

Libya's Warlord Economy: Haftar, Human Smuggling, and Europe's Southern Threat

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Over ten years after Muammar Gaddafi's bloody downfall, Libya remains a deeply fragmented and unstable state. The country's post-revolutionary collapse has become permanent, with no clear road-map out of militia rule, foreign meddling, and criminal capture. While the world's attention has largely shifted to crises in Ukraine, Gaza, and the South China Sea, the security vacuum in Libya continues to spill over its borders, especially across the Mediterranean. For European front-line states like Greece and Italy, Libya is not merely a North African concern. It has become the centerpiece of a much broader triangle: illegal migration, arms smuggling, and transnational organized crime.

At the core of Libya's security picture is General Khalifa Haftar, commander of the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA). Haftar has long positioned himself as a strongman alternative to the internationally recognized, yet fragile, Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli.

His forces, entrenched in Cyrenaica and parts of southern Libya, have imposed a degree of order in key zones. But this order has come at a steep cost: political repression, extrajudicial violence, and a deeply enmeshed relationship with illicit economies. In many ways, Haftar does not challenge Libya's state failure, he thrives in it.

Though his 2019 assault on Tripoli failed to unseat the GNU, it made his ambitions crystal clear. Haftar seeks total control. Backed by regional players like Egypt, the UAE, and Russia, who view him as a secular alternative against Islamist militias, Haftar's LNA has taken root in areas that are essential to Libya's shadow economy. From oil fields to border crossings and migration corridors, Haftar-aligned militias control the arteries that move people, weapons, and money.

This has a direct impact on European security, particularly for Greece and Italy. Libya's long and unpoliced coastline, over 1,700 kilometers, remains one of the most active launching points for irregular migration into the EU. *Tens of thousands of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, the Horn of Africa, and even the Sahel cross Libya's southern desert on foot before being extorted, abused, and eventually funneled into dangerous maritime routes across the central Mediterranean.* Many end up on Italian shores or in Greek island camps, victims of an organized system of trafficking that operates with impunity.

In eastern Libya, many of these networks operate under the supervision of Haftar's forces. Armed groups tied to the LNA have been repeatedly accused of doubling as smugglers. Some paramilitaries run extortion rackets or "tax" migrants passing through controlled areas. Others serve as local gatekeepers, turning a blind eye to trafficking in exchange for bribes or loyalty. This fusion of military and criminal economies is not incidental. It reflects a systemic reality in today's Libya: the lines between authority, rebellion, and organized crime have all but collapsed.

Viewing this through a humanitarian lens alone misses the point. **Libya's migration crisis is a regional security issue.** And Europe, particularly its southern flank, has yet to fully internalize this. Despite throwing millions of euros at Libyan institutions, most notably the coastguard, irregular departures from Libya continue. Worse still, the smuggling architecture has adapted, becoming more embedded, more violent, and more international. *What used to be loose networks of local traffickers are now parts of broader criminal syndicates stretching from the Sahel to Sicily.*

Greece and Italy, bearing the brunt of these flows, are caught between the EU's lack of coherent strategy and Libya's collapse into zones of competing influence. The result has been a patchwork of emergency policies: offshore detention centers, push-backs at sea, and quiet deals with local strongmen. None of these address the core problems: *Libya's institutional vacuum, the complicity of armed actors in the trafficking economy, and the role of external mercenaries and war profiteers.*

Haftar's governance model encapsulates this dysfunction. While he sells himself as a bringer of order, his methods point in the opposite direction. His ties to Russian mercenaries, especially from the Wagner Group, his transactional pacts with tribal militias, and his use of opaque financing mechanisms (often involving oil smuggling or arms brokering) reflect a warlord economy. Benghazi may no longer be a war zone, but it is hardly a free city. Civil society is choked, dissent is crushed, and political assassinations go unanswered. The culture is not one of justice, it is one of impunity.

Meanwhile, Libya's southern frontier with Chad, Niger, and Sudan is functionally ungoverned. These borderlands serve as open arteries for drugs, weapons, and human trafficking. With national borders meaningless, transnational criminal organizations have established durable supply chains across the Sahara. Militants, jihadists, mercenaries, and

smugglers coexist and compete in a gray zone economy, one that stretches from desert highways to European ports.

*The criminal ecosystem born in Libya is already spreading, in Greek island prisons and Sicilian coastguard reports, authorities are increasingly documenting the role of Libyan-linked trafficking rings. **These aren't just moving people, they're moving heroin from the Golden Crescent, light weapons from the Balkans, and fake EU passports printed in the back alleys of Tripoli. Their strength lies in adaptability, and in their ability to convert failed states into operating hubs.***

If Europe fails to act, this crisis will deepen. A real response must begin with a hard political reckoning. European actors, and especially front-line states like Greece and Italy, must observe Libya, not as someone else's backyard, *Libya's domestic security crisis is now a European problem.* That means talking to Tripoli's internationally recognized government, and directly engaging with actors like Haftar, not to legitimize them, but to leverage influence and extract transparency when possible.

*Equally important is a shift from reactive border control to proactive regional engagement. **This means deeper intelligence cooperation, the identification and sanctioning of key smugglers, and targeted support for anti-corruption initiatives in Libyan municipalities. Addressing the lawlessness in Libya's south, where terrorism, organized crime, and human trafficking intersect, it is critical.***

Libya's future still remains unresolved. But one thing is increasingly clear: **the Mediterranean is no longer a buffer zone. It's a corridor.** What happens in Sabha or Benghazi today will not stay in Libya. It will ripple into Athens, Rome, and beyond.