NON-SECURE ROUTES: THE HIDDEN WORLD OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION IN LIBYA

Abdelsatar Hetieta 2019
Introduction

Every year, hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants journey through severe armed conflicts between Libyan rivals, willing to risk paying a heavy price to preserve their lives — provided they make it out alive. Most of these migrants travel via the secret world of illegal immigration, in which all routes are unsafe: the entire journey, from arrival into Libya to exit, is fraught with danger.

Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in 2011, Libya’s fragile borders have provided an additional attraction to Africans yearning to improve their living conditions, and who are therefore willing to travel thousands of miles via the Libyan coast to Europe.

Issa Abdel Majid Mansur, the former head of The Tabu Front for the Salvation of Libya (TFSL), Libya’s anti-illegal immigration agency, estimates that the number of Africans crossing Libya into Europe during the Gaddafi era was around 3,000 a year; today, the numbers reach 3,000 per day.

Barak Barfi, a researcher at the New America Foundation, states that, given the migration situation in Libya, “in the lack of government, there are no forces to control either land or maritime borders, and that is why the predicament of migration, which is growing terribly, is putting pressure on Europe and the entire world.”

While European leaders are alarmed by the escalating number of African migrants travelling via Libya across the Mediterranean, and their political agendas are focused on how to stop the flow of illegal immigrants to their countries and combat terrorism, African leaders are wary of the scale of their catastrophes being revealed.

The seemingly endless convoys of migrants call attention to the dire economic, political and security issues many — particularly those from Central African countries — face.

The head of the High Social Council of Libyan Tuareg, Moulay Kadidi, whose tribe dominates most of the southwestern border between Libya and Mali, points out that the greater the poverty, the greater the security risk.

He talks about the role of political differences in Libya, foremost of which is the ongoing practice of neglecting the tribal demands of those in the harsher areas — as has concerned African governments in Mali, Algeria.

“In the lack of government, there are no forces to control either land or maritime borders, and that is why the predicament of migration, which is growing terribly, is putting pressure on Europe and the entire world”

— Barak Barfi, New America Foundation

NO MAN’S LAND: This barbed-wire fence on the eastern border between Egypt and Libya, erected since the Italian occupation of the 1930s to prevent the Libyan resistance movement from gaining support from Egypt, stretches 155 miles (250 kilometers) from the Mediterranean coast deep into the desert. At 6.5 yards (six meters) wide and with landmines on both sides, it serves as a deadly wall of resistance for illegal immigrants, with many tragedies occurring.
You pay your money, and then you pass. But if you don’t have money, you won’t. What have you got on you? I do not care! What is your destination? I do not care!”

— Issa Abdel Majid Mansur, former head of the Tabu Front for the Salvation of Libya

DEADLY JOURNEYS:
Rescuers carry a bag with the body of a drowned migrant off the coast of Tajoura, east of Tripoli (REUTERS). The number of Africans crossing Libya into Europe during the Gaddafi era were around 3,000 a year; today, the numbers reach 3,000 per day.

Amid the political chaos and war between those contending for rule over Libya, and the in-fighting between various cities and tribes, the masses of migrants seeking a better life have instead found themselves at the mercy of a network of stakeholders, many of whom consider humans and human trafficking a commodity on a par with other goods — drugs, weapons, terrorists — smuggled in similarly perilous cross-border adventures.

“The risk of illegal immigration continues, and the conditions of migrants are getting worse than ever, as many of them are buried in the Sahara before even reaching the coast,” says Mansur. “You pay money, and then you pass. But if you don’t have money, you won’t. What have you got on you? I do not care! What is your destination? I do not care!”

This is the grim charter human traffickers adopt and implement on the many roads linking Libya with its neighbouring countries, which also serve as routes for extremists bent on wreaking havoc in the West and other African nations or elsewhere.

Regarding his views on whether illegal immigration could be exploited by extremist elements in Libya to move across borders to other countries, Barfi — who has visited several countries in the Middle East, including Syria, Turkey and Egypt — says, “The whole world is afraid of this. So far, we have seen so many jihadists coming to Europe this way. However, there is an urgent need to take care of this issue.”
Routes Through the Desert: The Extremist Element

There are many routes through the Libyan desert; while some have existed for centuries as part of an ancient network of trade routes, others are newer — and with little opportunity for alternative sources of income, most are now being used predominantly for the trafficking of illegal immigrants and other commodities, such as drugs and weapons.

One such route from Mali, which passes from Niger and then into Libya, is frequented by an assortment of migrants seeking to reach Europe, as well as members of Boko Haram and other extremist groups. At present, such extremist cross-border groups are contributing to the continuing chaos in Libya, and consequently, to the continued trafficking of illegal immigrants, which is also a source of profit for them.

The extremist convoys utilise similar routes as other human traffickers and narcotic dealers: long paths covered by dirt and gravel, with sparse sources for drinking and bathing water — in the forms of a few ponds or oases — available only after hundreds of miles. Travellers on these routes typically rely on palm cultivation, falconry and deer hunting for sustenance.

A security official in southern Libya states that “such numerous alarming human convoys face military intervention in northern Mali for fear of terrorists, and so they flee to Niger, then into Libya, and head for the north, and that is where we lose track of them; the south is uncontrolled in the lack of an army. You pay and you simply pass! Traffickers have become wealthy through transporting those people across borders.”

There are other routes for illegal immigration convoys from the Sudanese and Egyptian borders into Libya. There are also some strange immigration routes, mainly used by extremists coming from Iraq and Syria. These extremists mysteriously arrive at points near the Libyan border, especially from Tunisia and Sudan, and then melt into the waves of migrating people.

This bizarre mixture of extremists and various other migrants can be noticed in the large tin buildings at As Saddadah area — one of the most important illegal immigration collection centers, located in the middle of the Libyan desert. The As Saddadah area was previously used by the Libyan army for storage and as a rest house; in fact, it was a favored rest spot for Gaddafi when he wanted to spend a few days in solitude.

Although the As Saddadah center is no longer used by any government body, its director, Hamad Bou Ahmad, who is originally from the neighbouring city of Bani Walid, is one of the biggest smugglers of illegal migrants.
Immigrants. The building still has a functional infrastructure, despite being bombed during the armed Libyan uprising, which was backed by NATO and supplemented by its jet fighters and rocket-propelled grenades.

Near to the As Saddadah center, high-profile extremists on the “most wanted” lists of countries such as France, the U.S. and Egypt hold meetings to plan attacks inside and outside Libya.

Among these feared extremists are Algerians Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Abu Maawiya, and Egyptians Hassan, Khalid Said and others. In recent years, Belmokhtar has led operations against Western nationals in West and Central Africa.

The United States African Command (a.k.a. “AFRICOM”), which comprises the forces operating in Africa, formerly had a presence on the coast of Tripoli. However, the Libyan civil war made it leave the country in early April. Barfi points out that AFRICOM’s forces are, nevertheless, deployed in other countries in Africa because they fear the spread of al-Qaeda, Daesh and Boko Haram. According to Barfi, AFRICOM also has a presence in West Africa, and there are special U.S. forces in Niger, headquartered in Djibouti on Bab El Mandab.

**DANGEROUS CRISS-CROSSINGS:** The red lines on the maps above show the various routes through the Libyan desert used by smugglers of illegal immigrants and other cargo: 1) Inset, the city of Salloum on the Egyptian–Libyan border. From Salloum port, the illegal immigrants set off on land routes to the seashore, where they board boats into the Mediterranean Sea as shown on the red line on the map. This is the first step for the illegal immigration; after that, some of them continue travelling to Tripoli, and take the next step to Europe. 2) The red lines here present one of the hardest illegal migration routes between Salloum (Egypt) and an Musaid (Libya). Crossing here is done on foot through landmines at the border; many immigrants die in the desert here. 3) Red lines show the journey of thousands of illegal immigrants across the Libyan desert to reach the shores of the Mediterranean. 4) The red circles show the most important points of gathering migrants in the desert before they are transported to the seashore. These immigrants come from African countries and most seek to travel to Europe. Once they reach Tripoli, they face further difficulties because of the war.
Connections Between Drug, Terrorist and Human Trafficking

Although Libya, with a population of just over six million, is not a major market for cannabis consumption, it is used as a transit area for shipments of drugs from Algeria, Morocco and Niger on their way to Egypt. The latter has a population of 99.21 million, and a soaring drug-addiction problem that is twice the global rate (just over 10%, or 9.6 million people, according to Egypt’s Minister of Social Solidarity, Ghada Wali).

The remote routes stretch across the borders of several countries, making it easy for travelers to cross and reach their destination without fear of authorities — providing they have the money, whether on the ground during the first stage, or at sea in the second stage. As long as you pay money everything will be fine. Libya’s beaches, especially in the northwest, are still inadequately controlled, and the boats used to transport migrants to Europe can easily be seen from the shore of Zuwara.

Austrian-born Col. Wolfgang Pusztai, security and policy analyst, and chairman of the Advisory Board for the National Council on U.S.–Libya Relations, who has previously served in the military and security missions of his country, the European Union and NATO, sees indications that terrorist groups in North Africa are earning money from protecting illegal immigration and recruiting members from among those immigrants: “There is strong evidence that terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State (Daesh) and al-Qaeda organizations in the Islamic Maghreb, are making money by extorting convoys of migrants under the pretext of protecting them.”

Pusztai adds, “These terrorists recruit new members among the migrants, but we cannot ascertain whether the two organizations are directly involved in illegal immigration.”

In the past, Issa Abdel Majid Mansur was in the Libyan opposition, and led an anti-government movement on behalf of his tribe, the Tabu (or Toubou).

After the fall of Gaddafi, Mansur assumed the position of head of illegal immigration control and established an office in the south of the country for this purpose. He then served as adviser to the President of the Libyan Parliament for African Affairs. He also has good relations with influential African and European parties.

Now head of the Tabu Congress, Mansur has recently visited African presidents in Niger, Chad and elsewhere to discuss illegal immigration. In his view, any attempt to resolve the problem without reference to the tribes on the Libyan border is destined to failure. He expresses bewilderment over the European focus on the illegal immigration boats on the northern Libyan coasts, saying: “This alone will not achieve any result. You need to address the issue at the source.”

Pusztai argues that so long
as non-governmental vessels are perched off the Libyan coast, human traffickers will continue to send migrants via smaller boats to board them. The process is very easy for dispatching more immigrants to Europe, yet it also results in more people drowning in the Mediterranean.

In 2018, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “an estimated 2,275 people perished in the Mediterranean — an average of six deaths per day.”

In an interview with Amjad al-Warfali, director of the information office of the illegal immigration agency’s Benghazi branch, he states that while some migrants come to make the journey by sea to Europe, others stay and seek work in Libya. “Some nationalities, such as Egyptians, mostly say they come to work in Libya. But for Eritrean, Somali and Sudanese nationalities, a percentage seek work here, while others seek to cross the sea to Europe.”

In Benghazi, too, says Mahmoud Bou al-Qanashi, a social activist on the Egyptian–Libyan border, more than 80% of Africans who arrive in Libya are seeking to reach Europe.

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— Amjad al-Warfali, director of the illegal immigration agency’s Benghazi branch

1. https://www.unhcr.org/desperatejourneys/
Stories of Individual Migrants: Al-Safi

From the eastern Libyan border comes the story of 50-year-old Al-Safi, from the center of Itay al-Baroud in the Beheira Governorate of northwest Egypt, with the three men who arranged the operation of his illegal smuggling into Libya last November for $800.

The first man was Haitham, 36, an employee at the Egyptian–Libyan border town of Salloum — a small but important link in the transnational trade routes since ancient times. The second was Ibrahim, 50, who works as a carpenter and lives in Sinbillawin in Dakahlia Governorate. The third, Abdel Halim, 42, is from Salloum, and has tribal relations and relatives on the other side of the border inside Libya.

Al-Safi’s case is registered numerically as “19860 for the year 2018 — crimes of Salloum,” revealing another aspect of the hidden world of trade in illegal immigration. The three who sent Al-Safi and hundreds more to Libya were charged with “joining an organized criminal group for smuggling migrants.”

The way Al-Safi arrived in Libya is very similar to the way thousands of poor migrants travel from their countries to Libya, a journey that often ends in tragedy. Al-Safi went on record in the minutes of investigation dated 21 November 2018, taken at the detective unit at Salloum police station, which told his story from the beginning after his return from Libya.

In his own words, Al-Safi relays his story: “Because of the working conditions in Egypt, I wanted to travel to Libya to work. I was talking to a neighbor who told me he had traveled before and had some friends with at Salloum border crossing.”

Al-Safi says one of the smugglers asked him to arrive at that Mediterranean border town under a high plateau in the morning, and then instructed him to send a message to a certain phone number informing him that he had entered Salloum. He was then instructed to wait next to the mosque in the Salloum Bay cafeteria, where a car would come to take him somewhere else.

Al-Safi explains: “Then a stranger came took me to a room in the desert behind the cafeteria. There were many Egyptians in the room waiting to cross the border into Libya.

“Then three pickup trucks covered with drop cloth took us to warehouses inside the plateau, far from the city of Salloum. There we found other Egyptians waiting to cross the border. All the passengers were taken off at 12:00 p.m. in seven-seater sedan cars, and the car climbed the plateau on its way to the official crossing point at Salloum.

“Shortly before reaching it, the passengers were taken off and led in the dark through the plateau until we reached the sea coast between Egyptian and Libyan borders. By then, it was seven in the morning.”

The smugglers ordered them to wait for boats to transport them into Libyan territory. However, as bad weather and high sea waves prevented that, the smugglers instructed the group to walk about six miles (10 kilometers) to reach the Libyan town of Musaid. They prohibited Al-Safi and another migrant, Samir, from walking with the young migrants, saying they would not be able to walk because of their age.

Al-Safi continues: “Samir and I stayed in position waiting for the weather to improve. The first day went without incidents, despite the lack of food and drink. On the second day we were alarmed, but by sunrise, around 7:30 a.m., another group of illegal immigrants arrived.

“The wind had calmed down and the waves were more appropriate for using the boats. We got on board and reached the Libyan coast, where cars took us to Musaid. The smugglers placed us in warehouses, where I found a large number of Egyptian immigrants who had preceded me.

“They charged more money as they moved us from one location to another; each group would sell for 2,000 Libyan dinars per person ($1,431), and then the last group that bought us transported us to another warehouse for the assembly of illegal immigrants in Tobruk.”

In another aspect of the investigation into illegal immigration cases, the interrogator at Salloum asked one of the smugglers: “How much money is agreed to each person who wants to travel?”

The smuggler answered: “We agreed on the amount of 15,000 Egyptian pounds per person [about $900].”
Types of Migrants

Migrants are divided into several categories. The first type, which poses a threat for Europe, comprises those coming to Libya in order to cross the Mediterranean, particularly into Italy. Most of these migrants are Africans, as social activist Bou al-Qanashi confirms.

The second type of migrant are those seeking jobs in Libyan cities. These are usually skilled workers in construction, carpentry, electricity and mechanics. Demographically, most of this type is either Egyptian or Sudanese. They are migrating primarily in the hope of saving money and then returning to their respective countries.

The third type poses the greatest threat: extremists and transnational terrorist elements who seek to exploit the security chaos, political disputes and civil war among the Libyans to be able to establish safe havens for themselves.

This class of migrant derives from various African nationalities, including Egyptians, Tunisians, Algerians, Somalis Malians and others. They also reflect different ideologies: some belong to al-Qaeda, while others
subscribe to Daesh. There are also those who come to work as mercenaries for militias.

African countries in the middle of the continent suffer not only from poverty and challenging environmental constraints, but also from political upheaval and repression. Under such arduous challenges, African citizens are searching for a brighter future, and their plan for fulfilling this dream comes in the shape of fantastic schemes of reaching Europe by sea.

As their fantasy takes them across the Mediterranean to Europe, there is not an easier path than through Libya, where the borders are open and security authorities are too busy dealing with the issues of the ongoing internal conflict and civil war ravaging the country.

The economic situation among the residents of border towns has been severe for decades, and most of these tribal populations have an extension with their cousins on the other side of the border, says Kadidi. This attribute is both a privilege and a problem, as residents of those areas can have a role in protecting the borders, although organizing this could be complicated.

Yet whichever class of migrant they may represent, each of those struggling across the Libyan border share the twin curses of poverty and destitution. Hence, within some tribes involved in the smuggling operation, there has emerged a stratum of rich and powerful individuals whose veiled and lucrative connections with powerful people in their countries have arisen in the aftermath of the wave of unrest that shook in the Arab world — including Libya — for eight years.
Attempts to Control or Deter Illegal Immigration

Mansur says that, during previous agreements between the Gaddafi regime and Italy, funds were allocated to deter illegal immigration and support the Libyan control apparatus with equipment, aircraft, weapons and logistics. Those agreements achieved results on the ground.

“The Italians supported Gaddafi at the time to prevent illegal immigration, but it did not work out,” adds Barfi. “If Gaddafi, the powerful ruler, was not able to control illegal immigration, then the implausibility of the situation right now stands to reason, especially with prevalent chaos and weak governance in Libya.”

However, Mansur points out that the number of illegal immigrants entering Libya to cross into Europe was insignificant before Gaddafi fell, but has increased manifold after the fall of his regime.

“I can tell you that Italy has not been dealing prudently with successive Libyan governments since 2011, and has not fulfilled its previous commitments. It is providing aid to the Libyan Coast Guard in the eastern and western regions, but it is supposed to give that aid to the south, which is the main spot where illegal immigration comes from.”

He believes the solution to the problem of illegal migration lies in developing the southern regions where illegal immigrants enter Libya — for example, the towns of Rebiana, Kufra, Qatrun and Murzuq — through education, training and local projects, so that they do not have to engage in the economy of human trafficking.

Mansur recalls the days he managed the official apparatus for the prevention of illegal immigration from southern Libya: “The headquarters was based in the southeast of the country; we stopped and arrested numerous groups. About 15,000 or more were sent back to their respective countries through Niger and Chad. That was a carried out singly, without support from either Italy or the then-(Libyan) Transitional Council or subsequent Libyan governments.”

Since 2014, Libya’s institutions have been largely divided between two governments in the west and east of the country, while the south remained without government administration. The army and police were divided, and the central bank split. The illegal immigration control body was divided.

Explains Mansur, “This is why waves of illegal immigrants reached Europe, why some drowned in the sea, and why the problem has turned into an international issue. There is no doubt that living in some African countries is tough.

“Most migrants come from Ghana, Niger, Burkina Faso, Guinea Conakry, Guinea-Bissau and Ivory Coast, as well as Sudan, Egypt and other groups, such as Eritreans, Ethiopians and Somalis. Some of these countries suffer from economic or political problems or wars.”
Border Smuggling Over Time: Modern Amenities and Ancient Tribal Ties

Many border smugglers have become more experienced than security officers; this has been the case for a very long time — long before the advent of terrorist groups and the dawn of rosy dreams of life in the developed world prompted migration at its present exponential scale. These smugglers carved routes deep in the desert, far away from customs, passport authorities and border guards.

In the first stage, at the beginning of the second half of the 1900s, wily smugglers transported fabrics and electrical appliances from Europe to the Libyan kingdom. The transport was carried out using animals such as donkeys and camels or pickup cars.

At a later stage, in the 1970s and even before the Arab Spring revolutions, the drug trade spread widely along the same routes. And these same age-old traders who were previously engaged in the smuggling of non-harmful goods became engaged in the lucrative process of drug-smuggling. The trade in cannabis and heroin rapidly expanded, increasing the expertise of traffickers and smugglers, who formed a strong network across the entire Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

In the third (current) stage, human trafficking, arms and the transfer of extremists was introduced. The features of this phase are evident, strongly, from 2011 to today. Although this phase is based on the same routes used earlier by fabrics and then drug smugglers, the tools used by the border smugglers have been completely modernized.

Now, the only differences between the past and the present are the levels of ambition — along with the vanishing use of animals, and an end of the era when smugglers used stars at night and shades during the day as their...
primary tools for navigation. These have now been replaced with modern sport utility vehicles (SUVs) in the desert and the widespread use of motorized boats to ferry people across the sea. Close-up telescopes, Thuraya cellphones and global satellite positioning (GPS) devices have also emerged.

As in the past, tribal ties on both sides of the border give more confidence and security to those working in smuggling. On both sides of the border between Libya and Egypt, the high-population Awlad Ali tribes can be found.

Illegal immigrants can only cross from Egypt into Libya after the coordination and payment of money to local smugglers has been completed. It would not have been possible for Al-Safi to pass from Salloum to the Libyan Desert without assistance from a local — in his case, Abdul Halim.

In the middle of the previous century, Salloum was an important commercial city, but the decades-long political wrangling between Egypt and Libya had an abating effect. On the two sides of the Libyan–Sudanese border, there is the Zoya tribe, some of whose sons are smuggling between the two countries in a rough terrain from the vicinity of Gabal El Uweinat in the far southeast of Libya, reaching the oases of Kufra and Jaghbub.

Often, the interests of the senior smugglers of the Zoya tribe intersect with other tribes seeking a share of this lucrative trade, such as the Shuhaybat, Tabu and Mahamid tribes — the latter being located within the Sudanese side.

On the Libyan border with Chad, where the Tibesti Mountain is located, the Tabu tribe is spread within the borders of the two countries. Due to the fragility of the border in this region, the issue is not merely human trafficking — it
is the ease of movement of armed individuals and Islamic extremists with cars and military equipment between the two sides that raises regional concern.

In the southwestern region, the Tuareg tribe is spread across the borders of Libya, Niger and Algeria, and has an extension to Mali in the west. Many members of this tribe are shepherds and camel herders. But the scarcity of rain, coupled with land poverty and government neglect in recent decades, has resulted in a new and more reckless behavior among the normally peaceful tribe, according to Kadidi.

Having a four-wheel drive to move anything across the border has become a source of wealth. It does not matter what you are transporting — drugs, weapons, illegal immigrants or even terrorists. Such conditions and atmosphere are similar on all of Libya's borders with its neighbours.

“All the tribes of the South have those who work on transferring illegal immigrants. But the serious issue is about trafficking in human beings whose poverty can be exploited in Libya's civil wars,” says Mansur.

He adds: “Members of the Justice and Equality Group (JEM), the opposition faction to former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, also cross the border into Libya, along with members of Chadian opposition to President Idriss Déby.

“The majority of those are located around Libya's southern border and can be used in armed conflicts at various regions within Libya. In the end, I say this chaos is a momentous indicator of security issues, not only in Libya or Africa, but also across the Mediterranean.”
The Changing Price and Practices of Smuggling Immigrants Over Time: Jaghbub

Prices can vary in the illegal immigration market, according to location and category. The situation is similar to what happens in a market; there are cheap goods such as potatoes sold wholesale, and none of the traffickers would notice what is falling out of the bag — for example, young men who have wives, children, families and relatives in search of a better future. An individual of this group would usually pay $400–$500 to cross the border into cities in northern Libya.

But for various reasons, prices have risen everywhere on the border, including the deployments by the army led by Marshal Khalifa Haftar, which led to a fluctuation in the market of poor migrants traveling from Central Africa to the Libyan coast. On the eastern border, Libyan local authorities with weak capabilities have deployed patrols and initiated more surveillance along the border. But despite these deterrents, the number of immigrants continues to rise.

While the transfer price of illegal immigrants was $800 in November, it has increased to more than $1,000 in the first quarter of 2019. In addition to the deployment of the Libyan army in large areas of the Sahara, the Egyptian side was able to tighten the penalties in the law on human smugglers. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi led a campaign against illegal immigration, and tribal leaders on the border held conferences to raise awareness of the dangers.

Despite these efforts, it is still common to see new groups of illegal immigrants coming from the border; the area is full of faces looking tired and frightened. Here are dirt roads that engulf the low-rise houses in the Jaghbub oasis, about 174 miles (280 kilometers) southeast of Tobruk, where the Libyan parliament holds its meetings.

Jaghbub was once the capital of the Senusians, a movement of peaceful Sufis, despite its warring past with the Italian occupation of Libya in the first half of the 1900s. This is why the inhabitants of Jaghbub are pleasant and are not, by nature, inquisitive. The oasis is...
in a remote part of the desert; its opposite, on the Egyptian side, is the Siwa oasis.

As evening sets in Jaghbub, fewer men roam the streets, while more women take to the alleys around the oasis. This has been the common practice since the early period of the Senusian movement some 150 years ago. Men return to their homes after evening prayers at the Grand Mosque, leaving the night for women to visit and move freely between their neighbors and relatives.

But the situation in Jaghbub is changing. Nowadays, illegal immigration smugglers make use of the dark to drive their cars in the middle of the oasis, exchanging news and agreeing new deals. As in the border and remote areas, the telephone network is poor and irregular most of the time. Sometimes you can spend an entire day without being able to make a phone call.

However, the modern era offers many solutions and alternative options even in the heart of the desert. The communications problem in the oasis has been overcome by satellite-connected Internet, owned by five shop owners selling fabrics and food commodities.

Each of these five stores has the capacity to distribute Internet services within a vicinity of 218–328 yards (200–300 meters). If you want to connect your cellphone or laptop to the outside world, you can buy an Internet package from one of these shops and sit near the store that sells you the service.

As a result, if you wander around at night in Jaghbub, you will now find that many of the old customs have changed. In each of these shops you can buy four-wheel-drive vehicles for smuggling. These are typically cars without metal plates, where the windows are framed with tinted glass.

Here, too, you will see new generations of young men sitting on either side of the road, with only their faces illuminated by their cellphone screens. They are browsing the world, searching for a better tomorrow and jealously looking at the adventures of illegal immigration drivers who are richer.

These men (the smugglers) seem to have an unlimited ability to buy whatever they want from Internet packages, and in the event of interruption of telephone service, they resort to their Thuraya phones.
Troubled Oases: At Dr. Suleiman’s House

As soon as you enter Jaghbub, the entire oasis is aware of your presence, and will know whether you are a friend or an enemy. This forms the foundation for your treatment: doors either open before you unconditionally, or mercilessly close in your face. With no hotels in Jaghbub, an invitation to spend the night in the home of the young local medic, the good Dr. Suleiman, son of one of the most famous oasis officers, comes as a welcome relief. The late father was considered an officer of the old generation, or rather of Gaddafi’s generation.

D r. Suleiman’s house is located next to the main communication station. At night, many visitors come to chat about this troubled part of the planet, which stretches from the Suez Canal to South Africa and passing through this oasis; tea glasses flow in the guest room.

Jaghbub is one of the most important routes of illegal immigration in North Africa, not only for the class of poor immigrants dreaming of jobs in Libya or opportunities to cross the sea into Europe, but also for drug and weapons smugglers, and the high-profile “wanted” terrorists.

The most important crossing point between the Libyan Jaghbub and the Egyptian Siwa oases lies on the “Almalfa” sandy road. A convoy of Toyota Land Cruisers loaded with cannabis, narcotic pills or weapons passes through the night with professional guides, unloading its cargo on the other side of the border and returning with a fresh load of illegal immigrants.

Here, the profits are incredible. A 55-pound (25-kilogram) score of cannabis is worth around 230,000 Libyan dinars ($164,544). A box of Ultram (Tramadol) pills sells for almost the same price, with the profit made on each box exceeding 100,000 dinars ($71,540). If the smuggling convoy returns with a shipment of humans, the profits will be doubled.

Jaghbub — like most oases located on the Libyan border, with neighboring countries in the south and west — has witnessed the deterioration of legitimate sources of livelihood over the years, also due to the impacts of neglect and climate change.

The oasis relied mainly on cultivating dates, however Dr. Suleiman says: “Now the crop is zero. The shortage of date production this year is about 80%. The disease of dates known as ‘Ghobash’ has spread. In the past,
palm trees were sprayed in a given month. However, because there is no strong authority in Libya, date-palm farming has collapsed. There is no other economic activity.

A 373-mile (600-kilometer) road from the town of Tazerbo, near the southern border, leads to Jaghbub. Jaghbub is only 186 miles (300 kilometers) away from the southern Jalu oasis, and is also near the Ojla oasis, the home town of Omar al-Fadeel, grandson of Alfadeel Buomar, the famous freedom fighter, who is a member of the Awajla tribe. Omar al-Fadeel is proud of his half-Berber, half-noble Arab family lineage.

“Yes, the situation in the oases of the south is very difficult. Agriculture is in shambles. There are no longer safe sources of income,” says al-Fadeel.

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The situation in the oases of the south is very difficult. Agriculture is in a shambles. There are no longer safe sources of income

— Omar al-Fadeel, member of the Awajla tribe

DRIED-UP FRUITS: A worker collects dates from a palm tree at Siwa oasis, opposite Jaghbub oasis. Both oases formerly relied on date cultivation, but as date-palm farming has collapsed, people are forced to seek other sources of income (REUTERS)
Financing the Journey: Secrets of Illegal Immigration

Most of the oases of the south are connected by unpaved sand roads, which SUVs suffice to traverse; the only paved road lies between Jaghbub and Tobruk. About 18.5 miles (30 kilometers) south of Tobruk, there is a road leading to the Libyan rear in the north, called the 200 road. It is about 248.5 miles (400 kilometers) from Tobruk to Ajdabiya. After Ajdabiya, it is possible to move to the capital, Tripoli, via a 58-mile (850-kilometer) road.

The day after our arrival arrived at Jaghbub, we travelled 18.5 miles (30 kilometers) to the nearest point of the border with Egypt, i.e. opposite Siwa Oasis, to witness the smuggling operations in practice. From here, you can see the antennae of Egyptian communications towers through binoculars. The run-down paved road, constructed at the beginning of the Kingdom of Libya’s reign in the early 1950s, only accommodates one car.

“Things are no longer the same as the in the past,” says Hussein, 70, a member of Shuhaybat tribe who has been working as a guide since the time of fabric smuggling across the desert.

“Today, illegal immigration has become very profitable. Migrants come in groups from Siwa, each group made of 20–30 people, depending on the capacity of the pickup vehicle. The profit of a trip of this type is $30,000. It is almost impossible that an illegal immigrant comes alone. It’s very rare. But how can you pay almost $1,000 if you do not have a single dollar?”

The world of illegal migration embraces various tricks to pay money, the threads of which extend from Central Africa and Egypt to reach into the Libyan cities, and then to European work sites. It is done in several ways.

First, the migrant’s family raises money for him to travel. The payment
The “Working Solution”: Juma’s Story

This is what happened to Juma, 27, who now works in a coffee shop in Benghazi. He arrived here a month after he left his home, Bani Mazar, in the city of Minya in Upper Egypt.

As he explains, “I left Bani Mazar last summer and went to the border city of Marsa Matruh, where I met Egyptian smugglers from the tribe of Awlad Ali. It was agreed that I will pay the amount of 20,000 Egyptian pounds ($1,166).

“Of course, I had only a few hundred dollars for the road, so I told them I have a relative named Hussein who works in a restaurant in Benghazi, and that the payment will be from him after I get there.”

Alongside Juma, there were other migrants: nine other Egyptians, seven from Somalia, five from Sudan and two from Eritrea.

“We were stuck in the trunk of the car, and arrived in Tobruk at night,” says Juma. “When our group coming from Egypt and going to Tobruk arrived, the smugglers placed us in one of their small rooms.

“The rooms were lined in long rows on the outskirts of Tobruk on the east. While on route, the smugglers had already contacted my relative, Hussein, who works in Benghazi, and told him to prepare the money so that he can receive me.”

Juma continues, “Some of those who were with me continued their way with other smugglers to towns in the west of Libya, such as Ijdabia, Tripoli and others, as the Eritreans and the Somalis wanted to cross the sea to Europe. This is more accessible in the west of the country than in the east.”

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must be made by his family after the migrant arrives at his destination and starts sending part of his salary each month to the family.

It is rare to find an illegal immigrant, such as Al-Safi, who can pay in cash. The common way here is to make payment through a complex series of arrangements, provided the illegal immigrant has a relative or an acquaintance in the destination location — either Libya or Europe — who agrees to pay the smugglers to receive his relative. The relative then gets their money from the immigrant in monthly installments once he has begun work and is earning a salary.

Smugglers operate as one gang. The Libyan smuggler receives illegal immigrants from the Egyptian smuggler after he has surreptitiously crossed the border with them, which is inherently risky. In addition to security patrols along the border from Salloum in the north to Jaghbub in the south, a barbed wire stretches about 155 miles (250 kilometers), and both sides have landmines. When the convoy arrives safely, the Libyan smuggler pays the Egyptian smuggler his share of the deal, which amounts to about 6,000 Egyptian pounds per person (about $583). The group is then loaded into a pickup vehicle that heads west.

There is a quasi-banking process that takes place confidentially in all parts of Libya’s weakened state, but this fundamental process is essential for instilling confidence among those working in illegal immigration. The process takes place in private money transfer offices in Libya. These offices have savings accounts for foreign workers, who occasionally
The owner of one of these offices in the suburb of Benina near Benghazi airport, known locally as “Al-Maghrabi,” explains this process: “For each new worker who comes to the suburb, whether to work in construction or restaurants or cafes, I open a savings account, and after the amount reaches a reasonable number, he tells me that one of the relatives of an illegal immigrant will arrive on a certain day, and that he wants to give the smuggler who brings him a specific amount.

“In the case of access from Salloum or Jaghbub to Tobruk, the amount ranges from $500–$800. If he wanted to reach Benghazi, the amount will rise to $1,100 or $1,300.”

During the first months of his arrival, the illegal immigrant becomes a slave to the one who paid the value of his arrival; he will work in any field, but he has no choice. He has to repay his debt before he is free.

Al-Maghrabi says: “Once he has finished repaying his debt, we open a new account for the newcomer, so that he can start his own savings as well. A few months later, he tells us he wants us to give part of his money to the smugglers in exchange for bringing an acquaintance or a relative, and so on.

“In the event there is no payment to the smugglers after the migrant arrives at his destination, he is then destined to death. Smugglers do not have mercy. They cannot allow manipulation of this matter. There are few incidents in which the illegal immigrant was unable to pay his money.

“If he does not pay and finds no one to pay on his behalf, the smugglers will discipline him as a lesson to the other migrants. They would do to him what you cannot even fathom... [they will] leave him in the middle of the desert, among the mines and the barbed wire. Either border control authorities will find him, he will explode by a landmine, or he will die of thirst and hunger.”

— Al-Maghrabi

CENTRAL STATION: Beres, in the district of Benghazi, is one of the towns that receives illegal immigrants before they move on to the far northwest of Libya
In northwest Libya, particularly in and around Tripoli — the region from which most of the boats carrying illegal immigrants leave to Europe — a frail-bodied young man named Conte, from Guinea Conakry, was with four of his African friends hoping to travel from the coast of Zuwara town, near Tripoli, to Italy, and from Italy to his brother in France.

On his journey to Tripoli, Conte spent $1,000, which was all he had on him. When he arrived in Tripoli, he had to pay a similar sum for the journey by sea to Italy. This requires waiting at the center of the immigrant gathering until the number reaches 200, the total capacity of a boat’s load. The waiting time is typically extended for more than a month.

During this waiting period, Conte’s brother in Paris contacted him to arrange to transfer the necessary funds to the merchant in charge of the Zuwara migrant gathering center, sending an amount to cover the costs of boarding the boat as well as for living, eating and drinking for a month. However, as Conte’s brother’s phone was out of service for some unknown reason, the center officials believed Conte was trying to deceive them. He was forced to contact his family in Conakry to send the required funds.

During these events, another militia engaged in illegal immigration offered to settle the debt, provided they would get a repayment from Conte according to their own terms. For months, Conte found himself being bought and sold from militia to militia. While waiting for the financial transfers from his relatives to rid him of the bind he was in, his owners forced him to perform various labors — carrying bricks and cement, unloading lorries, cleaning buildings.

There is an illegal immigration agency affiliated to the authorities in western Libya. Colonel Ahmed Issa, who was previously in charge of the agency in Tripoli until 2017, says new resolutions regarding illegal immigration are expected in the near future: “Wait a bit, and we will talk about them. I have left work and do not work for the agency anymore. I’ll just say briefly that the majority of the immigrants are Africans. All of them are going to Europe by sea.”

Lt. Colonel Ali Suweib assumed responsibility after Col. Issa, but the unrest and war in Tripoli prevented him from completing the interview or resuming the dialog with Suweib.

As regards the slave market and the sale and purchase of migrants at his center in eastern Libya, Amjad al-Warfali, director of the information office of the illegal immigration agency’s Benghazi branch, says this is not common in the eastern region: “We have no contact with the illegal immigration agency in the West.

“We do not have the practice of buying and selling people, but it might be happening on the border. We ask the immigrant when he comes to us how he entered; sometimes, if we find his passport without a stamp, he says he paid money to a mediator on the border.”
Desert Menace: The Perils of Intertribal Conflicts, Militia and Seasoned Mercenaries

In the vast areas of the Libyan Desert, you cannot anticipate anything. Something good can happen to you, or something bad, including the loss of your life. Here it is impossible to isolate the dividing lines between the al-Qaeda elements, thugs, African armed opposition and the illegal immigrants.

“All this human mixture is floating in the desert in search of an end. Everyone is afraid of everything. Here you may encounter an army patrol, or bandits looking for money. It needs to be checked,” says Bou al-Qanashi during an interview in Jaghbub. “Most of the smugglers on these brutal roads carry weapons. In many cases, there are conflicts between them where there are victims; no one knows anything about them.”

One of the most significant threats to illegal immigrants during their transport through the desert is the disputes between bands of smugglers. Members of the Shuhaybat tribe, whose territory extends across both sides of the border, tend to monopolize the trade of people in Jaghbub, while the Maabda tribe monopolizes the trade between Salloum in Egypt and Musaid in Libya.

However, the tribal conflict over illegal immigration seems less acute at the Egyptian–Libyan border than in the south and southwest. In these two areas, members of the Zoya, Tabu and Tuareg tribes are actively competing to control the influence and trade of human beings by using weapons and engaging in fighting that can sometimes persist for days.

Says Mansur, “Some groups of militias that have joined the Libyan state and wear Libyan state uniform still carry out their old work of smuggling illegal immigration, especially in the Kufra region.”

In al-Jufra, in the middle of the desert, a security official who specializes in monitoring transients on remote land routes comments, “You expect to meet any kind. Terrorist. Tramadol dealer. Usually none of these objects to anyone. No one disputes sins, legality or adherence to religion, as you may think. This does not exist at all. “Even if the immigrant is Christian or non-religious, interest is predominant. Everyone takes his need and goes on. They are governed by a unique law. For example, among the provisions of this unwritten law, if you raise the weapon against me, I kill you. If you take your stuff and go on your way, then it’s fine — have a safe journey. Do not expect human smugglers to use the question tool: ‘Why?’ You ask and pay, so you get what you need on time.

“There are some kinds of smugglers on the border with Sudan who will ask you what you want. ‘I want fighters who are capable of taking up arms,’ you answer. ‘Well, I will bring them to you, and I will get my pay. As for what you do to them, it does not matter.’”

The connecting station is in the oasis of Kufra; from there, the migrants are received by Libyans.
Typically, human traffickers do not differentiate between ordinary migrants and highly dangerous extremist migrants seeking their help to travel, and willing to pay generously for the service. There have been many incidences of leaders and members of extremist groups using the same migration routes followed by the smugglers on all sides of Libya’s borders to cross neighboring countries — Egypt, Sudan, Chad, Niger, Algeria and Tunisia — to reach their ultimate destinations. As a result, a few thousand extremists of various groups are now scattered across Libya, many of whom have settled in the country or have moved on to Syria, or to other countries within North Africa and Europe.

The emergence of Daesh in Iraq and Syria coincided with the Muslim Brotherhood’s anger at the overthrow of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi.

Among the Morsi allies who appeared in demonstrations and sit-ins in the heart of Cairo and other provinces in 2013 and beyond, there were more extremist groups such as the Islamic Group, supporters of Ansar Bait al-Maqdis and Hazimoun. With the Egyptian state being able to control the Brotherhood and its allies, another layer of migrant — this one bloodier and even more capable of cross-border coordination — has emerged.

Since the proliferation of the bloody Daesh organization and its slaughter of victims, as shown in countless terrifying videos, concerns about migrating terrorists have spread across the Middle East and North Africa. Some countries that have the potential to monitor the vast border with Libya have increased their efforts, but this does not prevent the infiltration of terrorists wearing the clothes of ordinary illegal immigrants. Such was the case with Abu Muslim, an Egyptian in his 30s.

Abu Muslim (real name Mahmoud Sammalousi) formerly lived in the eastern suburb of the city of Marsa Matruh. He belongs to a tribe whose region extends along the Egyptian border with Libya, and therefore has knowledge of the illegal immigration traffickers.

Abu Muslim initially participated in a small cell calling...
for jihad against the security authorities that hung leaflets on the walls of Marsa Matruh’s main youth center. When sought by the authorities, Abu Muslim, along with two other young men — Abdullah and Sharif — took refuge among the illegal immigration smugglers to enable him to travel between Egypt and Libya. Abdullah, a computer technologist and the son of a famous cleric in the Egyptian city of Marsa Matruh, emerged as one of the leaders of Daesh in Sirte in 2016. Sharif went further, moving across the sea from Libya to join Daesh in Iraq and Syria. Abdullah was killed during Daesh’s expulsion by Libyan forces from Sirte, while Sharif’s fate is unknown after he was injured in the ankle in Syria. Abu Muslim was arrested after his infiltration across the Libyan border and was sentenced to death last year in case No. 12497 of year 2016 — Heliopolis Criminal.

When Daesh settled in Sirte up to the beginning of 2017, the organization’s leaders openly declared that they were preparing to invade Rome and reach the heart of Europe. With the expulsion of Daesh from Sirte, the organization rapidly spread throughout the Libyan Desert. New convoys endlessly poured through the same border crossings. In Alharuj region, in the most severely harsh desert areas of central Libya, extremist immigrants have established a new center, including leaders of the Somali Shabab movement, as well as others from Mali, Nigeria, Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria. Since August 2018, many names of dangerous leaders have emerged there, including Abu Muawiya al-Jazairi, Hassan al-Masri, Abu Yahya al-Nigeri and Somali Harun. According to sources with links to illegal immigration smugglers in western Libya, Abu Muawiya and Hassan entered Algeria a month ago to exploit the popular movement opposed to Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika running again for office. Mansur says many terrorist groups and Daesh members from all Arab and African countries are trying to benefit from open borders. However, this requires stability first in the countries of the region. So will it be possible for security services to detect terrorists who exploit illegal immigration in cross-border movement, including the infiltration of Europe by boats sailing across the Mediterranean? Not if, like Libya, the countries are suffering from problems such as political divisions and wars. According to the director of the information office of the illegal immigration agency in Benghazi, Amjad al-Warfali, “We are a detention and deportation center, and have nothing to do with the arrest or investigation of illegal immigrants.”
“The arrest and investigation of terror suspects is carried out through criminal investigation, internal security and the police. “First, they arrest the illegal immigrants, and then they turn them over to us. If anyone is found with security or other suspicions, we hand them over to the internal security, or to anti-terrorism — if the person is clear, they return him to us, and we deport him to his country.”

Mansur explains: “Distinguishing natural and extremist migrants is at the core of the work of security services, and it has its methods and jurisdiction in this matter. Yes, you can tell someone who is an illegal immigrant with an extremist approach and wants to harm others from someone who is looking for a better life. “When I was head of the illegal immigration agency, there might have been one or two extremists who were among the illegal immigrants, perhaps. At that time, Daesh had not proclaimed itself yet, and extremists’ the boldness to exploit Libya as a transit point had not been developed. During my time, the work was mostly about examining ordinary people who were looking for a new life in Europe.”

According to a report prepared by the Libyan intelligence service in Tripoli when it was formerly headed by Abdelkader Touhami, most of the Daesh members and terrorists who come to Libya are those who were in Syria and Iraq and came through illegal routes. The report, which is believed to have led to Touhami’s overthrow, accused regional states of being involved in transferring terrorists from Syria to Libya, especially in 2018, claiming they aimed to spread chaos in Libya and neighboring countries, and across the Mediterranean.

Mansur says: “The border has always been difficult to control. Even during the days of Gaddafi’s rule, it was not possible. it is about 1,242 miles (2,000 kilometers) long, and it is difficult to close these borders.

“The illegal immigration coming from Niger comes under the gaze of the French and American forces in Africa. Of course, America is not interested in the subject of illegal immigration here, but here is the largest French base, located in the Madama area on the border between Niger and Libya.”

Adds Mansur, “The extremist groups that were in Mali enter via the Algerian border, and from there cross over into southern Libya. This border area in the southwest, nicknamed the ‘El Salvador Triangle,’ had previously been a drug-smuggling and trafficking zone across the region, and now illegal immigration and the transport of extremists have been added to drug smuggling.”
A Tale of Three Traffickers

One evening, join a businessman named Bolsharya from the Menfa tribe in the Libyan east. A few minutes later, other guests from central Libya arrive, including an army colonel in charge of the military communications service, and other tribal and security leaders.

Bolsharya talks about the risks illegal immigrants coming to Libya face, including the landmines, and the colonel recounts a few incidents about how foreign extremists are trying to establish concentrations in the desert in cooperation with local contractors. New information had also reached the army about another route being used to move new cars from dealerships in the north to smugglers and armed groups in the middle of the desert.

According to the colonel, in December 2018, a military patrol, led by Marshal Haftar, was monitoring the road between Jafra and the various routes leading to the town of Ajdabiya in the east and to the coast in the north. The patrol intercepted convoys of three four-wheel-drive vehicles, all new cars. The first is driven by a 65-year-old man with a boy, 7; the second by a 55-year-old former army officer from the neighboring town of Sawknah; the third by a 27-year-old man from Ajdabiya.

At first, the three cars obey orders to stop, prompting the patrol to fire bullets. It is one of the most dangerous routes through which there are points of contact between the army forces stationed in the east and the forces of the Presidential Council of the National Reconciliation Government, headed by Fayez al-Sarraj, stationed in the west, yet the army managed to arrest the three cars and drivers, including the old man and the child.

The drivers were taken to a nearby military post; there, the investigations began. The official started by asking: “What does this old man want to do with the child in the desert?!” The old driver explained during his interrogation that this is his job, and he has no other — that is, delivering cars from Midrate to the Ajdabiya–Kufra road. The three drivers bought cars in the town of Misrata for militia groups operating in the desert between Jafra and the Kufra oasis. Each driver receives 15,000 Libyan dinars (roughly $10,000) for six hours of driving from the sales center to the buyers hiding in the valleys.

The interrogator asked: “Haj, this kind of new car is used by al-Jadhran against the army. What is your story exactly, and what is your relationship with militias and illegal immigration?!”

He referred to Ibrahim al-Jadhran, former commander of the oil installations in the central region, who is classified as a terrorist and wanted for prosecution in Tripoli. The authorities have accused al-Jadhran of bringing foreign migrants from Africa to help him fight back to control the oil facilities between Sirte and Ajdabiya.

With further investigation, it was established that the old man was taking the child with him in the car to dupe the army checkpoints while the car was being transported from the sellers in Misrata to the buyers in the desert. Smugglers often take women and children along as passengers to disguise their cargoes of illegal migrants while traveling through interstate roads. In a conservative society such as the Libyan Muslim community, security officers usually turn a blind eye to cars containing women to avoid having to have them searched. But what can investigators do to a frightened little child traveling with his elderly father?

There are a few sparse rooms with lots of mosquito nets where they detain the accused; offenders are usually punished in the camp where the detainees are being interrogated. “We only put those who deserve it here, whether they are illegal immigrants or outlaws,” said a military investigator at the interrogation. “Of course, one of those rooms belonged to the officer from Sawknah, and to the other young man. The old man and his son, the child, were very fond of the soldiers.”

One of the officers suggested it was appropriate to punish the old man. He asked for the old man’s wife’s number, then took his phone and gave it to the child so he could tell his mother about the dangers he was suffering because of his father. According to the interrogator, “When the boy listened to the voice of his mother, he began to cry. He was saying: ‘Mom, mom!’ In the end, the commanding officer told the old man, ‘Take your son and leave.’” Of course, the car was confiscated, along with the other two cars, but the old man and the child were released.

The rest of this interrogation concerned the seller: Who is it? Is he complicit? (In other words, does he provide cars to militias and human traffickers in the Libyan desert because he is part of it, or is he just a car owner looking for profits?) It turns out the owner of the car showroom is from the town of Sabratha, near the Libyan border with Tunisia, but originally from the town of Zliten, east of the capital. It was not possible to assign a security force to go to his residence or the headquarters of his car dealership in Misrata to investigate, as the forces that extend influence in Misrata, Sabratha and Zliten are hostile to Haftar’s army.

The colonel explains, “We called him to come and tell us what was going on, but he refused. He said, ‘As you have arrested the drivers, then it’s over. I do not want the cars.’”

One of the other visitors — Adel, from the Zoya tribe — has a few sons working in illegal immigration near the border with Sudan. He says: “Of course, a car driver working in this field gets a big wage. If he continues in this job, he also gets privileges and incentives, even if he only delivers vehicles from sellers to buyers in the desert near the border, or if they are engaged in illegal immigration directly.

“If the driver is working hard and earns excellent returns, he gets a car as a present. If he is caught and the car is confiscated, all the parties forgive him, and they take care of his family’s livelihood. But if he attempts to deceive, then he will meet a tragic fate.”
Further Evidence of Military Corruption and Immigrant Exploitation

The Libyan army, which is led by Haftar and currently controls large areas of the east and south, is weak and under-funded. It is also subject to an international ban on arms purchases from abroad since the start of the armed uprising against Gaddafi. The UN says lifting the sanctions requires the presence of a unified authority. However, the army has been disintegrating since 2011, and many officers have since left its service. Some have used their newfound expertise to work in illegal immigration, smuggling people, drugs and weapons, and providing fighters to groups on request.

One of these, a 45-year-old officer from the area of Wershfana, southwest of Tripoli, was a leader of the anti-corruption committees during the Gaddafi era. After he left the army in 2011, he made a fortune selling 20 armored vehicles of the distinctive yellow color used by the militia, and 40 ordinary pickup cars, to the fighters of the tribes of the Awlad Soleiman and Qadadfa in Sabha. He then worked on the cannabis-trafficking line in the south, near the towns of Rebianah and Al-Shatt.

Once the army had recovered and reached deep into the desert, it began to monitor this anti-corruption committee officer, discovering that he was running an extensive network of illegal immigration and bringing fighters from behind the border.

According to the information military investigators gathered, he also had commercial relations with various terrorist groups. The army could not pursue him for fear of falling into a trap set by the various forces occupying this desert triangle.

This situation continued for a few months until the officer and Hamad had a disagreement during the departure from Bani Waliid to the As Saddadah area concerning a convoy of illegal immigrants belonging to the officer. Despite not being a resident of the region like Hamad, the officer wanted to monopolize the trade further by taking over a residence located on the farm attached to As Saddadah facilities so he could accommodate the 50 illegal immigrants he had agreed to sell to the militia.

When the convoy approached the site known as the military factory at As Saddadah, clashes broke out between the two forces. The officer was eventually forced to withdraw after handing the illegal immigrants over to the militia for $5,000 each, and a few days later, the army expelled Hamad from the region.

During one of the many battles in 2018 between the army and the forces of Aljdhran in the Crescent over oil ports and installations, armed military police found a thousand dollars in the pockets of each of the dead Africans’ bodies. “We knew militias were exploiting young illegal immigrants to fight the authorities by offering them money to help them continue to migrate,” says an army officer. “Those who do not know how to carry a weapon join a quick training course, and then they are pushed into the front lines.”

Young immigrants are often lured into joining the fighting by money: “The militia commander says to each of them, ‘If you join us in the war, you will receive $1,000 a day; in addition, the booty you get from the enemy will be yours. If you die, we will send your family $100,000.’”

The impoverished and desperate migrants willingly comply, not realizing they are likely to be the first filled by bullets.
Fragile Borders, Conflicting Divisions

One problem with policing smuggling activity in Libya, especially of terrorists, is that it has two ministries for the interior, one from the interim government operating from the Al Bayda in the east, and the other from the Western-/UN-backed Al-Wifaq government. However, both are preoccupied with civil war, which has been accelerated by the advance of the national army led by Marshal Haftar that is proceeding to the capital from the east of the country.

Regional and international parties have attempted to unify security and military institutions since their division in 2014, but these attempts have stalled so far. This reality has been reflected in the security situation in general, the most prominent aspect of which is the fragile security situation on the border.

For example, while there is an apparatus to combat illegal immigration in Tripoli, and another in Benghazi, there is no coordination, cooperation or exchange of information between the two bodies because of the division throughout the country.

Of Benghazi, al-Warfali says: “Yes, we do not know what is going on with them, and they do not know what is going on here. This is, of course, a hindrance to work. The state needs a unified authority, and I believe the majority of people throughout Libya support the army led by Marshal Hafer to extend security and stability in the country.”

On the day we arrive, the number of detainees in the center is more than 300, comprising various nationalities: Eritrea, Somalia, Egypt, Sudan, southern Sudan, Chad and Niger — “most of them young, with families,” says al-Warfali.

DETAINEES EN MASSE: Hundreds of African migrants huddle on floors at the Anti-Illegal Immigration Agency in Tajora shelter center in Tripoli April 24, 2019 (REUTERS)
European and Western Responses to the Plight of Illegal Immigrants

Over the past three years, the U.S. and several European and non-European countries have intervened in the Libyan crisis because of the worrying situation of the country, but also because some believe these countries are trying to invest in illegal immigrants to make political gains.

“We have previously submitted memoranda to the European Union on how to stop illegal immigration, and support border areas and municipalities, but they have not responded,” says Mansur. “We met with the United Nations after the arrival of its envoy, Ghassan Salama, in Libya, to meet with Tabu, Tuareg and Amazigh tribes. We talked about illegal immigration, but nothing really happened on the ground.”

Some of the Western capitals hosted tribal leaders from the south, some openly and others undeclared. “Italy is looking out for its own interests; France is also looking for its interests, but it has not explicitly called any representatives of the southern tribes to Paris. A year ago, leaders of the two tribes of Awlad Suleiman and Tabu were called in for reconciliation, etc., but the dialog failed, so they have not discussed illegal immigration until now.”

As to whether he believes there is any real understanding among European countries about illegal immigration from Libya, Pusztai says: “Yes, they are aware of the reality of the situation in Libya, and of the situation in illegal immigration camps, but they also realise the problem cannot be resolved by facilitating migration and making access to Europe very easy. They want to send the main message: ‘You will not pass through Libya to Europe!’ to prevent migrants from going to Libya.”

Sources in Tripoli reveal that Italy was adopting a plan to counter illegal immigration by setting up camps in the south to receive and classify migrants, and then work to bring them back to the countries from which they came, but the place chosen for setting up camps in the south was in the oil-rich Ghat region, which was suspicious.

On June 30, 2018, Mustapha Sunallah, chairman of the Libyan National Oil Corporation, of the National Reconciliation Government headed by al-Serraj, was alarmed by the Italian plan, according to an official source at the foundation. The source added that Sunallah told al-Serraj that the area the Italians chose was close to the Murzuk basin and the El-Fil oil field — both of which are areas containing huge reservoirs of oil, according to the geological survey conducted under Gaddafi’s regime.

Mansur says: “The difficulty lies in the fact nothing can be done in these areas without coordination with the tribes and persuading them. Without tribal support in those areas on the border, neither France nor Italy can close the border in the south against illegal immigrants. The tribes must be engaged and supported, noting that differences on the Libyan file between Italy and France should not affect the file of illegal immigration.”

Italy, in fact, is no longer the most affected by immigrants, having recently become a transit zone only, while migrants continue their journeys to France, Germany, Britain and Scandinavia. Italy appears to be
more of a beneficiary than affected, as it gets money from the EU to help with the costs of illegal immigration. But the grandson of freedom fighters, Buomar, does not trust the Italians, nor their intentions toward his country.

The Italians are currently angry. Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini renewed his rejection of the EU’s Mediterranean operation, known as Sofia, in its current operating system, because, according to his opinion on Twitter, this has led to the disembarking of those illegal immigrants rescued from at sea in Italian ports.

By contrast, Libya’s anti-immigration agencies seem weak and need international support in order to do their work as they collect, feed, and treat injured immigrants before dispatching them via airplanes for repatriation.

Explains Al-Warfili: “We hope to support the system in all its branches. Capabilities are very weak, although everyone gives promises and we need funding. Thanks to the Army’s headquarters, led by Marshall Haftar, we have received today, praise to Allah, comprehensive supplies of meat, vegetables, fruits and drinks for the migrants detained at the shelter, as well as supplies to members of the illegal immigration agency.”

Al-Warfili is outspoken about the increase in illegal immigrants compared with the previous year: “This year, more and more Sudanese and Egyptian nationals have come — most without entry procedures and passports; some with scabies. We received medicines from the International Organization for Migration, and 10 days after receiving the medicines, we have eradicated it, thank God.”

Libyan politicians such as Mansur and al-Fadeel believe a cockfight is brewing between the Italians and the French over Libya in general. But, explains Pusztai, this competition between the two European countries has not adversely affected international efforts to combat illegal immigration: “Not at all,” he says.

Adds Pusztai, “If you refer to the restructuring of the Sofia operation, this was driven by Italians, because they consider this process to increase the number of immigrants from Libya. For the French, Libya concerns them first, and above all, as regards the fight against terrorism — but not on the issues of migration or economy.”

While the debate on Libya continues at the local, regional and international levels, thousands of people are still suffering as victims of the illegal trafficking operations across the country. The illegal immigrant who does not die in the desert and does not die in the sea dies in the middle of the fighting between the Libyans. Although this is a bad fate, the worst is that extremists continue to exploit this situation to move across borders and threaten the security and peace in many countries. 

Abdelsatar Hetieta

Abdelsatar Hetieta is an Egyptian writer, journalist and television analyst covering events in the Middle East and North Africa. He worked as an editor in the London-based Al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper and as a correspondent for Al-Majalla magazine from 2008–2019. Unless otherwise attributed, the images in this report are his own.

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ROAD RAGE: The Toyota Landcruzer (front) and the Toyota Tundra (behind) compete for the acquisition of roads in the Libyan desert. Smuggling use this type of vehicle in human and drug trafficking, and for the transfer of extremist elements across borders.