation of violence in May-June 2017, prompted by an attack on Brak al-Shati airbase by the BDB and pro-Misrata forces, LNA-aligned forces took over both Tamanhindt and the Jufra airbase; by June 2017 Misrata's Third Force withdrew entirely from the south. ¹⁷² Since Misrata's withdrawal, there has been only one, rapidly quelled, episode of fighting in Sebha. ¹⁷³ Jamal Treiki, the head of the Third Force, and others warned of a possible flare up in the south or even ISIS attacks should Misrata be forced to leave. ¹⁷⁴

Though attacks by ISIS affiliates have increased between Sirte and Sebha in recent months, locals apparently most fear rising crime. ¹⁷⁵ As a Sebha resident said:

There is no police here, no units fighting against crime. Sebha is full of criminals and lots of drugs come through here. If things don't get better, they can only get worse. [...] Someone can attack you just to steal a phone. I am not afraid of escalation of fighting between tribes because at the end of the day *ayyan* (tribal leaders) can stop that. But they have no control over crime. That is more dangerous. ¹⁷⁶

Other issues of concern are the rapidly shifting alliances among and within tribes. Both are recurring sources of instability in the south and could remain so even after recent dramatic changes in the balance of power on the ground.

C. Fluid and Fragmented Loyalties

The tribes and ethnic groups of the Fezzan are not monolithic entities. ¹⁷⁷ The Tuareg, for example, are internally divided along military lines. At any given moment, some members might fight in the name of forces aligned with the Tripoli-based government, others on behalf of Haftar and still others would be neutral. A similar pattern occurred with the Tebu, whose commanders are on both sides of the military divide, as well as with the Arab tribes.

Among the Tuareg, these divisions were the result of threats by the different Tripoli governments to cut the salaries of all military personnel without a national ID number (*raqm watani*). While the IDs were introduced in Libya in 2013 to control public payrolls, many Tuareg – including some employed as professional military by Qadhafi – did not possess a number nor could they obtain one since they did not meet the requirement of being a full Libyan citizen.

¹⁷⁸ An activist said:

It started in 2013 when Osama Juweili of Zintan was defence minister. The only way for those who saw their salaries cut off to resume being paid was to join the Zintani forces. In that case, a Tuareg would be given a national ID number and a salary. *Fajr Libya* [Libya Dawn, the Misrata-led military coalition that clashed with Zintani forces in Tripoli in July-August, sparking the divide between rival governments and parliaments] did the same: they gave a national ID and salary if you joined them. Since *Karama* [the Haftar-led Operation Dignity to seize control of Benghazi launched in May 2014] started, Haftar has given LYD3,000 a month [\$2,170 at the official exchange rate, but around \$375 at the 2017 black market exchange rate] to whoever agreed to fight with *Karama* forces in Benghazi. ¹⁷⁹

Some Tuareg say they find power struggles within the capital confusing; they feel manipulated by the country's various military factions. Speaking in April 2017, a Tuareg, who before 2011 worked as a desert tourist guide and since the war has been employed by various military forces operating in the Obari area, acknowledged:

We don't really understand what is happening or what will happen. In 2011 when the revolution started, I joined an anti-Qadhafi force of *thuwwar* (revolutionaries). Then Zintan came and said that the force I had been working with was al-Qaeda. So I left them and joined Zintan as part of the Petroleum Facilities Guards. Then Zintan left without warning us [in November 2014] and Misrata came here. So I joined the Misratan force. Now we are with the Third Force. But then people say that Haftar is getting strong and his people say that Misrata is not legal. You see, we don't really know what to do. ¹⁸⁰

Amid this confusion, another Tuareg force is emerging in the south under the leadership of a Qadhafi-era general, Ali Kanna, who says he is neutral in the national conflict and aspires to a unified army. ¹⁸¹ In early 2017, however, Kanna tilted toward the Misratans, leaving open the question of how he will position himself in the long run should the LNA's standing in the south

The Tebu have also experienced shifting loyalties and internal divisions. ¹⁸³ In 2012, during the first Tebu-Awlad Suleiman war, they aligned with Misrata while the Awlad Suleiman opposed it. In 2014, the alignments were reversed: the three main Awlad Suleiman armed groups in Sebha (*katiba reda*, *ahrar fezzan* and *shuhada sebha*) cooperated with Misrata while the Tebu were backed by the LNA, Zintani armed groups and by factions close to the old regime. Throughout the political and military crisis of 2014-2015 and the Tebu-Tuareg conflict, the Tebu largely remained in the LNA camp. By the end of 2016, as reconciliation talks with the Tuareg matured and relations with Zintan soured, the Tebu-LNA alliance broke down. Several Tebu commanders distanced themselves from the LNA because of Haftar's perceived pro-Arab bias. ¹⁸⁴ In 2017, the Tebu split: some units remained aligned with the LNA, others supported Misrata. The same applied to the Awlad Suleiman. ¹⁸⁵ Misrata's recent withdrawal from the south signals a major change in the balance of power and is likely to trigger further realignments in the south.

Another wild card is the presence of foreign fighters recruited by both the Misratan-backed coalition and the LNA, as well as their respective local allies. The origin and exact numbers of these fighters remain murky although most appear to be Chadian and Sudanese; local sources offer differing accounts regarding who fights for whom, with some groups switching sides. In mid-2017, fighters with opposition armed groups from northern Chad – mainly from the FACT (Front for Change and Concord in Chad) – appeared to be fighting alongside the pro-Misrata coalition whereas Sudanese and Darfuri groups (eg, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and SL/Mini Minawi) were on the LNA side. ¹⁸⁶ There were also allegations of *janjawid* [Sudanese Arab] fighters in Libya, though it was unclear whose side they were on. ¹⁸⁷

A recently published report, which discussed reasons for the Misrata-led coalition's recruitment of Chadian fighters, offers the following rationale:

Their Libyan hosts' initial aim was to prevent these Chadian forces from being recruited as mercenaries by their adversaries in Tobruk. Another aim was to encourage Haftar's Chadian recruits to switch sides, then to use them as mercenaries against Haftar or ISIS. The aim of the 'third force' was also to use these troops to put pressure on [Chad's President Idris] Déby and to distance him from Haftar. ¹⁸⁸

V. No GNA, Few Internationals in the South

The internationally recognised government in Tripoli remains disengaged and lacks influence in the Fezzan. The EU, most EU member states, and international organisations have at best a limited presence on the ground; only Italy is trying to implement a stabilisation plan for the south.

A. No Central State

State authorities in Tripoli historically have enjoyed less direct influence in the Fezzan than elsewhere in the country. Yet their presence has never been as marginal as today. An Arab tribesman from Wadi Hayat said, “Serraj is completely uninfluential here. About 60 per cent of the local population supports Haftar”. ¹⁸⁹

The GNA’s two main rivals fare somewhat better. Since 2014, Khalifa Ghwell’s Tripoli-based, unrecognised government and LNA forces, who recognise the east-based government as legitimate, have reached out to local communities and co-opted their support. “Haftar and LNA envoys came here and distributed vehicles and spoke to local military groups. Ghwell also did the same,” said a Tebu, an account confirmed by Arab tribal members. ¹⁹⁰ As recently as April 2017, representatives of both Ghwell and Haftar – but not Serraj – were present in the town of Murzuq, for example. A local resident explained:

Murzuq has two heads of police, one appointed by the Ghwell government (a Tebu) and the other by Haftar and the eastern government (a Fezzana). Both operate from the *mudiriya* (police station), and have offices side by side. The two don’t fight each other. They each give their orders to the police force. But the police force is actually the same – so *de facto* these men are taking orders from two heads of police. There is nobody appointed by the Presidency Council here, in the whole of Murzuq. ¹⁹¹

GNA supporters acknowledge their lack of influence in the south, which the Presidency Council attributes to its inability to access and dispose of funds for southern institutions. ¹⁹²

The Presidency Council also lost ground militarily. Its main ally in the Fezzan, the Misratan Third Force, withdrew from Sebha’s Tamanhindt military base in late May 2017; its departure weakened the council’s local allies. Advancing LNA forces expelled the Benghazi Defence Brigade (BDB), an unofficial military coalition stationed in Jufra and backed by al-Mahdi al-Barghati, the Serraj-appointed defence minister, in June 2017. This has given LNA-aligned military groups the upper hand, at least for now.

B. The International Community in the South

Aware of the fragility of the Tripoli-based government and its lack of operating capacity across the Fezzan and in the border area, the EU and member states until recently brushed off Libya’s south as “a region where we simply do not have an institutional partner and therefore where we cannot operate”. ¹⁹³ As a result, European efforts to curb migrant flows until recently had focused mainly on stopping smugglers in international waters off Libya’s north-west coast and in Niger.

Established in late 2014, the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED), also known as Operation Sophia, tried to disrupt human smuggling and trafficking networks between Libya and Europe while saving lives at sea. ¹⁹⁴ Notwithstanding these and other efforts – such as training coastguards, facilitating voluntary repatriation flights and enhancing UN agencies’ migrant-related activities – migrant flows from Libya to Europe continued to increase. ¹⁹⁵ Efforts to stop people from entering Libya through Niger also have fallen short of expectations. Despite EU support for authorities in Niger and a government-led crackdown on smugglers in Agadez in 2016, which briefly reduced entries, by mid-2017 the number of migrants entering Libya via the Niger border rose again. ¹⁹⁶

In early 2017, with attempts to stem migration off Libya’s coastline or from northern Niger faltering, European policymakers shifted gears and decided to tackle the problem also from southern Libya. ¹⁹⁷ Some of Serraj’s international backers – particularly Italy, the European country most directly affected by Libya’s migrant flows, and Germany – appear keen to take the lead. ¹⁹⁸

“ For the past several years, most international organisations and Western countries have eschewed work in southern Libya. ”



But they do not know where to begin. For the past several years, most international organisations and Western countries have eschewed work in southern Libya. The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) team, the EU delegation to Libya and most embassies (all of which had moved from Tripoli to Tunis by early 2015) admitted they barely followed dynamics in the south, focusing instead on the national political crisis and the east-west military divide. ¹⁹⁹ The exceptions are the French military (which was interested in southern Libya as part of Operation Barkhane) and neighbouring states – Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Tunisia – that need to secure their borders and monitor the flow of people and fighters. As mentioned, Qatar was also involved in mediating peace talks in the Obari conflict.

In April 2017, the EU allocated €90 million (\$105 million) for development aid to Libya as part of the North of Africa Window of the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, some of which is due to be spent on projects in the south. ²⁰⁰ EU officials said additional funds could be earmarked for such projects, though Libyans are sceptical. ²⁰¹ Many questioned whether the UN agencies that will receive these funds can do much in the south. A Libyan diplomat said:

They allocated these funds without asking themselves what they can do. There is a simple

problem of access: how are these organisations going to roll out their projects in the south if they lack implementation capability and access? ²⁰²

Difficulties operating in the Fezzan will continue to be a key impediment. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) has local staff in Obari and Sebha, working on the rehabilitation of local hospitals, schools and sanitation, but this appears to be more the exception than the rule. ²⁰³ Several international NGOs engage in reconciliation projects in the south yet these initiatives tend to occur outside of Libya. A number of UN agencies are trying to implement development projects across southern Libya but they operate mainly through local partners or the Libyan Red Crescent. ²⁰⁴ Most foreign NGOs that were considering starting operations in Sebha gave up because of security concerns. ²⁰⁵ Even the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which has a presence in Sebha, has had trouble operating since it likened the treatment of migrants there to the slave trade. ²⁰⁶

Despite these constraints, Italy, which is eager to become more active in the Fezzan, is promoting its own stabilisation project. Since early 2017, a government-funded NGO has convened meetings with stakeholders from southern Libya for an ambitious project titled “A plan for peace, stability and security in the south of Libya”. ²⁰⁷ Its aim is to confront “illegal immigration, illicit traffics and terrorism” and it includes a tribal reconciliation program; cultural and medical hubs; an economic project to create industrial centres; and local anti-illegal smuggling police units with members recruited from groups currently involved in human trafficking. Initial costs are estimated at €90 million for which Italy is seeking EU funding. ²⁰⁸ The idea, an EU official familiar with the project said, is that “if you want to peel away people from the human trafficking business you need to co-opt them and to do so you must buy them over”. ²⁰⁹

Many expressed doubts about the project, however. Some tribal leaders who attended the Rome talks questioned the “cultural hubs”, telling their hosts they did not need their former colonial masters “to help the tribes preserve their cultural identities”. ²¹⁰ Some Italian analysts fear that trying to co-opt local tribes into anti-smuggling local police units without parallel efforts to address Libya’s macroeconomic problems will not reduce the number of migrants, just increase the price they must pay to smugglers. ²¹¹ Questions likewise surround the proposed industrial projects, which include glass and marble factories, whose products will be difficult to market in the sparsely populated south and hard to deliver to wider markets further north because of insecurity on the roads. ²¹²

VI. Policy Implications and Conclusion

Libyan authorities, the EU and European governments can take steps to improve conditions in the region, which over time can discourage the people smuggling that is Europe’s paramount concern.

A. Security

Initiatives to end the tribal wars that have killed thousands in the Fezzan over the past five years have failed thus far to build a solid peace. Despite ongoing ceasefire arrangements and dialogue between groups once at war, lingering tensions remain, some deepened by these very efforts to end the fighting. Qatar's failure to deliver the monetary compensation promised during its mediation efforts, for example, has become a potential trigger for renewed violence. Given uncertainty over what Qatar will do – particularly given its isolation from other powers seeking to project influence in Libya, especially Egypt and the United Arab Emirates – expectations need to be adjusted in subsequent negotiations. Efforts still underway, such as negotiations between the Tebu and the Awlad Suleiman, should avoid empty promises. Monetary compensation may not be the most effective way to engineer a settlement; it may be wiser to focus on concrete issues – such as security, freedom of movement and access to services such as hospitals and universities – that affect people's everyday lives.

More importantly, there needs to be rethinking about how to address Libya's security challenges, with an eye to the south. Narrow, local talks among tribal representatives and civil society activists are not enough. These should be accompanied by negotiations specifically aimed first at bringing together military commanders and leaders of armed groups operating in the south and then integrated into a wider national security dialogue. Stabilisation of the south will depend largely on the outcome of competition between military groups nominally aligned to the internationally recognised government in Tripoli and those belonging to the military coalition under General Haftar. Crisis Group previously urged a national dialogue to address this rift, but it has yet to materialise. Instead, conversations on security so far have focused on creation of a secure zone in and around Tripoli. This is vital but insufficient; it will do little for the rest of the country, including the south.

Restoring an effective, integrated national army with a clear chain of command is crucial both nationally and in the south, where Arab, Tebu and Tuareg officers all aspire to positions of influence. Ordinary citizens, meanwhile, crave a legitimate armed force that can impose a modicum of order.

Beyond the military, other security functions – ordinary policing, securing oil and gas facilities, border guards, etc. – should be addressed both in any southern strategy and in the wider national security dialogue that remains, for now, largely unstructured. UNSMIL, pursuant to its mandate, should take the lead in constructing and conducting this security dialogue and ensuring inclusion of the south and of its concerns. As a preliminary step, and as it prepares to return to a permanent presence in Libya after a prolonged absence, UNSMIL should deploy to the area.

stabilisation could spill over to the south and undermine stabilisation efforts. ”



The different political and strategic agendas that drive various European countries also need greater coordination. Today, France and Italy have taken the most active approach toward the south, each motivated by separate and at times competing priorities. Paris is concerned about the Sahel's strategic stability not only because it has troops deployed there but also because it is an area of privileged French influence in Africa. Rome has energy interests in Libya (including in the natural gas extracted in the south) and is concerned primarily about the flow of migrants that land on its shores. The two countries have lent political and at times military backing to rival sides in the Libyan conflict (with France giving LNA forces covert military support in 2016) even as they both nominally support the UN-led diplomatic process. ²¹³ Tensions between Rome and Paris over their respective roadmaps for Libya's stabilisation could spill over to the south and undermine stabilisation efforts.

Europe as a whole is motivated by the migration question, and often appears to be seeking the kind of partnerships it has implemented with countries such as Turkey, designed to prevent refugees and migrants from reaching the continent. In Libya, this is not feasible: the internationally recognised government has little implementing capability, especially in the Fezzan, where forces opposed to the Tripoli government have the upper hand. Instead, it would be wiser to exert greater diplomatic pressure on Libya's meddling neighbours (particularly Egypt and the UAE, whose military action and aid in support of Haftar have been most disruptive), while avoiding the temptation to pick winners in local or national conflicts. At the same time, Europe should provide greater support to UN efforts to resolve the Libyan conflict, stabilise the national economy and create a negotiation track for armed actors aimed at creating a more integrated security sector. ²¹⁴

B. Economic Alternatives

Without security, it will be hard to build the economy; without economic alternatives, it will be difficult to curb trafficking, including of migrants; and as long as trafficking continues, Fezzan residents will have incentives to resist efforts to impose security. This vicious cycle has left European officials both seized with the urgency of reducing migrant flows on the Central Mediterranean route and deeply pessimistic that anything meaningful can be done.

That pessimism has stymied even modest, but useful initial steps. In the long term, an end to the Libyan conflict would create opportunities that will lure many back into the licit economy while absorbing migrant labour from sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, as was the case before 2011. Libya has massive potential wealth and a long backlog of major infrastructure and

reconstruction projects. In the short to medium term, even as the conflict endures, some measures are both possible and advisable:

First, economic or social development projects require careful feasibility studies, especially given the EU's and member states' lack of experience or contacts with the Fezzan. The agricultural sector is especially worth exploring: farming is not highly reliant on high-tech equipment, which is difficult to maintain and secure, and it can quickly bring food and employment to the local population. As Crisis Group observed in the south, privately owned and secured farms have continued to function, even amid the current disorder, because owners have a stake in protecting them. In contrast, low paid employees fled the now largely defunct state-owned farms when conditions deteriorated. Further studies are necessary to determine whether the better solution would be privatisation, cooperative ownership structures or another form of collective organisation. In the meantime, the EU and others should encourage and, if necessary, help the UN-recognised government to improve its agricultural sector, which also would enhance its standing among the Libyan people.

Second, UN agencies, in coordination with the internationally recognised government and local municipal authorities should seek to reopen Sebha airport, facilitate negotiations among local security factions to secure it and carry out the minor infrastructural work necessary to enable commercial flights to Obari. This would help decrease the Fezzan's sense of isolation.

Third, national and international oil companies – notably around Murzuq and Obari, the two locations where they have facilities – should implement small-scale development projects in cooperation with local civil society. According to Libyan law, oil companies are supposed to invest in communities and promote social development projects, but they do not. Legal obligations aside, it would be smart business to lower community resentment. In April 2017, promises by managers of Libya's NOC to invest in Murzuq persuaded local guards in al-Feel, an oilfield operated by Italy's ENI, to lift their blockade on production. The NOC should deliver on its promises to avoid new problems and it should reach out to other communities in oil-rich areas. Maintaining good relations with civil society groups is all the more important in the current atmosphere of insecurity, where a single militia leader can block production in hopes of a pay-off. When a community has an interest in ensuring that does not happen it can pressure local militias to back off.

These would all be modest beginnings, but the international community has much ground to make up in Libya's south.

Brussels/Tripoli/Sebha, 31 July 2017

Appendix A: Map of Libya



Appendix

A:

Map

of

Libya

Crisis

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