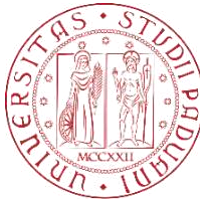


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**ARMS, TRAFFICKING, AND POWER IN LIBYA. THE INTERPLAY
OF ARMS PROLIFERATION, HUMAN TRAFFICKING, AND
EXTERNAL ACTORS' INTERESTS (1969-2024)**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the interplay between arms proliferation and human trafficking networks and how they interact in Libya, focusing on the post-Gaddafi era (2011- 2024). Using an historical approach, this research examines how the fall of Gaddafi in 2011 led to a political vacuum, which was exploited by militia and armed groups involved both in illicit activities including arms and human trafficking. Furthermore, this study investigates how political and economic interests of external actors, particularly those involved in arms trade, have influenced the proliferation of trafficking networks, worsening regional instability and increasing migration flows.

This thesis is structured in five chapters. It begins with an overview of the research framework through which this study is conducted, including relevance, research question, methodology and a critical literature review. The second chapter will provide a historical overview of Libya from 1969 to 2011. It will take a look at Libya's trajectory from Gaddafi's rise to power in 1969, his shifting political and economic governance strategies and alliances, until his fall during the Arab Spring of 2011. Finally, it provides an analysis of Libya's fragile transition after Gaddafi, covering NATO's intervention, the second civil war and the current situation.

The third chapter constitutes the main focus of this study as it delves into the relationship between arms proliferation and human trafficking in Libya, demonstrating how these phenomena reinforce each other along primary migration routes. It also outlines legal frameworks regulating both issues. Two case studies will be taken in consideration: the coastal area and southern Libya, showcasing both the country's dual role as a destination and a departure point, and the main hotspots where arms flows and trafficking operations converge.

Chapter four will investigate the role of external actors in shaping the security landscape, including the EU – particularly Italy - the US, Turkey and Russia, and acknowledging their political, economic and military interests in Libya. The analysis will highlight arms

embargo violations, migration policies, economic objectives, especially considering the energy sector, and efforts at stabilizing the region – mainly by the UN.

Finally, this thesis will delve into key findings and policy recommendations, proposing legal reforms at the EU and international level, as well as more practical measures to reduce arms proliferation and human trafficking. The study concludes by highlighting the limits of this study and proposes new paths for future research.

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INTRODUCTION

The fall of Gaddafi in 2011 represented a turning point in Libya's contemporary history, as it marked the beginning of a period of profound instability characterized by civil war, the proliferation of armed groups and the rise of criminal networks. While Libya has historically been a political and economic strategic player in North Africa due to its very large oil reserves, the period from 2011 to today demonstrated the fragility of state institutions, the competition among regional and international actors and the emergence of illicit economies that exploit the country's geopolitical position. One of the most relevant issues shaping Libya's after 2011 are the proliferation of arms and the expansion of human trafficking networks. These two phenomena, often studied separately, have a self-reinforcing dynamic that had consequences in Libya's humanitarian, security and political scenario and in general in the north African region. Furthermore, Libya's oil wealth has long been an important resource in its political and economic landscape. Under Gaddafi, oil was a tool for both economic development and political leverage. However, after his death, the country's oil reserves, which are among the largest in Africa, became a point of dispute for various armed groups, militias and international powers trying to get control over them. The resulting instability has not only worsened the country's internal conflicts but also contributed to the proliferation of arms and the expansion of human trafficking networks, both of which are helped by the possible profits from oil trade. The lack of a strong central government has allowed armed groups to gain control of key oil infrastructure, which in turn has funded their activities, including the trafficking of people across the Mediterranean and through the Sahara.

This thesis investigates the interplay between arms proliferation and human trafficking in Libya, with a particular focus on how the former worsens the latter. The research explores the historical and political context of Libya's arms trade and migration crisis, looking at developments from Gaddafi's rule to the present day. By analyzing the legal frameworks, political interests, and external interventions that have shaped these dynamics, this study tries to answer the central research question: To what extent is there a correlation between

arms proliferation and human trafficking networks in Libya? How do these two phenomena interact and reinforce each other within Libya's security and political landscape?

The relevance of this research lies in its contribution to the broader academic publications on security studies, migration governance and international relations. While a lot of the existing literature has covered Libya's political collapse and its consequences, less studies have analyzed the connection between the illicit arms trade and human trafficking. This thesis argues that arms proliferation not only gives power to trafficking networks by giving them the tools to operate without repercussions but also keeps up the cycle of violence and instability that maintains these illegal economies. Furthermore, the control of oil resources has been a critical component for militias, as access to oil revenues fuels both armed conflict and the operation of human trafficking networks. Understanding these connections is fundamental for policymakers, as efforts to fight these issues by themselves often takes away from addressing the root causes that sustain both phenomena.

Libya's geopolitical importance and its strategic location in the Mediterranean, Africa and the Middle East, make it a primary case study in examining the consequences of illegal economies on regional and global security. The country's oil wealth, alongside its position as a central hub for arms smuggling and human trafficking, highlighted it as a regional and international key player. European countries, in particular, have interests in Libya due to its closeness to the Mediterranean and its role as a key transit point for migrants seeking to reach Europe. At the same time, the competition over Libya's oil resources brought in external powers, including the United States, Russia and regional actors like Turkey that want to shape the country's political and economic present and future landscape. This thesis will analyze how the collapse of the state and its institutions post-2011 created a power vacuum that allowed militias and criminal organizations to thrive. Moreover, it will explore the role of international interventions, embargo violations and covert operations in shaping Libya's current security landscape. The

international community, particularly European Union countries, focused mainly on migration control but it also encountered criticism for its involvement in Libya's oil industry and its private support of various militias controlling oil fields and ports. This support has sometimes been connected to geopolitical interests and the desire to gain access to resources, which has complicated efforts to stabilize the country.

This research is divided into five chapters. Chapter I presents a literature review and outlines the methodological approach adopted for this research. Chapter II contextualizes Libya's historical trajectory (1969 – 2024), focusing on Gaddafi's rule and the transformation of the country's security landscape after his fall, with a focus on the post-Gaddafi power vacuum. Chapter III provides an analysis of arms proliferation and human trafficking in post-Gaddafi Libya, demonstrating their mutual reinforcement through key case studies. Chapter IV examines the role of external actors, including the EU, Italy, the United States, Turkey and Russia, in shaping Libya's security environment, oil industry and migration governance. Finally, Chapter V summarizes key findings and provides policy recommendations whose objective is mitigating the effects of arms proliferation and human trafficking.

By adopting a mixed-methods approach that puts together qualitative and quantitative data, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Libya's contemporary security challenges. It highlights the need for coordinated efforts to address the root causes of these crises, with a focus on the importance of both policy-driven and on-the-ground solutions. Moreover, it calls for a reassessment of existing security cooperation policies, highlighting the necessity of a more comprehensive approach that combines economic development, governance reforms and targeted law enforcement strategies to limit the influence of illicit networks in the region.

CHAPTER I: LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Introduction

The interplay between arms proliferation and human trafficking in Libya represents a significant area of study within the wider context of transnational security in the Euro-MENA region. Libya's strategic geographical location, connecting Africa, the Middle East and the MENA area, combined with an abundance in oil resources, made the country a point of interest for both regional and global powers. From its colonization by Italy in 1911 to its independence in 1951 and the rise to power of dictator Gaddafi, Libya's political and economic scenario has been shaped by external interventions, such as in 2011 by NATO, internal governance challenges, like the loss of a centralized authority and the presence of armed groups, and shifting political alliances.

Under Gaddafi's rule, Libya became a centralized rentier state, heavily reliant of oil income. This economic model, analyzed through the Rentier State Theory (RST) developed by Mahdavy (1970), explains how the concentration of wealth in resource-rich nations often supports authoritarian regimes. In Libya, the income obtained from oil production and export was distributed to élites to maintain loyalty, while the improvement of institutions and political pluralism were put aside (Vandewalle, 2012). The regime also pursued a confrontational foreign policy, promoting Pan-Arabism and later on, Pan-Africanism, making Libya a key player in regional politics. However, this centralized model left Libya vulnerable to political and social fragmentation, as well as prices fluctuations in the global market (Pack, 2021). 2011, a pivotal year in Libyan's history, saw the fall of Gaddafi's leadership, which marked the beginning of the country's descent towards instability as well as the collapse of state institutions, the rise of militias and competing governments.

In the years following the dictator's death, Libya's poorly controlled borders and fragmented governance created a fertile ground for the rise of illicit networks, including arms smuggling and human trafficking. The proliferation of arms, particularly after the theft of Gaddafi's stockpile of weapons, fueled regional conflicts and increased the number of trafficking routes across the Sahel¹ and into Europe (Pack, 2013). At the same time, Libya became a central hub for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa trying to reach the country for job opportunities or to cross the Mediterranean, with human trafficking networks exploiting the lack of control by an authority (Micallef, 2017).

These dynamics drew significant international attention to the region: external powers, such as Russia and Turkey, often sent military equipment and personnel to Libya to support their preferred faction, worsening the country's situation, while international organizations like the EU and the UN tried to implement policies to limit illicit flows but often failed to do so due to the country's internal instability. At the same time, countries like Italy had a different agenda, pursuing policies that aimed at border control and limit the migrations flows to the coast rather than addressing the root causes of the phenomenon. This can be analyzed through Barry Buzan's securitization framework, which examines how issues such as migration and arms proliferation are exposed as security threats to justify often non-necessary measures by states and international actors. Moreover, Jason Pack's concept of Global Enduring Disorder provides a framework to understand how and why Libya's political and social fragmentation persists until today, taking in consideration the contemporary international scenario and the role of external powers. Pack argues that Libya is the representative of a broader global disorder where external powers, often driven by economic and political interests, exploit local issues rather than implementing solutions.

¹ The Sahel region, from Arabic "coast" or "shore", includes: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Sudan.

The relevance of this thesis lies in addressing the critical and underexplored interaction between arms proliferation and human trafficking in Libya. By taking Libya in consideration and the broader Euro-MENA area, this research allows to examine how historical legacies, such as Gaddafi's regime, external interventions, specifically by the EU – and Italy – NATO, the US, Turkey and Russia, and transnational networks support instability and fragmentation. It also contributes to expanding the body of literature on the limits of current transnational security cooperation strategies, providing an academic basis through which creating more coherent and effective policies.

This chapter provides the theoretical and methodological structure to analyze these dynamics, merging insights from previous literature with theoretical frameworks in order to address the research question. This analysis will draw from existing literature, referencing the main scholars that analyzed security and governance during Gaddafi's dictatorship (1969-2011) and the post-2011 period. The review highlights the existing gaps in literature, particularly the lack of research directly connecting arms proliferation to human trafficking. Key works by scholars such as Jason Pack (*Libya and the Global Enduring Disorder*, 2021) Dirk Vandewalle (*A history of Modern Libya*, 2012) and Mark Micallef (*The Human Conveyor Belt: Trends in Human Trafficking and Smuggling in Post-revolution Libya*, 2017) are central to this research, providing experts' insights on Libya's political economy, fragmented governance and the role of external powers in influencing dynamics in the region.

The methodology section frames the mixed-methods approach used in this study. Incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data to examine the nexus between arms exports and human trafficking. The thesis is based on a historical perspective to provide a background on the evolution of Libya's security dynamics. Primary and secondary sources, including government documents, policy statements and academic literature will provide the empirical basis on which this research lies, which will be supported by an interview and discourse analysis. Finally, the inherent limits of this study will be considered.

1.2 Thesis relevance

The choice to analyze the nexus between arms proliferation and human trafficking in Libya is not merely limited to an academic interest, but a crucial step to gain a deeper understanding of regional dynamics in conflict zones and the role of external powers in stabilizing or creating chaos in regions that are already unstable due to internal circumstances. Libya is a geographically strategic hub for migrants and trafficked people moving from Sub-Saharan Africa, e.g., Chad, Niger and Sudan, to Europe, especially Italy and Malta, who are fleeing from violence, economic crisis and social disruptions. Its central location in the Mediterranean makes Libya relevant to understand the interplay between arms proliferation and human trafficking, as well as the broader transnational security challenges. Furthermore, the historical relevance of Libya in the international scenario is a crucial element to take in consideration. The fall of dictator Gaddafi in 2011 created a power vacuum which marked the beginning of a period of political fragmentation and armed conflict, fueling migration and therefore increasing the number of human trafficking networks. The criminal groups that emerged after 2011 operate in a lawless environment which creates a vicious cycle that encourages and reinforces the system itself, especially considering the proliferation of weapons and human trafficking. In this regard, Jason Pack (2021) emphasized that Libya's fragmented governance structure made the country a "playground" for competing local militias and external actors, further destabilizing the region.

Furthermore, the discovery of oil in 1959 made Libya a very contested territory. This resource drew both local and international stakeholders to the region, its control and exploitation has been a key driver of conflict and a reason to maintain a condition that Vandewalle defines as "statelessness" i.e., the avoidance of creating a modern state by Libya's rulers, including Gaddafi (Vandewalle, 2012). Under the leader's rule, oil was weaponized both as a profitable economic resource and a strategic diplomatic tool. Through its revenues, Gaddafi implemented social programs, including free education, healthcare and subsidies for housing and food, which aimed at creating a representation

of the leader as benefactor to the people, legitimizing his power. His regime was the embodiment of the “rentier state”, where oil revenues replaced taxation as a primary source of government income (Vandewalle, 2012). The Rentier State Theory (RST) was first formulated in the 1970s by Hossein Mahdavy, an Iranian economist, in his work *The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran* (1970). He defined this kind of state as:

Those countries that receive on a regular basis substantial amount of external rent. External rents are in turn defined as rentals paid by foreign individuals, concerns, or governments to individuals, concerns or governments of a given country.

Therefore, external rents are generated usually by the sale of natural resources, such as oil and gas to foreign markets. This concept was later expanded by other scholars, for instance, Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani, who focused on the socio-political consequences of a rentier state, rather than the economic side. The Rentier State model lessened the need for accountability from the authority and it suppressed the development of alternative political and economic institutions, creating a dependence on oil which made Libya vulnerable to global price fluctuations² (Vandewalle, 2012). Gaddafi also used oil income as a weapon in global politics. Relying on oil extraction and export and on Libya’s membership in OPEC³, he was able to bend political demands to his favor and influence global oil prices. For example, during the 1973 oil embargo, Libya had a role in inciting Arab oil producers to cut their production and imposed an embargo on exports to the US and other nations that supported Israel during the Yom Kippur War. In *The Arms Race in the Middle East: Contemporary Security Dynamics*, Eslami and Vieira

² As of 2023, the oil and gas sector represented 60% of GDP, 94% of exports and 97% of government revenues.

³ Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries which includes Algeria, Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Venezuela.

(2023) describe how Libya's oil reliance amplified the country's regional influence, allowing Gaddafi to engage in an ambitious foreign policy, which included arms transfers to allies and revolutionary groups. After the fall of the regime, oil control turned into a rat race among competing factions. Libya's oil wealth, while a potential driver for national stability and development, became instead a resource curse, worsening divisions among criminal factions and attracting external interest, which in turn, increased the country's internal divisions (Pack, 2021). The race towards oil control in Libya is still central to understand the region's ongoing conflict and its intersection with arms proliferation and human trafficking networks.

Following this concept, highlighting the role of external actors on the territory is crucial when taking in consideration the interplay between the two phenomena, as well as the country's broader instability. Powers such as Italy, the US, Turkey and Russia, all contributed to shaping Libya's post-Gaddafi scenario, affecting the internal political, social and economic context and had a role in deteriorating and, at the same time, mitigating conflict.

The most evident intervention was the one conducted by NATO in 2011, framed under the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) doctrine which aimed at preventing massacres of civilians by Gaddafi's forces during the Arab Spring. Nevertheless, the motives were also to maintain regional stability and controlling energy markets (Pack, 2021). While this imposition led to the collapse of Gaddafi's centralized state, it created fertile ground for the rise of rival militia, who took advantage of the dispersion of weapons from Libya's state arsenals and took control over key cities, and it failed to create a post-conflict stabilization framework (Lacher, 2020). As Florquin and Berman (2005) stated, these factors fueled both internal and regional conflict across the Sahel region⁴.

⁴ This region includes six states: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Sudan.

Furthermore, it is important to analyze the role of the EU in Libya, as it provides insights on how external actors' policies, including border management, can fuel the crises they claim to alleviate. This duality is a central theme that helps to understand the complexities behind Libya's arms and trafficking nexus. Vieira and Eslami in *The Arms Race in the Middle East: Contemporary Security Dynamics* (2023), delve into the question of historically played dual roles in Libya by European nations, particularly Italy and France, and affirm that, while they were supplying weapons to Gaddafi's regime, they also tried to mitigate the arms flow through embargos in 1992 and 2011. Nevertheless, the illicit arms transfers have persisted, reflecting the presence of bigger challenges when enforcing international control measures in conflict zones (Stohl and Grillot, 2009).

The same system can be applied to the migration and human trafficking crisis. It is relevant to concentrate on human trafficking challenges as it is a phenomenon that characterizes Libya, especially post-2011 (Micallef, 2017). Analyzing human trafficking allows to better understand the human cost of instability in conflict zones, Libya in this case, and the broader issues of arms proliferation and governance. Libya's geographical position makes it a key transit hub for migrants; this drew attention on the territory by EU countries, especially those in the Mediterranean area. Although a solid international legal framework was put in place by the EU to protect migrants from being trafficked and used as work or sex slaves (Gallagher, 2010), the self-reinforcing system of human trafficking and arms proliferation networks is still thriving. EU policies, including funding the Libyan coastguard by Italy, worsened the humanitarian crisis by imprisoning migrants in detention centers often controlled by militias (Berman & Florquin, 2005). Finally, non-EU countries have played a role on destabilizing Libya, including Turkey and Russia. The first supported the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) because of broader regional objectives, such as securing energy resources and assuring maritime dominance in the Mediterranean. Turkey's military cooperation, despite the UN arms embargo, contributed to the proliferation of weapons in Libya, solidifying conflict patterns and social and political fragmentation. The latter's support of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), reflects the geopolitical interests that Russia had in Libya

and, in general, in North Africa through the supply and deployment of Wagner Group mercenaries and of military equipment (Lacher, 2020).

Moreover, the reason behind choosing Libya as a case study is well described by Pack. He describes the region as a representative “microcosm of larger global trends”, i.e., Libya’s situation serves as a representative of larger issues within the global enduring disorder. In fact, the region embodies the international context: localized conflicts can have extensive and significant consequences on a globalized level, from the destabilization of neighboring countries to the intensification of migration crises in Europe. Analyzing Libya acts as a magnifying glass to understand how international norms and policies on arms control and human trafficking prevention are challenged and dodged in unstable states, providing important lessons for transnational security cooperation. By focusing on Libya, this research takes a look into the immediate consequences of the arms-human trafficking nexus, as well as the broader questions of governance, international accountability and the role of international actors in post-conflict reconstruction and/or destruction.

The most relevant objective of this thesis is to explore the direct and extensive correlation between arms proliferation and human trafficking as it represents a new piece of literature that tries to compensate for the lack of prior research on this topic. In fact, while there is substantial research on the two issues (Eslami and Vieira, 2023 & Shelley, 2010) and the role of external actors in conflict zones (Pack, 2021), the gap in the literature does not take them in consideration as connected phenomena. This gap exists for different reasons. First of all, there is a tendency to separate security and migration studies: security studies tend to delve on arms proliferation, conflict dynamics and state instability, usually examining arms flows in the context of war and terrorism rather than organized crime; migration and human trafficking studies, on the other hand, focus more on migrant vulnerabilities, smuggling routes and policy responses but they rarely use arms proliferation as a key factor. Moreover, until recently, human trafficking was framed more as a human rights issue rather than a security issue connected to armed groups. Only

recently, the militarization of human trafficking, i.e., armed groups that actively engage in smuggling for profit and power, gained attention, but gaps are still present. Finally, the ever-changing landscape in Libya after Gaddafi makes it difficult for researchers to keep up with evolving dynamics. Changes in power between militias, warlords and political factions entail changes in arms and human trafficking patterns, making it difficult to establish clear boundaries. Therefore, this thesis's relevance lies in addressing these missing links, through the analysis of the self-reinforcing nature of arms and human trafficking, rather than treating them as separate issues, focusing on internal Libyan dynamics and providing case studies that illustrate concrete examples of how arms flow fuel trafficking operations.

To provide more context, studies on arms proliferation tend to analyze state and non-state actors, arms trade policies and their impact on regional security, such as the publication *The Arms Race in the Middle East: Contemporary Security Dynamics* (2023). Human trafficking, on the other hand, has been researched based on its humanitarian, socio-economic and judicial dimensions; for example, exploitation, migration and victim support (Micallef, 2017 and Gallagher, 2010). For example, *The Human Conveyor Belt* (2017) explores the economic factors that drive the networks of human and arms trafficking, while *The International Law of Human Trafficking* (2010) focuses more on the legal dimension of the problem, leaving room for research on governance challenges. This thesis aims at bridging these perspectives, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the interaction of the two phenomena. This research advocates for the necessity of transparency in the arms trade, better anti-trafficking efforts and increased cooperation among international actors.

1.3 Research question

To what extent is there a correlation between arms proliferation and human trafficking networks in Libya? How do these two phenomena interact and reinforce each other within Libya's security and political landscape?

The main objective of this study is to investigate the extent to which arms proliferation affects the growth of human trafficking networks and whether human trafficking revenues contribute to igniting further arms purchases, creating a cycle that self-reinforces. This duality is crucial in order to understand the broader security dynamics in Libya, as both arms exports and proliferation, and human trafficking contribute to destabilizing the country. The hypothesis is that there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between arms proliferation and human trafficking in Libya, as the availability of weapons strengthens trafficking networks, while the profits from trafficking finance further arms purchases. This dynamic preserves instability and sustains armed non-state actors, making it more difficult for national and international efforts to limit these illegal economies. Furthermore, fragmented governance structures and a lack of enforcement power by institutions worsen the cycle, allowing militias to operate with little consequences and maintain control over both arms flows and human trafficking routes.

Furthermore, the study aims at analyzing the roles of external powers, i.e., the EU, particularly Italy, international organization – including NATO and the UN, alongside the US influence –Turkey and Russia. In *The Arms Race in the Middle East: Contemporary Security Dynamics*, Eslami and Vieira (2023) show how the European nations played a dual role in Libya. The authors highlight the paradox behind the international actors' actions: while countries like Italy and France supplied weapons to Gaddafi's regime, they also tried to limit the trade of arms through embargoes both in 2004 and 2011. Pack (2021) also discusses the implications of foreign interventions in Libya's security environment post-2011, discussing how external powers, in their declaration of migration control and containment of terrorism, have nevertheless perpetuated the instability they tried to address. Therefore, this research's secondary objective is to understand how external actors, both state and non-state, contributed to the proliferation of arms and the expansion of human trafficking networks in Libya, and what are the implications of their involvement for regional security and governance. The hypothesis is that external actors have played a significant role in maintaining and worsening the already fragile situation in Libya by putting their economic and political

interests first, indirectly or directly influencing arms and human trafficking. Through arms exports, proxy interventions and migration policies, state actors have contributed to the militarization of trafficking routes, while non-state actors like mercenary groups, have exploited Libya's security and power vacuum to expand their control. Rather than reducing instability, most of the time, these external interventions have reinforced militia power, perpetuated conflict and prevented efforts to eradicate trafficking networks.

This study is mainly conducted using the conceptual framework developed by Jason Pack in his publication *Libya and the Global Enduring Disorder* (2021). He describes the current state of the world as characterized by a global enduring disorder, which he describes as the systemic lack of coordination of collective action to achieve mutually beneficial aims. In fact, an indicator of the Global Enduring Disorder is neo-mercantilism, i.e., each country wants to make sure others do not enter their space. This lack of coordination can be seen at almost every level of analysis such as domestic and international, private, public and non-governmental sectors. In his book, Pack problematizes the realistic and constructivist IR theories which affirm that:

“Order beget order” and “imbalance led to a restoration of balance”.

According to these theories, when one hegemon recedes, the US in this case, there is either a balance of powers or a new hegemon rises. Pack questions the concept of “natural laws” in International Relations affirming:

What if the reverse is true and local disorder can beget regional disorder, which, in today's globalized world, can foster Enduring Disorder.

After the end of Cold War, the US became the hegemonic power but it was not able to create a new global structure as factors like globalization and technology came into play. The world seemed to have gone directly from a hegemonic US-led international system to an “interregnum in global order”. Later on, the Global Enduring Disorder was evident with the invasion of Iraq by the US; during this operation the nation did not cooperate

with other powers, rather the US pursued a unilateral solution to foreign policy problems. This lack of hegemonic leadership was also due to other powers not being able to step in. Russia was incapable of leading an axis of coordinated allies, China was more powerful compared to Russia but it had similar problems as its neighbors opposed its regional ambitions. Furthermore, the difficulty in creating global order lies in fact that major world leaders actively seek global chaos; this is explained by Pack through the paradox of neo-populism which finds scapegoats to stay in power, such as migrants and minorities, promoting at the same time the problems it claims it will solve. It creates a narrative of “us against the outsider” which can be transposed internationally, as global powers do not seek collaboration, rather they try to find an enemy to blame. This is what Pack calls the “tribalization of politics and culture”. To solve this problem, Pack affirms that the institutions would need to be deconstructed and then reconstructed and in this historical and political period, major governments from China, Russia, the EU or the US are not likely to propose a new framework of multilateralism or new alliance structures to address the new global challenges such as climate change, migration, democratic shifts and proxy wars. He also affirms that globalization and technology, albeit the cause of the problem, can also be its solution.

Moreover, in order to explain the Global Enduring Disorder, the author uses Libya as a case study. He identifies Libya as a representative in microcosm of larger global trends, and, as he explains it:

The ongoing Libya conflict – slightly more than even the civil wars in Yemen, Syria, Venezuela, and Eastern Ukraine – may in fact provide the most powerful demonstration of the prior collapse of the post-Cold War order. Furthermore, it also highlights the self-reinforcing nature of these developments. Libya’s ongoing implosion gives rise to contagion, which incrementally reinforces further implosions of order at the global level.

Pack analyzes the last 10 years of international policy towards Libya and how it was implemented on the ground. What his research showed was a new global approach,

meaning that middle powers such as Turkey, the UAE and Russia, promote disorder in Libya because they are willing to put aside international norms and violate UN arms embargos; they therefore have more power in the region than big economies do – USA, EU and China – which is a system that was not present before the end of the Cold War. Neither China nor the US perceive their own interests as threatened enough to try to order the international system in a way that could lead to a resolution of the Libyan conflict. In this case, the EU acts as a stability player: its interests and core positions are not threatened by developments in Libya but it is not able to coordinate internal disagreements to formulate a coherent response to restore stability. Therefore, these collective action failures and a lack of hegemonic leadership have manifested themselves all the way from the collapse of the Gaddafi's regime in 2011.

The research will be divided into two historical periods: first, Gaddafi's rule will be analyzed which characterized Libya's political scenario from 1969, when he gained power by a coup d'état, to 2011, when the dictatorship collapsed with his death. His dictatorship was characterized by an absolute control over Libya's government, military and economy, combined with a cult of his person, political repression and a reliance on oil wealth to secure power. Furthermore, while presenting an image of a revolutionary leader that fought for Arab and African unity, his authoritarian regime resulted in human rights abuses and international isolation. Following Gaddafi's era of power, the period from 2011 to today will be considered. 2011 was a pivotal year for Libya and the international powers that had an interest in the region due to the outburst of Libyan civil war, which marked the end of Muammar Gaddafi's 42-year regime and significantly reshaped the country's political, social and economic landscape. Several factors frame this year. The Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt generated a wave that reached Libya in February 2011 and the people began a peaceful protest demanding democratic reforms, human rights and the end of corruption to which Gaddafi responded with extreme violence, leading to a full-scale civil war (Pack, 2013). Additionally, on March 17, 2011, the UN Security Council intervened and passed Resolution 1973:

Expressing grave concern at the deteriorating situation, the escalation of violence, and the heavy civilian casualties.

Furthermore, the UN:

Decides to establish a ban on all flights in the airspace of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya in order to help protect civilians.

The intervention, controversial for its scope and consequences, emphasized international opposition to Gaddafi's regime and humanitarian concern about civilians. 2011 also marked the capture of key cities like Benghazi and Tobruk over the course of several months by rebel forces that instrumentalized the power vacuum created by Gaddafi's death in their favor. In light of this, the research will focus on the significant change in arms exports to different factions, specifically Turkey and Russia, and rise of human trafficking networks after Gaddafi's fall. In fact, before his death, the leader maintained a tight control over arms distribution within Libya, the state regulated arms imports and exports, and they were primarily used for the military and internal security forces (Cockayne, 2016). He also cooperated with the EU, particularly Italy and France, to limit migration in exchange for economic and political concessions, i.e., the 2008 Italy-Libya Friendship Treaty (Vandewalle, 2012). Moreover, human trafficking was present but mostly suppressed under the state's repressive machine, these networks operated secretly and were less widespread. Finally, migrant routes were much more regulated under Gaddafi's regime. After 2011, the power vacuum and lack of border control made Libya a hub for human trafficking and smuggling networks, as migrants tried to reach Europe or the country itself for job opportunities. At the same time, militias began taking advantage of migrants for profit, they run detention centers where abuses, extortion, forced labor and even death are everyday occurrences (Micallef, 2017). Some efforts have been promoted by the EU to limit migration and ensure the safety of migrants but resulted in the empowerment of militias and traffickers, as these often collaborate with state forces to detain migrants (Gallagher, 2010).

In conclusion, 2011 was a turning point that ended 42 years of dictatorship but, at the same time, failed to bring peace or stability in Libya. The region shifted from an extremely controlled authoritarian regime to a fractured state characterized by political fragmentation, the absence of strong institutions and violence that, combined with the proliferation of weapons and militias, persists to this day.

1.4 Literature review

Gaddafi's rise to power in 1969 through a military coup d'état was a pivotal moment in Libya's modern history. The leader's aim was to create a new political order through the transformation of the country's governance, economic and social structures. These 42 years of dictatorship were characterized by the configuration of Libya as a rentier state and as a blend of ideological populism, authoritarian control and resource dependency. Gaddafi's regime, as many scholars have analyzed, was defined by political centralization, tribal manipulation and economic malpractice.

As Dirk Vandewalle, a key academic on Libya, explained in *A History of Modern Libya* (2006, 2012), Gaddafi's rule needs to be analyzed within the broader context of Libya's political scenario before 1969, in order to provide a detailed account on how the revolutionary movement that brought the dictator to power was extremely rooted in an anti-colonial sentiment, because of the Italian, French and British occupation, and resentment towards the monarchy. At the time of Gaddafi's rise, Libya was a newly formed country, gaining its independence in 1951, but the monarchy of King Idris was seen as weak and heavily influenced by external powers, particularly the West. The leader capitalized on this widespread dissatisfaction with the monarchy, putting forward an agenda that was based on pan-Arabism, nationalism and anti-imperialism, and therefore advocating for national liberation and unity. In doing so, he gained the trust of the majority of the Libyan people, even if part of different factions, and the broader Arab world, which was experiencing similar waves of anti-colonial movements.

However, as Vandewalle and Pargeter (2012) argue, the revolutionary promises made during the early stage of the regime were soon overruled by an authoritarian approach to governance. Although Gaddafi initially proposed an alternative way to the traditional despotic rule, maintaining ideals of direct democracy and social justice, his regime quickly became characterized by a centralized system of control, based on repression, propaganda and a cult of his person. His ideological framework was presented in his *Green Book* (1975), which rejected both Western capitalism and Eastern communism, presenting a third possible way of governance called the “Third Universal Theory”: a mix of direct democracy and socialism. As Pargeter notes, this theory served as a cover to justify the consolidation of a highly personalized and authoritarian regime, where dissent was violently repressed and loyalty to Gaddafi became a way of survival.

Furthermore, Gaddafi’s ideological showcase disguised a more pragmatic desire to maintain personal power and control, specifically ensuring that no alternative powers could challenge his authority, which became increasingly evident as the regime became more solid (Pack, 2021). In light of this, one of the most significant strategies that Gaddafi used to maintain control over Libya was the manipulation of tribal divisions. The dictator capitalized on Libya’s complex tribal structure to strengthen his power, using the strategy called “divide and rule” which involves developing loyalty among certain tribes while marginalizing others. This ensured that these tribes were dependent on the regime for access to resources and political favors. However, as Vandewalle observes, this strategy had long-term consequences for Libya’s political cohesion: by promoting a system in which tribal loyalties often replaced national identity, Gaddafi planted the first seeds for future fragmentation. The marginalization of certain tribes and regions created resentments that would later reemerge in the post-Gaddafi period, particularly after the 2011 revolution, which, in turn, created the conditions for the rise of militia factions (Vandewalle, 2012).

The legacy of Gaddafi’s tribal policies is further explored by Wolfram Lacher, who uses Vandewalle’s analysis to demonstrate how the tribalization process had a pivotal role in

shaping post-revolutionary Libya. Specifically in *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict* (2020), he argues that when Gaddafi's regime collapsed in 2011, the patronage system came to a stop, leaving a political vacuum which was quickly filled by rival militia groups, many of which were organized on tribal or regional factions. Lacher argues that the proliferation of armed groups after Gaddafi's death was not only the result of ideological differences or external interventions, but also the consequence of an extremely fractured political landscape that had been created by Gaddafi's exploitation of tribals. The militias were initially formed to fight Gaddafi's forces during the civil war (2011) but quickly became powerful actors in the region, each with its own agenda and loyalties. Moreover, Gaddafi's centralization of power and reliance on a personality cult also led to the destruction of the institutions that could have served as a basis for political reconstruction post-2011 (Cole, 2016). Without institutions capable of managing conflict and promoting national unity, Libya found itself in cycles of violence and instability that made state-building difficult.

A key aspect of Gaddafi's rule was Libya's status as a rentier state, a concept first proposed by Hossein Mahdavy in his work *The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in a Rentier State: The Case of Iran* (1970). Rentier State Theory explores how certain states that gain a significant portion of their revenues from external rents—such as oil or natural resources—develop specific political and economic structures. These states often rely on revenues from the export of these resources rather than domestic taxation, using them to fund government functions, maintain social stability, and ensure political loyalty.

In Libya's, Gaddafi's regime capitalized on the country's abundant oil reserves, which became the foundation for the state's economic structure (Pargeter, 2012) and it allowed the regime to maintain power without the need to create strong institutions and to establish an accountable relationship with its citizens through taxes (Vandewalle, 2012). Vandewalle explains that, under Gaddafi, this model reduced the necessity for public engagement in governance, as citizens were economically dependent on the state for

economic security, rather than participating as active stakeholders in the political system. This dynamic allowed Gaddafi to maintain his power for decades, as the state could use its oil wealth to keep the population in control and prevent discontent; however, the reliance on oil wealth led to the creation of a fragile economic structure. In fact, he failed to diversify the economy or invest in sustainable development initiatives which made Libya vulnerable to external powers such as fluctuations in global oil prices, and internally, particularly the challenges posed by the demands of globalization and modernization. The unwillingness or inability to develop other sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing or services, created an economy not capable of facing crises and promote prosperity in the long-term (Vandewalle, 2012).

The lack of diversification in Libya's economy also meant that the regime was unable to adapt to the changing global economic landscape; as international oil prices fluctuated, Libya's model became more and more inefficient. The lack of investments in infrastructure, education and other sectors brought Libya's economy to a halt in the post-oil era. Furthermore, this model reinforced high corruption levels, as state owned companies and patronage networks became the main mechanism to distribute wealth and income among a small circle of people, further lessening accountability and any attempts at broader economic reforms (Pack, 2021).

The fragility of this model became extremely visible after the 2011 civil war, when the centralized management of oil revenues collapsed. Pack's analysis is particularly relevant when considering the post-revolution era as, after Gaddafi's fall, the control over oil revenues fragmented which brought chaos and economic mismanagement. Each faction was trying to control oil resources to finance their operations, which brought to a violent competition among militia groups.

The consequences of Libya's rentier state model were not strictly economic, but it impacted the social fabric of the country. In rentier states, the government often uses oil revenues to provide public goods and services, such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure, in exchange for political loyalty. However, this can lead to entitlement

among the public, as citizens view the state as the primary provider of wealth rather than an institution that should be held accountable for its actions. This created a culture of dependency, where political participation is often put aside. Furthermore, the RS model created a class of élites that became extremely connected to the political and economic system. These included the regime's close circle of power, key tribal leaders, military commanders and business figures who benefitted from the patronage networks. This system created a self-reinforcing cycle of preservation of the status quo, leading to the lack of reforms that are necessary for a democratic transition after a dictatorship.

The Arab Spring in Libya in 2011 highlighted the country's vulnerabilities, exposing the fragile nature of Gaddafi's regime. What initially began as a series of peaceful demonstrations against corruption, human rights abuses, and political repression quickly blew into a full-scale civil war, as the regime violently repressed the dissent. This period in Libyan's history marked the intersection between domestic resentment with broader regional and international dynamics, its consequences defined Libya's scenario ever since. Both Pack and Lacher provided an analysis of this period, demonstrating how both internal factors and external influences, particularly international interventions such as NATO's, brought the country to chaos. According to their research, the uprisings were initially motivated by public discontent with the regime, specifically corruption and violent repression, alongside the burst of protests in other Arab countries happening at the same time. This quickly gave way to an armed insurrection.

A pivotal event was NATO's intervention in support of the protesters. While the help from NATO forces led to Gaddafi's death and the end of his regime, it also did not provide a coherent long-term strategy on how to address the subsequent power vacuum. The lack of a central authority left Libya fragmented, with rival militias, tribal factions, and political groups trying to fill the gap. Rather than stabilizing the country, NATO's intervention contributed to the disintegration of state institutions and the intensification of internal conflict (Pack, 2013 and Lacher, 2020).

One of the most significant and enduring consequences of Gaddafi's fall was the widespread proliferation of arms. Under Gaddafi, Libya accumulated a great number of stockpiles of weapons, many of which were of Soviet origin, but also more modern weaponry, including small arms, light weapons, and even surface-to-air missiles. With the collapse of the government, these were robbed by rebels and militias. Frederic Wehrey, in *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (2018), provides a detailed analysis of how the uncontrolled flow of these weapons fueled not only Libya's internal fragmentation but also destabilized the broader region. He emphasizes that the proliferation of arms empowered militias and armed groups within Libya, allowing them to operate autonomously and opposing any central government that tried to gain power. This fragmentation made it very difficult to rebuild a unified state. The loss of these weapons contributed to the rise of transnational terrorist organizations, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and later the Islamic State (ISIS), which exploited them to strengthen their operations and expand their influence. Additionally, the arms' proliferation also encouraged local criminal networks, facilitating activities like arms smuggling and human trafficking.

Nicolas Florquin and Eric G. Berman (2005), in their earlier studies of armed violence in Africa prior to the 2011 uprisings, had already documented the risks generated by Libya's extensive weapon stockpiles. While their work was published before Gaddafi's fall, it already warned on the potential consequences of these stockpiles falling into the wrong hands. Florquin and Berman's insights laid the groundwork for understanding how Libya's arsenal, when unleashed in a post-Gaddafi power vacuum, could exacerbate conflicts across the Sahel and the broader Euro-MENA region.

Furthermore, Barry Buzan's securitization framework (1998), which he expanded from Wæver's work (1995), offers an interesting lens through which understand the complex role of arms proliferation in post-Gaddafi Libya. Securitization, as Buzan defines it, involves framing certain issues as threats that demand quick and extraordinary measures. In the case of Libya, arms proliferation has been securitized by both domestic and

international actors, leading to the formulation of policies that often prioritize its regulation and security over addressing the political and economic causes. In Libya, the spread of weapons is seen as a threat to national security and, at the same time, a threat to regional and global stability. The external actors involved in Libya—including NATO, the United States, and regional powers such as Egypt and Qatar—framed the proliferation of arms as a major security concern, which led to the adoption of counterterrorism policies that aim at limiting their flow.

However, as Buzan indicates, this approach to these issues has been often counterproductive. By framing arms proliferation as a security threat, international responses focused on military solutions, such as arms embargoes (1992-2003 and 2011-today), military assistance to rival factions, as in the case of Russia and Turkey, and targeted strikes on deposits of weapons, without considering the root causes of this phenomenon or the broader political dynamics. As mentioned before, this created the ground for the expansion of terrorism and terroristic groups, like ISIS, making it easier for them to recruit fighters and broadening their influence.

Moreover, the collapse of a centralized authority in Libya, following Gaddafi's fall, not only left a power vacuum but also created the basis for human trafficking networks to rise and flourish. With the destruction of the state and weakening of security, the borders along Libya lacked control and the opportunity for illicit networks to thrive became higher. Vulnerable migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa that were escaping poverty, conflict and persecution became the primary target for smugglers (Micallef, 2017). With Libya becoming both a transit and destination point, traffickers capitalized on the country's position as a gate to Europe, using it as a hub for transporting migrants across the Mediterranean, especially from Tripoli.

Micallef (2017) highlights how militias and organized criminal groups play a central role in facilitating the flow of migrants. These groups are often in control of key migration routes, using armed power to maintain the system up and gain profit from migrants. The involvement of armed groups often occurs with the approval or even direct participation

by political actors. The nexus between militias and trafficking rings worsens the problem, as trafficking becomes more and more connected to local power structures and economic interests. As traffickers use their illicit profits to acquire weapons, they further fuel the fragmentation of Libya's political landscape. Ineffective governance, high corruption levels and impunity are all factors that characterize many Libyan institutions, which allow these illegal networks to thrive and flourish in plain sight. The humanitarian results are catastrophic: migrants experience widespread abuse and exploitation and many of whom face dangerous conditions, violence, and even death in the hands of traffickers. Furthermore, southern Libya is the most evident example of how these two phenomena interact with each other, as this region has become a key hotspot for both arms and human smuggling.

The transnational nature of human trafficking in Libya is another important aspect of this issue which has been analyzed in the book *The International Law of Human Trafficking* (Gallagher, 2010). Gallagher addresses the legal challenges of tackling trafficking in fragile states, such as Libya. Implementing international law in unstable states, where corruption is rampant and law enforcement is either absent or complicit, is extremely difficult. Gallagher argues that, in these environments, trafficking thrives because an accountability system is either weak or nonexistent. Gallagher highlights the necessity of addressing the root causes of these phenomenon and developing strategies that go beyond the criminalization of trafficking.

Additionally, Libya's role in the trafficking of migrants is deeply connected to global economic forces, particularly the demand for cheap labor in Europe and the Middle East. Libya's geographical position makes it a fundamental player in the global system of exploitation, where human trafficking is often a way to generate wealth, both in terms of profits for smugglers and the labor needs of destination countries. These countries are complicit in sustaining these networks, as they demand for cheap labor in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work in Europe and the Gulf regions, which, in turn, fuels the trafficking trade (Shelley, 2010).

The self-reinforcing cycle of violence, arms proliferation, and human trafficking has heavy implications not only for Libya but for the broader Sahel and Euro-MENA regions. These illicit networks extend beyond Libya's borders, as the smuggling of both migrants and weapons spills over into neighboring countries, worsening regional conflicts and contributing to the security problem that characterizes the region. Moreover, the connection between arms proliferation and human trafficking highlights the complex and transnational nature of these issues, which require a coordinated and multilateral response to address them.

In light of this, the role of external actors in Libya's post-revolutionary instability is a crucial factor when analyzing the country's long-standing fragmentation and violence. Jason Pack's (2021) concept of the "Global Enduring Disorder" offers an interesting and new framework to understand the often contradictory and scattered international responses to the Libyan crisis. According to him, external powers such as the EU, the US and Russia, have been inconsistent when approaching Libya, contributing to the ongoing instability. While NATO's intervention in 2011, conducted by the United States and European powers, was justified as a humanitarian mission aimed at preventing mass atrocities and protecting civilians under Resolution 1970 of the UN and based on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) paradigm, the intervention failed to produce a coherent post-conflict strategy. This campaign succeeded in killing Gaddafi and the dictatorship with him, but it left a political vacuum, with no clear plan to restore order and a centralized authority. This political gap left the door open for the rise of militias, tribal factions and criminal networks, creating the basis for the current scenario in Libya. Pack argues that external actors are contributing to maintaining the status quo since the chaos in Libya is beneficial to them in terms of economic gain and political control.

Kjell Engelbrekt, Marcus Mohlin, and Charlotte Wagnsson, in *The NATO Intervention in Libya: Lessons Learned from the Campaign* (2015), provide a critical analysis of the intervention, arguing that NATO's failure to plan for Libya's political future was clear neglect on their part. They emphasize that NATO's intervention, while successful in

achieving its military objectives, lacked a long-term vision and failed to take in consideration the complexities of Libya's tribal and political landscape. This lack of planning resulted in a neither smooth nor peaceful political transition; the aftermath being a country where armed groups, local grievances and external support competed for control of the territory, creating a cycle of violence and instability that can still be seen today.

The European Union and the United States, in addition to their military involvement, have also played significant roles in Libya's arms proliferation crisis. Ethical and legal dilemmas surround the flow of weapons to conflict zones from superpowers. Both legal and illegal arms exports have fueled the conflict, where weapons destined to government forces were often redirected to militias, rebels and non-state actors. The international arms trade operates along ambiguous lines: legal exports are often misused and illegally trafficked weapons reach conflict zones due to a lack of oversight and accountability from international actors. This had important consequences as weapons that were intended to stabilize the situation have often contributed to Libya's fragmentation, allowing armed groups to proliferate and perpetuate the cycle of violence (Eslami & Vieira, 2023).

Furthermore, when considering the role of criminal networks in regions characterized by contested sovereignty, the presence of a weak or absent state is a primary cause of the prosperity of illicit organizations. In Libya, these networks have been able to exploit the absence of a centralized government to gain and maintain power, often using the flow of arms as a way to gain influence in the region. The relationship between organized crime and arms proliferation in Libya highlights how external actors, whether through direct arms supplies or the failure to control illegal arms flows, have indirectly facilitated the empowerment of criminal networks that now dominate most of the political and economic landscape in the region (Cockayne, 2016). The lack of a functioning state apparatus has allowed these networks to gain control of various sectors, from the political elite to local security forces, safeguarding their survival and growth. Cockayne's concept of "hidden power" emphasizes how these networks operate within the gaps of formal governance,

manipulating weaknesses in state institutions to consolidate power and make progress in their illicit agendas.

The underexplored and complex nexus between arms proliferation and human trafficking, as mentioned before, is a primary cause in creating and perpetuating Libya's instability. While both issues have been studied individually, there is little prior literature that directly connects the two phenomena, particularly in the context of post-Gaddafi Libya. The dynamics between arms proliferation and human trafficking are self-reinforcing, creating a vicious cycle of violence, exploitation, and insecurity that is difficult to change. The import of weapons, and their subsequent proliferation, empowers trafficking networks, allowing them to operate on an extensive territory and with impunity. At the same time, the profits that are generated from the illegal smuggling of humans and their labor, provide the financial means to invest in the purchase and distribution of more arms, perpetuating a dangerous loop that destabilizes the region even more⁵.

Given the tight relationship between these two phenomena, it is of fundamental importance to create policy responses that address both issues at the same time. Cockayne (2016) and Micallef (2017) both argue the need for integrated solutions that involve border controls and more effective law enforcement, as well as broader efforts to rebuild Libya's political and economic context. For example, when trying to limit arms flows to Libya, there must be also efforts to challenge trafficking networks such as increased cooperation between Libyan authorities and international actors. Moreover, the political institutions in Libya need to be rebuilt in order to reduce the state's vulnerability, especially when considering arms and human trafficking. By strengthening governance, lessening corruption and promoting national unity, Libya and begin to address the structural issues that allowed these illicit networks to thrive.

⁵ Shaw M. & Mangan F., (2014). *Illicit trafficking and Libya's transition. Profit and Losses*. PeaceWorks. United States Institute of Peace.

Finally, the lack of direct academic focus on this relationship highlights an important gap in the literature, which needs to be taken in consideration in order to understand the full extension of Libya's crisis. By connecting these two issues, scholars and policymakers can develop more effective strategies that allow to tackle the complex consequences, especially humanitarian, of arms proliferation, human trafficking and the broader instability of the region.

1.5 Methodology

This study is based on a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data that, supported by an historical background, explore the interplay between arms exports and human trafficking in Libya. The approach of this thesis can be described as interdisciplinary as it combines elements of historical analysis, political science, international relations and security studies. This thesis takes on an historical perspective, focusing on the period from 1969 to today in order to examine the shift in political, social and security dynamics in Libya, particularly in the context of Gaddafi's fall and the subsequent instability that characterizes the country until today.

The qualitative approach allows to delve into complex phenomena and gain a deeper understanding of the country's political and security situation. These insights will be gathered through a meeting with Jason Pack, an expert on Libya whose knowledge will offer critical information on the relationship between arms proliferation and human trafficking; an issue that is difficult to explore as the previous literature does not delve into the direct interaction between these two phenomena. This interview will allow to obtain primary sources of expert knowledge that are difficult to find through classic documentation, providing new perspectives and veracity to this research. The interview will focus on the influence of external powers in Libya and it will provide policy recommendations that the EU can implement in order to create stability in the region. Jason Pack, founder and president of the Libya-Analysis LLC, and author of *Libya and the Global Enduring Disorder* (2021) and *The 2011 Libyan Uprisings and the Struggle*

for the Post-Qadhafi Future (2013) is an American expert on Libya. He specializes in Libyan history, politics and security dynamics, while also covering militia networks, illicit economies and the role of external actors in the country's ongoing instability. He has written on how global governance failures have shaped Libya's post-2011 fragmentation and how international interventions have influenced the country's security and economic landscape. Pack has also provided policy analysis for governments, think tanks, and organizations dealing with conflict resolution, security, and economic stabilization in Libya and the broader MENA region.

Complementing the qualitative analysis, quantitative data will be gathered to identify trends and determine patterns within arms trafficking and human migration flows, specifically in the coastal area, including Tripoli and Benghazi, and in Southern Libya. Data on arms exports to Libya, particularly from the EU and the US, will be of vital importance to understand the trade of weapons to the region. Sources such as the SIPRI database, Our World in Data and the Campaign Against Arms Trade databases will be used. Additionally, data analyzed by reports will be consulted such as those put forward by UNHCR, IOM and UNODC, to track the quantity and frequency of these exports. As far as human trafficking and migration patterns, of vital importance are the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix database and the Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative. Additionally, records from law enforcement agencies and non-governmental organizations will be examined to quantify the scale of arms flows and their intersection with trafficking networks, providing an empirical basis that helps understanding the two phenomena separately and their interaction.

In line with this, the research will use both primary and secondary sources in order to produce a comprehensive analysis on the topic at hand. Primary sources will include legislative documents such as the Resolutions adopted by the Security Council of the UN on Libya, e.g., Resolution 1973 that backed NATO's intervention in 2011, the Treaty of Friendship between Libya and Italy (2008) and Council Decisions on Libya by the EU, and government issued documents, including reports by the Italian Camera dei Deputati

on Libya and Joint Statements on Libya by the US Embassy and Consulates of Italy. Furthermore, reports by major International Organizations aforementioned will be included, which will provide reliable and data-driven information on the topics this thesis focuses on. For example, the *Civilian capacity in the aftermath of conflict* report by the UN (2012), *UN Libya Results Report 2023* and *Libya* by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime. Moreover, this research will rely on official articles published by the UN, the EU and NATO, as well as the Italian, Libyan and American government, for instance *NATO Secretary General and Libyan Foreign Minister discuss how NATO can support Libya* (17 June 2016). The interview with Pack on Libya will serve as another primary source, providing first-hand perspectives on the political dynamics. Finally, political statements by Gaddafi, American, Italian and Libyan leaders will be analyzed as they reflect the political strategy and rhetoric used when referring to Libya. Secondary sources, on the other hand, will include academic literature, such as books and articles, reports and newspaper articles. For example, sources will be drawn from the International Crisis Group, the SIPRI database and NGOs' websites such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Key sources such as *Libya and the Global Enduring Disorder* (Pack, 2021), *A history of Modern Libya* (Vandewalle, 2006 and 2012), *The International Law of Human Trafficking* (Gallagher, 2010) and *The Arms Race in the Middle East: Contemporary Security Dynamics* (Eslami and Vieira, 2023) will offer valuable insights into Libyan's scenario, the impact of external powers and the broader regional security context.

As mentioned above, an historical approach is central to this study, as the events of the past several decades have played a critical role in determining the situation in Libya today. The study will focus on the period from 1969 to present day, beginning with the rise of Gaddafi, whose regime played a key role in determining Libya's current political, social and economic scenario. Moreover, Gaddafi's rule over Libya can be broadly subdivided into two periods, each characterized by distinct policies, ideologies and outcomes. From 1969 to circa 1989 his approach can be considered as revolutionary and based on Arab nationalism and pan-Arabism, as he sought to become the unifier of the

Arab world; he therefore rejected the West and any international power that tried to intervene. He introduced the “Third Universal Theory”, as described in his *Green Book*, which rejected both capitalism and communism. The second period of power, which roughly started in 1990, was characterized by a pragmatic approach to governance. Gaddafi introduced a shift in foreign policy after the failed unification with other Arab states, becoming a leading supporter of African unity and promoting the African Union. After the Lockerbie bombing and sanction, Libya began a period of reconciliation with Western countries in the 2000s, peaking at the renounce of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in 2003 (Pack, 2021). Furthermore, he adopted market-oriented reforms which allowed investment by foreign countries in Libya’s oil sector and privatized parts of the economy, but much of the wealth was still under Gaddafi’s control. As far as internal challenges, the worsening of economic inequality and corruption created resentment towards the regime, alongside Gaddafi’s family dominance in the political and economic aspects of the dictatorship, which culminated in 2011. His fall in 2011 represented a turning point in Libya’s history, causing the collapse of central authority and a rise in armed militias and human trafficking networks. The choice of this time frame is relevant because it demonstrates how Libya changed from a relatively stable state under Gaddafi to a fragmented, conflictual environment following his death. This period also allows for an analysis of the influence of external powers, such as the EU and the US, whose involvement in the region had long-lasting consequences for both arms proliferation and human trafficking.

The methodology also relies on a chronological approach to historical research. Key events like the 2011 NATO intervention, the fall of Gaddafi and the subsequent civil wars will be analyzed to understand their impact on Libya’s fragmentation and the emergence of transnational security challenges. This chronological approach allows to have a clearer picture of how Libya evolved into a hub of arms smuggling, migration crises and external power struggles.

An important methodological consideration in this study is the critical analysis of primary sources. Political speeches, government issued statements and official documents, while crucial when studying the interplay between arms proliferation and human trafficking in Libya, they often come with limitations. Many of these sources are published and used as a mean to reach strategic and political goals, making them inclined to bias and rhetoric. For example, official statements from EU leaders on migration or arms exports to Libya might address humanitarian issues with little consideration to the political and economic interests. At the same time, documents and declarations from Libyan factions sometimes aim at legitimizing their actions in the eyes of domestic and international actors (Pack, 2021). To address these issues, a discourse analysis methodology will be used. This approach allows for a detailed exam of these statements as well as of the broader historical and political context in which they were issued. By analyzing these narratives, the study will try to uncover underlying intentions and their effect on public perceptions. For instance, analyzing the way EU actors frame their migration policies in Libya as security measures can show deeper motivations that are connected to regional stability and geopolitical interests (Pack, 2021).

An important methodological note needs to be addressed. This thesis inevitably reflects a Western-centric perspective, shaped both by the sources consulted and the broader academic and policy rhetoric on arms proliferation and human trafficking in Libya. Most part of the literature analyzed originates from American and European scholars, institutions and policymakers, which inevitably influences the framing of the issue. Western analysis often emphasizes security threats, migration control and counter-trafficking efforts, often proving less space for local perspectives and narratives. Moreover, the reliance on Western sources introduces a certain degree of internal bias, particularly in the interpretation of international interventions and the role of external actors. This approach does not invalidate the findings but rather highlights the need for a more diversified methodological framework, incorporating local Libyan and regional actors' perspectives.

Alongside these methodological structures, the study will be carried on theoretical frameworks that provide analytical tools to better understand the Libyan case. As mentioned before, the Global Enduring Disorder theory developed by Jason Pack will be applied, specifically when looking at the role of international powers in Libya. Pack's theory emphasizes how the interplay of competing interests among local, regional and global actors creates a state of persistent disorder, where short-term solutions and a fragmented governance structures block long-term stability. This framework allows to incorporate domestic crises in a broader international context. The GED works alongside the discourse analysis, as it provides a lens through which understand how words, statements and policies from different actors contribute to the broader chaos in Libya such as EU migration policies, arms embargo enforcement and the public narratives of Libyan factions. For instance, this research examines EU statements on migration management in Libya as a security measure, displaying the underlying motivations and geopolitical interests. Moreover, the Rentier State Theory (RST) will be used as it offers a way to examine Libya's dependence on oil revenues and its impact on political centralization and subsequent state collapse. This theoretical framework will help to contextualize the post-2011 fragmentation of Libya's governance and its consequences on transnational security. Furthermore, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's securitization framework from the Copenhagen School will be incorporated. This concept is described as the process by which political actors construct certain issues as existential threats, which is particularly relevant to understand how actors in and close to Libya frame issues like migration, arms flows and human trafficking. For example, the EU's securitization of migration through Libya often is used to justify restrictive measures and militarized border policies.

Despite the strengths of this study, there are several limitations that need to be addressed. First, the availability of data, especially during the post-Gaddafi period, is sometimes limited due to the political restrictions upon the issues at hand. Official Libyan government data is minimal and difficult to obtain as many arms trades and monetary transactions are not made public and human trafficking networks are difficult to trace; which can be compensated by relying on international and non-governmental sources

such as NGOs. However, the reliance on these secondary sources may introduce a bias, as these may reflect the interests and points of view of external actors rather than those of the Libyan state. Second, while the study will be strengthened by an expert interview, the geographical limits due to the ongoing conflict in Libya do not allow for fieldwork. This means that firsthand accounts from local actors in Libya will not be present in the study. However, expert insights, alongside secondary data, will provide a solid basis for analysis. Furthermore, this thesis lacks a broader comparative analysis with other MENA countries and Libya's bordering states, except in the context of migration routes. While the focus on Libya provides depth to the research, a comparative approach could offer additional understanding of regional dynamics, particularly in relation to arms proliferation and human trafficking. It would be interesting to analyze this issue in future research, as it would grasp how similar patterns manifest across different regions and influence transnational security policies. Lastly, the historical period covered – 1969 to today – while comprehensive in its scope, is limited by the availability of sources and the focus on contemporary issues. The study will not delve deeply into the colonial history or the developments before Gaddafi's rise to power, as the primary concern is understanding current issues, specifically the nexus between arms proliferation and human trafficking.

CHAPTER II: GADDAFI'S RULE IN LIBYA FROM REVOLUTION TO PRAGMATISM AND THE LEADER'S FALL (1969 – 2011)

2.1 Gaddafi's rise to power: causes and coup d'état

Muammar Gaddafi's rise to power in Libya in 1969 was the result of historical, political and socio-economic factors, including the legacy of the Ottoman rule, the Italian colonization, the weaknesses of King Idris' monarchy and Gaddafi's ability to capitalize on the growing nationalist sentiment and frustrations with the élite in power. To understand how he managed to gain control in Libya, the country's colonial and post-independence history needs to be taken in consideration while keeping in mind Buzan's securitization framework and Mahdavy's Rentier State theory.

During the 16th century, Libya became a part of the Ottoman Empire until the Italian occupation of the country in 1911. Libya's colonial experience under Italy (1911-1943) laid the foundation for its post-independence challenges. Following the end of World War II, the former Italian colony passed to the hands of the British and the French. Libya gained its independence under King Idris in 1951. The discovery of oil in the 1950s weakened the stability of the monarchy. Libya became a classic rentier state, as theorized by Hossein Mahdavy (1970). This system created a fragile, clientelist state dependent on oil, with limited accountability on the state's part towards the broader population (Pargeter, 2012). Libyans saw oil wealth benefitting a small part of the population, while poverty and unemployment were increasing, especially among the youth, leading to discontent.

Using Barry Buzan's securitization framework, one can argue that Gaddafi framed King Idris' regime as a threat to Libya's sovereignty and identity. He securitized the issues of foreign dependency, socio-economic inequality and the perception of the betrayal on Arab unity to justify their coup d'état in 1969; situation that was worsened by the

monarchy's little ability to gain broad support from the population and to address the post-colonial sentiments. On September 1st, 1969, Gaddafi and his fellow officers carried out a coup d'état, overthrowing King Idris and declaring the establishment of the Libyan Arab Republic. To justify the attack on the monarchy, Gaddafi and his allies emphasized three key narratives: foreign dependency, as King Idris was seen as a puppet of Western powers, socio-economic inequality, as the Rentier State model creates elite-dominated systems that neglect broader socio-economic development, and Arab unity and identity, which appealed to the nationalist and socialist factions within Libya (Pargeter, 2012 & Mahdavy, 1970).

2.2 Gaddafi's rule of Libya (1969 – 2010)

2.2.1 The revolutionary approach: from 1969 to 1989

From 1969 to around 1989, Gaddafi's leadership was characterized by a revolutionary approach to Libya's administration: at its core the goal to erase the traditional systems of governance and build a new model for the nation and the other Arab countries. Following the 1969 coup, Gaddafi portrayed himself as a charismatic and radical leader that wanted to present Libya as a united front of colonial resistance and Arab identity. His ideology was documented in his publication *The Green Book* (1975) and it became the basis for his rule, influencing Libya's domestic policies and its position in global politics, at least until the 1990s (Pack, 2013 & Pargeter, 2012).

As he gained power, Gaddafi abolished the post-1951 Libyan Constitution and introduced his own political philosophy: a mix of pan-Arab nationalism and Islamic socialism, heavily rooted in his opposition to imperialism from the West and communism and his vision of a self-sufficient state; what he called the "Third Universal Theory", which:

[...] heralds emancipation from the fetters of injustice, despotism, exploitation, and economic and political hegemony, for the purpose of establishing a society of all the people where all are free and share equally

in authority, wealth and arms. Freedom will then triumph definitively and universally.

Through the lens of the securitization framework, the Green Book and Gaddafi's Theory can be seen as instrumental to legitimize his regime by framing Libya's socio-political and economic problems as matters of national security.

In 1977, Gaddafi introduced the Jamahiriya system, i.e., State of the Masses and proclaimed himself "Guide to the Era of the Masses". This system rejected traditional democracy and political representation, wanting to establish direct rule by the people through local councils called General People's Congresses. However, despite arguing for collective leadership, Gaddafi quickly became the dominant figure, excluding rivals and centralizing power in his hands (Vandewalle, 2012). Dissent was not accepted and those who opposed the regime were imprisoned, exiled or executed (El-Khawas, 1986). Through this approach, he ensured that power remained personalized rather than institutionalized, contributing to the country's fragmentation scenario post-2011 (Pack, 2021). Finally, throughout the 1970s and 80s, the leader positioned himself as a champion of anti-Western resistance, supporting militant groups such as the PLO and the IRA.

Furthermore, Libya's economic policies from 1969 to 1989 were deeply shaped by Muammar Gaddafi's ideology, leading to nationalizations, the centralization and tribalization of the economy and attempts at self-sufficiency; all driven by Libya's large oil revenues. However, these policies also encountered challenges, including inefficiency, international sanctions and the limitations of a state-controlled economy such as a lack of popular accountability (Vandewalle, 2012).

By the early 1970s, the Libyan National Oil Corporation (NOC) was established to manage production and export, allowing for even more state control over the oil industry

(Bearman, 1986). The 1973 oil crisis⁶ increased significantly Libya's income, leading to ambitious state investments. The government used the money to build infrastructure, roads, houses and public facilities. Urbanization increased and Libya expanded its welfare state, offering free healthcare, education and subsidies for food and fuel to the population (St. John, 2008). By the early 1980s, Libya's economic expansion began to slow down due to a decline in the prices of oil and growing international isolation, leading to growing popular discontent (St. John, 2008).

Muammar Gaddafi's rise to power in 1969 corresponded to a significant shift in Libya's foreign policy. The economic liberty from oil exports allowed him to pursue an aggressive and sometimes unpredictable foreign policy, often giving Gaddafi leverage when interacting with other countries. Furthermore, it also fueled an extensive arms trade network, making Libya both a buyer and a supplier of weapons across Africa, the Middle East and Europe. This military approach was not only led by personal ambitions but it was also rooted in his securitization narrative, i.e., the clear construction of external threats to justify military expansion and interventionist policies. By doing this, he legitimized an increase in purchase of arms, military expenditure and external interventions, portraying them as necessary defensive measures to protect Libya, especially from the West (St. John, 2008). His arms trade did not align with any ideological side; he was supporting both leftist and nationalist insurgencies as long as they opposed Western interests. While initially reliant on Western weapons, he shifted to Soviet and Eastern Bloc suppliers in the 1970s as relations with the US and Europe deteriorated, escalating regional tensions (Dannreuther, 1998). His actions also reflected the pattern of the Global Enduring Disorder, where states and non-state actors exploited global instability to shape international politics in their favor (Pack, 2021).

⁶ On October 19, 1973, immediately following President Nixon's request for Congress to make available \$2.2 billion in emergency aid to Israel for the conflict known as the Yom Kippur War, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) instituted an oil embargo on the United States.

Despite his ideology, the confrontations with the US, France and regional actors like Egypt were often connected to behind-the-scenes diplomacy and economic deals, demonstrating his dual approach. With foreign policy decisions centralized under his role, decisions shifted quickly based on personal calculations of risk and reward, keeping Libya a key player in the geopolitical scenario of the late 20th century, particularly as a hub of arms proliferation and ideological radicalism, with the Cold War in the background (St. John, 2017).

One of the most consistent trade partners was Italy. Their relations were shaped by an interplay of colonial memory, economic interdependence and hidden arms dealings. By the mid-1970s, Libya had become one of Italy's most crucial energy suppliers, with ENI⁷ heavily dependent on Libyans' exports (Pack, 2021). Other than energy, the arms trade played a critical yet often hidden role in Italo-Libyan relations. While Italy officially complied with international arms embargoes and UN restrictions, in practice, Italian firms were extremely involved in supplying Libya with weapons and dual-use technology, in exchange for resources, often operating with intermediaries in Eastern Europe and the Middle East (Bucarelli, 2021). This created a paradox: while Gaddafi publicly condemned Italian's colonialism, he also used his position to establish economic influence over Rome, making sure that Italian governments had to rely on him for resource acquisition, regardless of their political orientation.

When considering the relationship between Libya and the West, particularly the US, it can be said that it was mostly adversarial and tumultuous in nature, characterized by intense ideological and political rivalry. The securitization of the West not only reflected his rejection of Western powers, but it also became a tool to increase his support in Libya

⁷ Stands for Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi, an Italian energy company operating primarily in petroleum, natural gas and petrochemicals.

and positioning the country as a frontrunner of anti-imperialist fights in the world through the support of militant groups engaged in terrorism (St. John, 2002).

Gaddafi's active support for militant and revolutionary groups, including those in the Middle East, Northern Africa and Europe increased US' concerns. The US imposed a series of sanctions, such as freezing Libyan assets in US banks, which aimed at isolating Libya both from the economic and political world. Direct engagement also occurred. The Gulf of Sidra incident in 1981 marked the beginning of active opposition between the two nations, with its peak in 1986, when the US launched missiles on Tripoli and Benghazi, known as the Operation El Dorado Canyon, and 1988 with the Pan Am Flight 103 bombing.

Libya's relationship with the Soviet Union (USSR) was complex. The USSR was seen as a counterweight to the influence of the US and its NATO allies. While Gaddafi's strategic unpredictability often destabilized Moscow (Chorin, 2012), Libya's oil resources and arms trade made the country a key interlocutor. In fact, between 1974 and 1986, Libya purchased billions of dollars' worth of Soviet weapons, becoming one of the most heavily armed nations in Africa. Nevertheless, by the end of the '80s, Gorbaciov's reformistic and Western approach ideologically and politically distanced the two countries (St. John, 2002).

Finally, Turkey has deep rooted relations with Libya due to historical and cultural ties. Turkey maintained a more pragmatic partnership with Libya, building infrastructure in the country (Kologlu, 2007). However, while Turkey remained aligned with NATO, it still engaged in limited arms transfers to the Libyan regime. Through this, Turkey was able to maintain a relationship with Libya that was used to advance on its own economic and strategic interests in the region (Yüksel, 2021).

In terms of social transformations in the first two decades of his rule, Gaddafi took advantage of oil wealth to implement social programs. Education and healthcare became entirely free and literacy rates increased from below 20% to over 70% by the 1980s as

schools and universities grew (Vandewalle, 2012). The state also implemented extended housing projects to improve living conditions (Pargeter, 2012). All these policies created a sense of optimism, especially among the lower and middle classes, who for the first time had access to basic services. On a gender perspective, Gaddafi promoted female education and encouraged women to work in sectors usually dominated by men as legal barriers to employment were lifted and equal pay policies were introduced (Chorin, 2012). However, this progress often conflicted with the country's tribal and religious structure, meaning that social acceptance still remained limited. At the same time, however, political repression intensified. For example, universities were often infiltrated by government informants, making political public discussions difficult.

2.2.2 The pragmatic approach: from 1990 to 2010

Gaddafi's ideological trajectory between 1990 and 2011 was characterized by a shift from revolutionary anti-imperialism to pragmatic commitments with the West, which indicated a pattern of survival strategies, rather than an ideological change. This was due to the sanctions imposed on Libya after the Lockerbie bombing⁸, along the rentier state's fragile nature (Simons, 1996).

Libya's relationship with the US exemplified this shift. The early 1990s were characterized by economic fragility as the sanctions limited the country's ability to export oil freely and access global financial markets. Rather than facing the economic crisis, the leader framed Western actions as existential threats to Libya's sovereignty, showcasing them as a part of a broader imperialist campaign against the country (Buzan et al., 1998). This narrative justified the use of increased violence and internal repression of those that were opposing Gaddafi (Vandewalle, 2012). The situation worsened with the collapse of

⁸ In particular, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions 748 of 1992 and 883 of 1993, heavily supported by the US and its NATO allies, imposed an arms embargo, a ban on air travel and the freezing of Libyan assets abroad.

the USSR, leaving Libya without a key ally. When 9/11 occurred, Gaddafi saw the opportunity to reposition Libya in the international scenario and proposed himself as a partner in the global war on terror by securitizing Islamist opposition groups - particularly the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG)⁹. To avoid the total collapse of the economy, Gaddafi decided to formally abandon the Weapons of Mass Destruction program (WMD) and Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) – class missile programs in 2003 - to compensate the families of the Lockerbie bombing victims and to comply with international demands for transparency in military and nuclear programs. All these factors led to the gradual lift of UN imposed sanctions, allowing Libya to reintegrate in the global markets and, in turn, increase foreign investment. While this period brought some sort of cooperation, frictions still persisted. For example, in 2009, Gaddafi gave a speech at the UN General Assembly in which he criticized Western powers, showcasing that his ideological opposition to the US was not entirely dissolved. By 2010, the US-Libyan relationship demonstrated its fragility as political trust between the two nations deteriorated.

Libya's relationship with Italy experienced significant change during this period. Italian companies, mainly ENI, kept a strong presence in Libya despite international sanctions and, following Libya's diplomatic shift in 2003, their relations only deepened (Lacher, 2020). By the mid-2000s, Italy had become Libya's largest trading partner: the key drivers being oil and gas exports (Vandewalle, 2012). However, the relationship between Italy and Libya was not purely economic; it was also deeply shaped by migration policies and geopolitical planning. Gaddafi realized the political significance of migration and instrumentalized it as a political negotiation tool, consistent the Enduring Disorder theory: he leveraged instability and European fears over migration to gain economic and political deals (Pack, 2021). In fact, Gaddafi threatened to "open the gates" of migration

⁹ These groups had previously tried to overthrow the regime; therefore, this approach can also be seen as a way to maintain control over Libya.

if European countries leaders failed to consider his demands, A clear example of Italian-Libyan relations was the signing of the Treaty of Friendship by Berlusconi in 2008¹⁰, as it represented (Camera dei Deputati, 2008):

cooperation in all fields of mutual interest and the creation of a strong political and economic partnership.

By signing the Treaty, Italy wanted to reduce immigration as there had been an increase in the flow of people reaching Italian shores before 2008. This measure worked for the first two years, as numbers increased by 2011.

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Total	36,951	9,573	4,406	62,692	13,267	42,925

Figure 2.1 This figure represents the number of migrants that landed in Italy from 2008 to 2013, mainly from Libya. Source: Personal processing of Italian Ministry of Interior data (2020) by Becucci S.

The relationship between Gaddafi and Moscow exemplified how disorder and instability can be leveraged to gain strategic advantages. While Libya was trying to rehabilitate his image on the international scenario between the 1990s and 2011, it still kept strong relations with Russia in order to ensure military supplies. This dual approach, meaning pitting global powers against each other, helped Libya to navigate a fractured international order and ensure that its military power remained solid despite the past restrictions and embargoes (Pack, 2021). Furthermore, Libya securitized his relationship with Russia depicting Western restrictions on arms and trade as existential threats. In

¹⁰ Italy agreed to invest 5 billion euros in Libyan infrastructure over a 25-year period in exchange for Libya's commitment to control the flow of irregular migrants into Europe. It also included the establishment of detention centers, which would become notorious for human rights abuses.

response to this, the regime justified its military spending increase and the regional interventions by arguing that external adversaries were trying to destabilize Libya. Moscow, at the same time, gained from this framing by considering itself as a counterweight to Western influence in North Africa, using Libya as a starting point in the Mediterranean to later acquire control over African countries (Buzan et al., 1998).

Furthermore, at the end of the '90s, a gradual rapprochement with Turkey occurred in regard to the economic ties over oil and infrastructure, as both of the countries were trying to bypass the impositions by the West (Aras, 1998 & Vandewalle, 2012). In fact, some clandestine cooperation cases have been discovered in support to Libyan security forces. Compared to Western powers, Turkey maintained a pragmatic position, balancing the commitments with NATO and the economic interests in Libya. The securitization framework helps to explain the cautious commitment on the Turkish part: compared to other countries that were framing Libya as a security threat, Turkey was prioritizing economic and diplomatic engagement over direct confrontation (Buzan et al., 1998). Finally, migration and human trafficking networks became increasingly more relevant in Turkey-Libya relations, especially during the 2000s. Libya's role as a key transit hub for migrants coming from Africa and the Middle East, alongside Turkey's geographical position as an entry point to the EU, created the basis for the development of diplomatic relations (Lacher, 2020).

In terms of Libya's economy, oil revenues were still under Gaddafi and his internal allies' control, maintaining a highly centralized economy and state. When the revenues from oil exports lessened, Libya turned its attention to alternative approaches – some legal, some not - in order to maintain the regime's stability; this led to a growth in corruption and an increase in conflicts across Africa and the Middle East. Arms smuggling and organized crime networks were used as alternative sources of revenue (Lutterbeck, 2009). The economic crisis and the limited liberalization changed the relationship between the regime and its citizens but Gaddafi's cult of personality and security system were kept the same. Political opposition, whether Islamist, democratic or tribal, was still severely

repressed. As he shifted his approach to the West, many citizens saw Gaddafi's newfound approach to foreign policy as opportunistic, especially considering that the internal conditions did not improve (Lacher, 2020).

Finally, while the first twenty years of Gaddafi's rule experienced a certain degree of reforms towards the welfare of the citizens, the same cannot be said about the second part of his rule. Libya's isolation from global markets signified fewer public funds for the state: the progress that was made began to recede. Hospitals lacked basic equipment, housing projects were abandoned and infrastructure fell apart (Vandewalle, 2012). The sense of economic opportunity in the early years shifted to frustration, especially among young people as nearly one-third of graduates were unemployed during the 2000s (Lacher, 2020). The gap between the élite running the country and ordinary citizens became more prominent. Only with Gaddafi's reproachment to the West, some social benefits began to increase, such as healthcare and education but at this point, social discontent was at an all time high.

2.3 Arms trade and human trafficking under Gaddafi

As it will be relevant in light of the next chapters, it is important to provide a context around the arms trade and human trafficking networks under Gaddafi. To understand how these two phenomena operated in Libya, the theoretical frameworks through which this analysis is conducted need to be taken in consideration. The securitization framework helps to explain how migration and arms proliferation were framed as security threats by both Libyan actors and external governments, leading to militarized approaches rather than addressing the root economic and social causes (Buzan et al., 1998). Furthermore, Pack's global enduring disorder theory demonstrates how NATO's intervention, whose initial objective was to protect civilians, and later on remove Gaddafi, in reality created instability in the region by leaving a power vacuum that increased internal fragmentation and external exploitation (Pack, 2021).

In terms of migration before the fall of Gaddafi, Libya was both a country of arrival and departure for people moving through Africa. Nevertheless, migration flows were heavily regulated by Gaddafi, ensuring that it was controlled under state supervision rather than unregulated criminal networks (Micallef, 2017). Furthermore, the legal framework on migration was shaped by bilateral accords, through which Gaddafi negotiated with outside actors promising to limit illegal movement. Finally, under Gaddafi's government, detention centers and abuses in them were well documented. Contraband existed but it was mainly managed through tribal networks aligned with the state, ensuring that the profits would fall back in the hands of the regime, rather than independent actors (Micallef, 2017).

Moreover, as mentioned before, Libya under Gaddafi was one of the primary importers of weapons to Africa, mainly acquiring them from the USSR, France and Italy. This trade increased when Gaddafi expressed the desire to modernize the country's military arsenal and improve the relations with Europe in 2003. Gaddafi was also an exporter of weapons mainly to Africa and the Middle East, supporting revolutionary movements in Chad, Sudan, Liberia and the Palestinian territories.

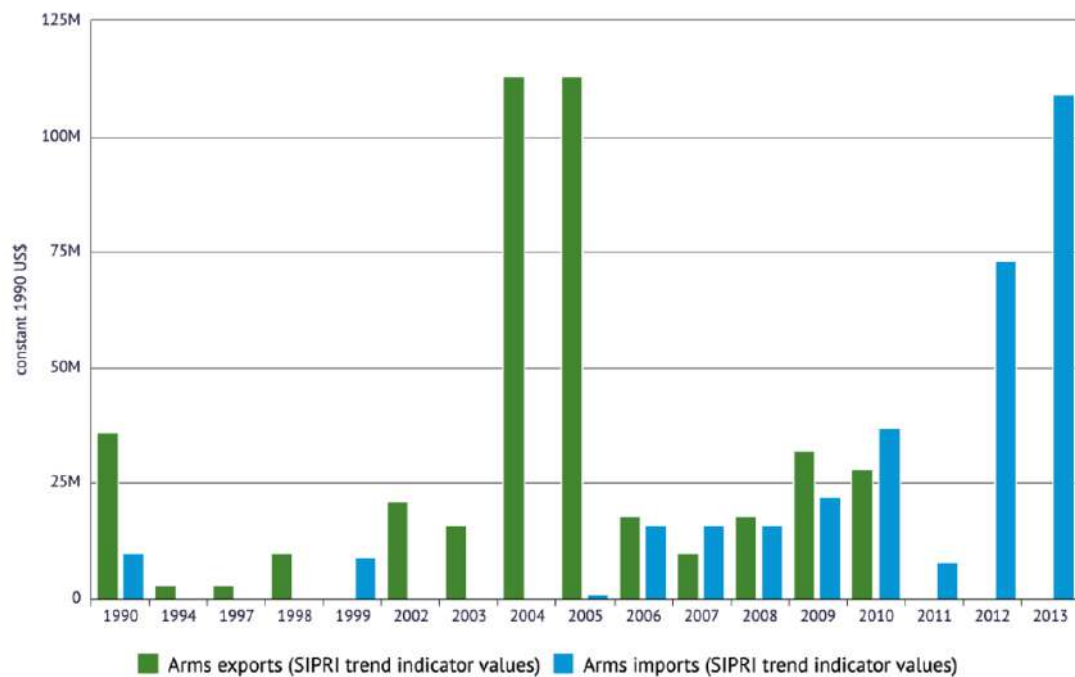


Figure 2.2 This table represents the values of exports and imports to and from Libya. After the lift of international sanction in 2003, the number of exports of weapons from Libya skyrocketed, reaching an all-time high of 113,000,000 values in dollars in 2004 and 2005. Source: World Development Indicators (WDI) by Knoema.

Even if this militarization process was undergoing in relation to external powers, the distribution of weapons inside Libya itself was highly controlled by the state.

2.4 Libya’s contemporary history: 2011 to 2024

2.4.1 The Arab Spring and NATO’s intervention

The First Arab Spring¹¹ (2010 – 2012) was a series of anti-government, uprisings and armed rebellions that occurred in the Arab region caused by the consequences of authoritarian regimes. It began in Tunisia on 17 December 2010 when a young street

¹¹ The term “Spring” can be traced back to People’s Spring of 1848, a revolutionary movement in Europe.

vendor set himself on fire to protest of police brutality, becoming a symbol of the revolution. What were at first protests demanding for socio-economic justice, gradually became political revolts, seeking the recognition of fundamental freedoms, respect of human rights and democratic principles, as well as the rejection of all forms of dictatorship and censorship. Inspired by the Tunisia revolution, similar protests were organized among mainly young citizens in Egypt first and later in countries such as Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. As Pack (2013) describes the revolts, they were bottom-up, leaderless movements, without a precise ideology that drove them. These unique features were possible because of twenty-first-century communications technologies which allowed for mass popular organization that did not need a charismatic leader, organizational hierarchies or political parties to grow. The causes of the revolts can be attributed to long-standing political, economic – including high unemployment, particularly among the youth, growing income inequality and the reliance on the rentier state model - and social resentments. The absence of pluralism, the consolidation of power through violence, censorship and patronage networks left citizens without any other choice but to regain power through the informal ways (Lacher, 2020).

Compared to other countries, Libya's revolution quickly became a violent conflict. Corruption among the Libyan Investment Authority (LIA) and mismanagement of oil revenues led to increasing frustration, as wealth remained concentrated among Gaddafi's inner circle while common people could not keep up with rising living costs (Vandewalle, 2012). Furthermore, Gaddafi's response to the protests was shaped by a securitization narrative, where dissent was framed as an existential threat to the state. Instead of confronting the demands by the population, the leader branded them as terrorists, foreign agents and drugged youth, trying to take legitimization away; transforming initially peaceful protests into armed rebellion. (Vandewalle, 2012). When cities like Misrata, Zawiya and Tobruk joined the rebellion, among Benghazi, the government launched shelling and airstrikes on the opposition, demonstrating that Gaddafi was willing to sacrifice civilians to maintain power (Pargeter, 2012). Finally, by mid-2011, Libya was under a full-scale civil war which was prolonged by Gaddafi's refusal to step down and

his reliance on foreign mercenaries (Pack, 2021). The country is the prime example of enduring disorder since the lack of a strong institution and the presence of rival militias, tribal divisions and foreign interference meant that Libya never managed to transition to democracy.

In regards to the historical event that occurred in Libya, the fights that broke out in Egypt and Tunisia made the overthrow of Gaddafi seem possible. The first Libyan civil war began on 15 February 2011 and ended on 20 October 2011, with the killing of leader Muammar Gaddafi, and it occurred between the government and the anti-Gaddafi forces. The conflict can be roughly divided in two periods: before and after the military intervention guided by NATO forces. The first riot occurred in Benghazi on February 15, 2011, in response to the pre-emptive arrest of a human-rights lawyer representing families of victims of a 1966 massacre in a Tripoli prison. What was first a small protest that included family members of the victims quickly grew into a large anti-Gaddafi demonstration of about 500 – 600 people, dispersed by tear gas and hot water cannons. In support of the securitization framework, the day after, Gaddafi issued a statement downplaying the extent of the riots and branding people as outsiders:

The clashes last night were between small groups of people - up to 150. Some outsiders infiltrated that group. They were trying to corrupt the local legal process which has long been in place.

The use of excessive force radicalized the opposition, leading to the formation of armed groups in the name of resistance in towns such as Misrata, Zawiya and Tobruk (Lacher, 2020). The government's approach - refusing to negotiate and shifting the blame on third parties such as al-Qaeda - led to widespread "ship jumping", particularly in the east, where the opposition groups began to organize themselves into the National Transitional Council (NTC). Formed on 27 February, it announced itself to be the "sole legitimate representative of the Libyan people". Among its duties: ensuring national security, coordinating efforts to restore civilian life and overseeing Libya's liberation. Furthermore, it supervised the Military Council that aimed at creating a national army

focused on defense, it organized elections to draft a democratic constitution and formed a transitional government to prepare for free elections.

In March, the battles escalated even more, leading to an increased counteroffensive by Gaddafi. On the 10th, France became the first country to recognize the NTC as Libya's legitimate government. This event was of diplomatic importance for the rebels since it showed broader international support against Gaddafi, and it led other states to consider a similar course of action. During this period, Gaddafi's forces successfully regained control over major cities; for example, by 15 March, the government managed to secure back the city of Ajdabiya which left Benghazi highly vulnerable, increasing fear that Libya would soon back to the status quo under Gaddafi if the international actors did not intervene (Pack, 2021). In response, an international debate began over whether an intervention in Libya was necessary; for instance, France wanted to intervene in the name of civilians' protection, while the Obama Administration preferred to keep a distance.

This debate came to a conclusion on March 17, 2011, when the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 1973 which imposed a no-fly zone over Libya to prevent Gaddafi from using airpower against civilians, authorized "all necessary measures" to protect civilians, allowing military intervention, and prohibited foreign ground troops – meaning that intervention was limited to airstrikes, naval blockades and logistical support for opposition forces. This resolution was wanted by France, the UK and the US, as well as supported by the Arab League, which called for international action. Russia and China abstained from the vote but did not veto it, allowing NATO to justify the intervention as legal and internationally approved (Engelbrekt et al, 2014). Two days after the adoption of the resolution, on March 19, France launched air strikes against the forces of the Libyan government (Campbell, 2012). After the French attack, US and British submarines sent missiles to Libya as well, as part of the Operation Odyssey Dawn (March 19 – 31, 2011). After the first two days, the objective of protecting civilians in Benghazi had been achieved; since that point on, NATO's aim in Libya became blurred and driven by the unwritten plan to change the regime and execute

Gaddafi. On March 31, 2011, NATO officially took command over the military operations under Operation Unified Protector (OUP). The Resolution was legally based on the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine which is:

[...] an international norm that seeks to ensure that the international community never again fails to halt the mass atrocity crimes of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

While humanitarian concerns were central to the intervention, NATO's involvement was also influenced by strategic, political and economic interests of key member states. France under Sarkozy advocated for a strong military intervention due to diplomatic and economic objectives in the region. The UK also played a role in supporting sending troops to Libya, seeing it as a way to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. Obama, on the other side, was hesitant to engage in another military conflict after the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan; therefore, taking a "leading from behind" approach, allowing European allies to step forward. Moreover, the Arab League approved the operation, proving legitimization to the intervention. Finally, European countries, mainly Italy and France, were concerned that a long-term war in Libya could lead to massive refugee flows and further destabilize the region (Engelbrekt et al., 2013).

Gaddafi framed the intervention as an act of colonial aggression and vowed to resist. In a speech broadcasted on state TV, he warned that Libya would become a "hell" for NATO forces and declared that the West was trying to steal Libyan oil. He ordered his forces to continue their advance on Benghazi, despite heavy airstrikes.

We have only one choice -- (to stay in) our country to the end. Death, life, victory, no matter what. We will not leave our country or sell it, we will not submit.

On June 27, 2011, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Gaddafi, his son Saif al-Islam, and intelligence chief Abdullah Senussi, charging them

with crimes against humanity for ordering attacks on civilians. Gaddafi dismissed the ICC warrant as “meaningless”, as he did not recognize its authority, during one of his speeches, claiming that the Libyan people would resist the “imperialist invasion” (Engelbrekt et al., 2013). NATO expanded its air campaign, increasingly targeting command-and-control centers in Tripoli. At the same time, Operation Mermaid Down was launched by rebel forces alongside NATO’s support, on August 20, 2011, and it consisted of an assault on Tripoli; which they managed to infiltrate. This led Gaddafi to go into hiding. He was found as he was fleeing from Sirte in a convoy by NATO forces and local people and he was killed, in a very violent manner, on October 20, 2011. Gaddafi’s capture and death marked the definitive collapse of his regime.

2.4.2 Libya after Gaddafi: the struggle for stability

Violent conflict produces new realities and logics that deeply transform societies. Violence draws rifts through the social fabric; it either strengthens cohesion or causes fragmentation among groups that rely on solidarity among their members to defend themselves against threats. It thereby redefines political communities and creates new ones (Lacher, 2020).

The fall of the regime was supposed to open a new chapter for Libya, bringing democracy and stability after 42 years of authoritarianism. Instead, the country found itself into a long-standing period of fragmentation, insecurity and economic crisis. Libya became the battleground of competing factions, with armed militias – who called themselves the “guardians of the revolution” - human traffickers and foreign power shaping its dynamics.

Understanding the scenario that unfolded after Gaddafi’s fall requires a multi-framework approach. The securitization approach helps to explain how international and regional actors framed Libya’s instability as a security threat which allowed them to justify interventions that advanced their interests in the region rather than addressing the root causes of the problems (Buzan et al., 1998). The global enduring disorder framework

(Pack, 2021) demonstrates how NATO's intervention increased fragmentation and created a state of persistent crisis, rather than leading to stability, where both local and global actors exploit disorder to gain from it. Finally, the rentier state model explains Libya's economic fragility, meaning that a country reliant on oil revenues without strong state institutions struggles to transition into a functioning democracy (Vandewalle, 2012).

Libya's political fragmentation began almost immediately after Gaddafi's fall. Compared to Tunisia, which became a democracy, or Egypt, where the military regained control, Libya had no institutional pillars to fall back on (Vandewalle, 2012). After the interim National Transitional Council (NTC) declared that Libya was liberated in October 2011, it began the process of forming a new government, prepare elections and prosecute the former allies of Gaddafi. On October 31, 2011, the UN mandate was lifted and NATO's Operation Unified Protector was terminated, despite requests by the NTC for military assistance to continue.

For the first time after 42 years, Libya held true elections on July 7, 2012. The elections were relatively peaceful, and international observers praised them as a step toward democracy (Pack, 2021). The General National Congress (GNC) was elected by popular vote on the same day and it took power on August 8. Its main task was to transition Libya to a democratic state and it was given 18 months to write a constitution for it, as well as overseeing the transition to a permanent government. However, the election results did not translate into political stability as the GNC lacked the authority to impose its decisions across Libya (Lacher, 2020). Many of these groups became de facto rulers in different parts of the country, controlling cities, oil fields, and smuggling routes. Moreover, the divisions between Islamist and secularists grew, especially over the question of integrating Sharia¹² into Libya's legal system. While the revolution shortly reunited different factions to take down Gaddafi, once the regime fell, there was no symbolic glue

¹² Sharia means "the correct path" in Arabic. Technically, it is the set of the holy laws of Islam that cover all parts of a Muslim's life. However, the sharia isn't the same as Islamic law.

that kept them together. Many militias that formed during the uprisings valued local and ideological loyalties over national unity, making it difficult to create a unified national army or police force (Vandewalle, 2012). Tripoli, Benghazi and Misrata became all controlled by different militias, with little coordination between them (Lacher, 2020). Therefore, while the GNC was initially seen as a step towards democracy, it soon became ineffective (Lutterbeck, 2009).

By 2013 and 2014, political divisions deepened and Libya was separated in two rival centers of power. On one side, the GNC in Tripoli, dominated by Islamist factions, and the House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk, supported by more secular and nationalist groups, as well as by General Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). This division laid the basis for the Libyan civil war (2014 – 2020), but even before open conflict erupted, the competition for who was governing Libya brought down the chances at stability (Pack, 2021). Some militias aligned with political factions, while others preferred to pursue their economic interests, which included smuggling, arms trafficking and extortion.

Moreover, from 2011 to 2014, the economy suffered important setbacks. Before the revolution, oil accounted for over 90% of government revenues (Vandewalle, 2008); after the fall of the regime, the political instability posed risks to the energy sector. The two governments, as well as other local militias, used oil exports as leverage, for example shutting down pipelines or smuggling crude oil to foreign buyers; this caused massive disruptions to the economy. Without a functioning economy, the state was not able to pay salaries, fund infrastructure or provide basic services (Pack, 2021).

As Libya plummeted into lawlessness, migration flows increased; situation that was exploited by human traffickers. Smuggling networks, which before the fall were focused on arms and goods, expanded into migrant trafficking, taking advantage of the lack of control over borders (Micallef, 2017). Migration became securitized, leading to the militarization of these routes and the creation of policies that focused on restrictions rather than humanitarian aid, threatening the lives of migrants (Gallagher, 2010).

By 2014, Libya did not just experience a failed transition, it was a nation on the verge of civil war, with no clear path forward and no actor capable or willing to restore unity (Pack, 2021). What began as a revolution that pushed for democracy, turned into a fragmented landscape within three years, where power was measured not by elections but by who was controlling arms, oil and smuggling routes.

2.4.3 The second civil war (2014 – 2020)

The second Libyan Civil War (2014 – 2020) was not merely a power struggle between opposing governments but a conflict based on years of social discontent due to economic and political instability, fueled by competing militias and foreign interventions.

Ratcliff (2017) argues that two primary factors are responsible for the outburst of second Libyan civil war: the Libyan regime as an anocracy¹³ and the political grievances of the Islamists and related political units within the country. The author adds, as a secondary cause, the presence of extensive oil reserves as the resource did not directly cause the civil war but contributed to its outbreak and facilitated the existence of armed groups in the country.

The political crisis reached an all-time high in June 2014, when the HoR relocated in Tobruk and claimed it was the legitimate government of Libya, dividing the country into two rival administrations (King, 2020). At the same time, General Haftar launched “Operation Dignity” against the GNC in Benghazi, framing it as a war on terrorism and securing his role as Libya’s stabilizer. This led to open hostilities between Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) and the Islamist dominated militias of Tripoli, Misrata and Benghazi, backed by the GNC (Shihundu, 2021). As both sides tried to gain external military and financial support, Libya transformed into a proxy battlefield for regional

¹³ According to the dictionary, anocracy is defined as a government that is a hybrid of democracy and autocracy, often as a transitional phase when one of these forms of government takes on characteristics of the other.

powers, with Egypt and the UAE supporting Haftar, while Turkey and Qatar backed the GNC.

By the end of 2014, the country was in a full-scale civil war, with Tripoli and western Libya under the GNC, while Tobruk and eastern Libya fell under Haftar's control. By 2015, Haftar had successfully positioned himself as the military arm of the HoR based in Tobruk, which officially elected him as Commander of the Libyan National Army, a section of Libya's military forces. This moment provided political legitimacy to the LNA, allowing Haftar to consolidate his forces as the "official" Libyan military, despite opposition from the factions from Tripoli (Shihundu, 2021). The LNA expanded by including tribal militias, former Gaddafi allies and paramilitary units, using anti-Islamist rhetoric to secure foreign alliances.

The UN tried to create cohesion in the government through the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), which led to the formation of the Government of National Accord (GNA) on December 17, 2015. However, it found opposition from Haftar's forces and Tripoli's militia networks, which used it as a financial tool rather than a legitimate authority (Shihundu, 2021). Also, control over oil resources remained a factor that sustained the war rather than developing the nation, as the LNA seized oil fields in eastern and central Libya, while militias in western Libya controlled oil terminals and export routes (Lacher, 2020).

A crucial moment during the civil war came in 2019, when the conflict escalated into one of the most destructive phases of the war. Haftar launched a full-scale military campaign to seize Tripoli in April, backed by the Russian Wagner Group, the UAE and Egypt (Shihundu, 2021). He framed this offensive as a battle against Islamist militias. The GNA was saved by Turkey's military intervention between 2019 and 2020, which included drone warfare and the deployment of Syrian mercenaries (Lacher, 2020). At this point, Libya's war was an internationalized conflict, where external actors directly shaped the scenario, reinforcing the idea that Libya had become the theater of the global enduring disorder (Pack, 2021). However, by mid-2020, the LNA suffered important defeats,

retreating from Tripoli and western Libya. Haftar's loss of major cities such as Tarhuna and Gharyan exposed his weaknesses, while Russians and Emiratis were not pleased with his stalled offensive, backing out of the conflict.

Finally, international actors such as the UN and the EU, taking advantage of LNA's moment of weakness, intensified diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the conflict. The Berlin Conference in January 2020 set the groundwork for a peace process, while negotiations were going on internally between the LNA and the GNA. In August 2020, a nationwide ceasefire was announced. While a single government was formed in March 2021, the Government of National Unity (GNU), Libya remained still deeply fragmented as in reality, the two governments were kept in place.

2.4.4 Today's scenario

Libya is still very much divided and fragment, case in point: the presence of two rival governments, one in Tobruk, the LNA, and the GNU, in Tripoli. The latter was established in March 2021, after the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) reached an agreement in December 2020, appointing Dbeibah as Prime Minister. The forum included both western and eastern factions of Libya, as well as different political and military groups, such as the LNA. The goal of the meeting was to create one united government and a plan for national elections to bring stability. Although the GNU was established as an interim government, replacing the GNA, it found itself facing many challenges in terms of legitimacy. Some factions did not fully accept the GNU: Haftar and his allies, particularly the HoR, claimed that it lacked a clear mandate and rejected it as a "fac-simile" of the GNA.

Economically, in 2022, disputes over the control of the Central Bank of Libya (CBL) broke out and resulted in the halt of oil fields extraction, diminishing significantly the exports. These actions worsened the financial crisis and contributed to the global energy price fluctuations. This re-occurred in 2024, to which the UN responded with efforts to

manage the situation, proposing the formation of an advisory committee to address electoral issues and new elections.

In terms of humanitarian issues, the substantial flow of migrants trying to arrive to Libya and those who depart from it is still a priority concern in the national and international agenda – for instance, the efforts of the IOM. Nevertheless, the involvement of militia in human trafficking and the presence of armed groups, make it difficult to establish effective governance that is capable of addressing it.

As of March 2025, Libya is still characterized by political fragmentation, with deep separations between different factions and parties. The economic situation is also very fragile, as oil revenues are still the main source of income and therefore subjected to prices fluctuations. Human rights organizations push to address the lack of accountability and compressive reforms that tackle ongoing abuses and conflict.

CHAPTER III: LIBYA POST-GADDAFI: PROLIFERATION OF ARMS AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING NETWORKS

3.1 The post Gaddafi future: an introduction

The fall of Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011 not only ceased his 42 years of ruling but also created profound instability in Libya, transforming the country into a hub for human trafficking and arms proliferation, due to a rapid institutional authority and the lack of state authority. While both phenomena were present during Gaddafi's leadership, they were extremely controlled by the state, operating in the context of coercion and patronage and used as tools of foreign policy and economic leverage. After 2011, however, Libya's collapse into a fragmented and lawless state allowed these illegal networks to build and thrive, reshaping migration routes and fueling conflicts across Africa and the Middle East (Lacher, 2020 & Micallef, 2017).

As Mercado argues in *Arms trafficking and organized crime* (2022):

Illicit firearms shape the activities of criminal networks and groups, giving them more power, as well as transforming criminal landscapes and enabling other criminal markets to thrive.

After October 2011, as Libya's institutions disintegrated, Gaddafi's extensive arms stockpiles were raided by local groups, flooding the black market with over 20 million firearms, anti-aircraft missiles and explosives (Shihundu, 2021). As predicted by Wezeman on March 28, 2011:

Libya has also procured large quantities of small arms and light weapons. These are likely to proliferate throughout Libya, prolonging the violence, or they may leak to conflicts or armed groups elsewhere.

The weapons that once were controlled and secured by the state were now fueling conflicts in Africa, including Mali and Central African Republic, and the Middle East, including Syria, reaching jihadist groups such as Boko Haram, ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (Lutterbeck, 2013). This was confirmed by Pack:

The Gaddafi period all weapons were held by the state, after the fall of the regime and the uprisings against him, there were popular groups who took those weapons. The proliferation of arms was a consequence of the revolution.

Simultaneously, the human smuggling networks took advantage of the security and political vacuum that was created to expand their operations, as conflicts fueled by Gaddafi's weapons and poverty were igniting large migration flows. Without a functioning border control, Libya quickly became both the arrival destination and a passageway for migrants that wanted to reach Europe, with over 150.000 crossings annually between 2013 and 2015 (Micallef, 2017). Just considering 2013, the number of migrants passing through Libya reached 25.755, according to the World Bank Group.

The arms and human trafficking networks became self-reinforcing, since militias and criminal groups gained profit from both. The use of weapons provided traffickers with the means to secure smuggling routes, while profits from human smuggling were used to purchase weapons, further enforcing the militias and armed groups system.

	Arms trafficking	Human trafficking	Human smuggling
Arms trafficking	-		
Human trafficking	.643*	-	
Human smuggling	.619*	.748*	-

Figure 3.1 This table represents the correlation between arms trafficking, human trafficking and human smuggling in 2021. A Spearman correlation ($p < 0.01$) examined the relationship between arms trafficking

and other criminal markets, including human trafficking. Arms trafficking was found to be significantly correlated to all other forms of crime, marked by an asterisk at a significance level of 1%, indicating a relatively high strength of evidence in probabilistic terms. SOURCE: Global Organized Crime Index 2021, GI-TOC.

Finally, external interventions contributed to the aggravation of the crisis and the self-reinforcing cycle of arms and human trafficking since other countries tried to exploit Libya's instability to further their economic and political interests. The UN imposed embargo on weapons through UNSCR 1970 and 1973, was extensively violated, with Turkey, the UAE, Qatar and Russia actively supplying weapons to the factions that they found themselves in line with (Lacher, 2020).

Looking at the EU, in particular France and Italy, the policies that it was proposing were often contradictory (Pack, 2021). To provide an example, the migration agreement between Libya and Italy in 2017, which funded Libyan militias in order to block migrants to enter Europe, actually legitimized traffickers as border enforcers, reinforcing the human trafficking cycle (Micallef, 2017). The lack of coordination between international actors and the European policies that securitized migration rather than addressing its economic and political causes, led Libya to remain in a constant state of fragmentation and instability, as well as trapped in a cycle of disorder.

3.2 Arms trade

3.2.1 Legal basis and definitions

The arms trade is based on a complex legal framework that includes international treaties, UN Security Council resolutions, regional agreements and national laws. Libya, both as an importer and exporter of weapons and as a hub for their proliferation, has been more prone to legal restrictions at different levels.

In terms of the international legal framework, the main regulation has been set by the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) in 2013. It “seeks to prevent and eradicate illicit trade and

diversion of conventional arms” through the establishment of international rule that governs arms transfers. Adopted by the UN General Assembly, it requires signatory states to assess arms transfers to prevent human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law. Libya is not a signatory, but many external actors involved in the trade of weapons are bound by the treaty’s obligations, such as the EU, the US and Turkey. Furthermore, the UN Security Council Resolutions often mentioned prior, the Resolution 1970 and 1973 (2011), imposed legally binding arms embargos on Libya, prohibiting all UN member states from supplying weapons to Libyan factions. However, many states have violated the impositions by covertly supplying arms to different groups during the Libyan civil war (2011).

Under the UN Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects (poA), governments have agreed to enhance national laws on small arms, import/export controls and stockpile management, as well as engaging in cooperation and assistance. Libya has been a hub for small arms proliferation, as large weapons were raided and distributed to militias, terrorist groups and traffickers in 2011.

Finally, the Geneva Conventions (1864 – 1949) and International Humanitarian Law are important frameworks to take in consideration. These laws restrict arms transfers if there is a high risk that weapons will be used to commit war crimes or crimes against humanity. Arms flows to Libya have often violated these principles, as weapons have been used by militias to commit human rights violations.

Since many external actors supplying arms to Libya are European or American, their national and regional regulations are crucial in understanding the legal framework as well as their violations. On the EU side, the Common Position 2008/944/CFSP sets out the Union’s rules that aim at controlling the export of items of military technology and equipment and it establishes that an annual report on trade needs to be published in the Official Journal by MS. It also includes that the MS must follow a series of criteria when authorizing arms exports, such as the respect for human rights and international

humanitarian law in the country of export and internal stability concerns, i.e., arms cannot be exported if they contribute to armed conflicts or internal repression. Despite these guidelines, European weapons often ended up in Libya, such as Italian and French, either directly supplied or through third-parties intermediaries. Finally, the Operation IRINI is an EU naval mission that monitors the UN embargo on Libya, which was put back in place in 2020 with the aim of implementing the 2011 embargo through the use of aerial, satellite and maritime assets. In particular, the mission's objective is to carry out inspections of vessels on the high seas off the coast of Libya that are suspected of carrying arms.

The legal framework that regulates arms exports controls in the US are the Arms Export Control Act (AECA, 1976) and the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR). These laws require arms exports to be licensed by the State Department through the Directorate of Defense Trade Controls (DDTC), they prohibit sales of weapons to countries under UN embargos or those engaged in human rights abuses and, finally, they allow the US to restrict or ban the re-export of American-made weapons. As for the EU, US made arms have also been found on Libyan territory, often transferred through US allies. Most notably, the UAE has been accused of supplying these weapons, including armored vehicles and missiles, to Haftar's LNA, in clear violation of the embargo. Also, in 2019, a UN Panel of Experts report found that Chinese-made Wing Loong drones armed with American laser-guided missiles were used by Haftar's military, indicating indirect US involvement through foreign sales.

Finally, despite these legal frameworks, the arms trade in Libya remains extremely unregulated and illicit due to a number of challenges. These include the systematic violation of the UN arms embargo both by Libya and other countries such as the UAE, Turkey, Russia and Italy; the presence of militias that have taken control of weapons; and the link between arms proliferation and human trafficking since armed groups are often the same actors that are involved in human smuggling.

3.2.2 Types of weapons to both factions

During Gaddafi's regime there were more small arms in Libya than in possession of the entire British army, there is an infinite amount of small arms in Libya. [...] Gaddafi was obsessed with the purchasing of weapons, he therefore would purchase them from anyone who would sell them to him, therefore there were a lot of weapons.

As Pack affirmed during our meeting, Libya had accumulated an extensive arsenal of weapons, mainly from the Soviet Union and various European nations. From Russia alone, for example, Libya imported more than 2.000 tanks, 2.000 armored fighting vehicles, 350 artillery weapons, numerous ships and fleets of aircrafts, as reported by The Guardian. However, the majority of the stockpile consisted of small arms and light weapons (SALW), such as self-loading rifles, handguns, mortars and rocket launchers. Once Gaddafi was not in control of the armaments anymore, weapons were scattered across various regions, mainly to Niger and Chad but, in general, to West Africa, the Sahel and the Middle East.

Despite the UN embargo, various types of military equipment, including artillery, aircraft and other weaponry, have been covertly sent to Libya by external actors between 2011 and 2024, mainly to support their preferred faction. Both the GNA and the LNA received important military support - from Turkey¹⁴, on one side, and Russia, Egypt and the UAE, on the other - in the form of armored vehicles, artillery systems and small arms and light weapons.

The GNA received weapons, artillery, vehicles and aircrafts, mainly from Turkey. These included armored vehicles, notably the BMC Kirpi II and BMC Vuran mine-resistant

¹⁴ The data on arms trade from Turkey to Libya is much more accessible compared to other countries as Turkey, at some point, was open about its embargo violations.

ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles, enhancing their ground mobility and troop protection. Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aircraft were also found in Libya. Video evidence suggests that, as early as June 11, 2019, at least one TB2 was flying over Tripoli, about to land in Mitiga International Airport's military section. However, some reports estimate at least 20 TB2s supplied in 2019, replacing losses during the conflict. Furthermore, in addition to UAVs¹⁵, an Aerotranscargo Boeing 747-412 cargo aircraft, registered as ER-JAI, was tracked flying from Istanbul to Misrata on March 31, 2020. These flights are believed to have transported a mix of weapons, ammunitions and other military equipment to Libya. other reports indicate the use of Libyan Wings Airbus A300 aircraft and various Turkish cargo planes for the supposed flow of military supplies.

On the other hand, the LNA received significant military help from the UAE, Egypt and Russia. the faction received Russian-manufactured Pantsir-S1 air defense systems, as well as Mi-24 and Mi-35 attack helicopters, which were likely supplied with the backing of Moscow. Additionally, Egypt supplied Haftar's forces with armored vehicles such as the Panthera T6 and T9, and provided logistical support, including the transfer of heavy artillery.

Beyond direct military aid, covert operations and clandestine arms transfers played an important role in maintaining the conflict ignited. Several reports suggest that arms shipments reached both factions and allies, via intermediaries, despite the embargo. Investigations into maritime routes revealed that the UAE and Russia used cargo ships to deliver military hardware to LNA-controlled areas, while Turkish vessels were seen in western Libya.

3.3 Human trafficking

¹⁵ UAV stands for Unmanned Aerial Vehicle.

3.3.1 Legal frameworks: smuggling vs trafficking

Human trafficking is addressed by multiple legal instruments, with the UN and the EU playing an important role in defining the phenomenon, establishing mechanisms of enforcement and implementing policies. In Libya, the legal framework is weak and enforcement complicated by the country's ongoing conflict and the role of militias.

The UN's primary legal instruments are the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC, 2000) and its *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, which supplements the Convention. The UN Convention is a multi-lateral treaty against transnational organized crime, adopted on November 15, 2000, and also the main international instrument in this combating this fight. The agreement is also supplemented by three Protocols, which target specific areas and manifestations of organized crime: the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children; the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air; and the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition.

It is important to make a distinction between the definition of "human trafficking" and "human smuggling". The first, as defined by the Palermo Protocol (2000), is:

[...] the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

To summarize, human trafficking is described as involvement of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of exploitation, which can include sexual exploitation, forced labor or

removal of organs. On the other side, the definition of human smuggling can be found in the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air:

[...] the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident [...]

However, discourse analysis reveals that these terms are frequently blurred in political rhetoric. Their strategic use brings consequences on policy, law enforcement and humanitarian responses. States and international organizations often frame migration crises as “trafficking crises” to justify securitized border control measures and military interventions under the name of victims’ protection. This allows governments and institutions to avoid acknowledging their role in forced displacement and shift the blame on criminal networks in the region. For example, agencies such as Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, often portray irregular migration as a criminal enterprise, reinforcing the “threat” narrative, using words such as “cross-border crime”:

Cross-border crime poses a serious threat to security at the EU’s external borders and to the Union as a whole.

Libya is a crucial case study in how securitization narratives hide the interests of both state and non-state actors. The armed militias present on Libyan territory simultaneously engage in and claim to combat these activities, such as the Tariq Bin Ziyad Brigade in Benghazi and al-Kaniyat. This narrative of a “trafficking crisis” has been used by international powers, particularly the EU and Italy, to justify the funding to the Libyan Coast Guard (LCG) and the creation of detention centers.

The Secretary General Kofi A. Annan, in the introductory part of the Convention affirms that:

With the signing of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime in Palermo, Italy, in December 2000, the international

community demonstrated the political will to answer a global challenge with a global response. If crime crosses borders, so must law enforcement.

As affirmed by the UN itself, the Convention was an important step forward in the fight against transnational organized crime as states cooperate through a series of measures to tackle this problem. The creation of national criminal offenses, as well as the adoption of new frameworks for extradition, mutual legal assistance, and law enforcement cooperation are among the measures that states that ratify this instrument pledge to take in order to combat transnational organized crime. Additionally, they support training and technical assistance with the aim of enhancing the capacity of national authorities.

Furthermore, the Palermo Protocol, an annex of the UN Convention, was the first globally legally binding instrument with an agreed definition on trafficking in persons. This allowed for harmonization in regards to national laws as the protocol required state parties to criminalize trafficking, protect victims and cooperate in international investigations.

On the EU's part, human trafficking is prevented and fought through Directives, such as the Anti-Trafficking 2011/36, EU Strategy Plans, including the Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings (2021-2025), and Regulations such as the 2021/1147. Finally, considering Libya in particular, Operation IRINI (2020 – present) created a legal framework of cooperation between the EU and the UN.

In particular, the Directive 2011/36/EU, also known as the Anti-Trafficking Directive, defines human trafficking in alignment with the Palermo Protocols, requires EU MS to criminalize trafficking, ensure victim protection and provide law enforcement cooperation. Furthermore, it affirms that trafficked individuals shall not be prosecuted for crimes committed under coercion and it establishes penalties, from 5 to 10 years in prison, for trafficking offenses. Moreover, the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings (2021-2025), adopted on April 14, 2021, provides a comprehensive response to the phenomenon, which includes preventing the crime, protecting and empowering the victims and trying the traffickers before a judge. In particular, it targets supply chains,

financial flows and recruitment methods used by traffickers. This framework is closely linked to the broader EU Strategy to Tackle Organized Crime (2021-2025). EU Regulations also create a framework that aims at preventing crimes against people such as Regulation 2021/1147 which supports programs to prevent trafficking among vulnerable migrant populations and allocates funds for humanitarian aids and repatriation for victims, e.g., Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) 2021-2027.

In Libya's landscape, the Palermo Protocols were signed but the country lacks a clear domestic anti-trafficking law. Its legal system is fragmented, with overlapping authorities and militias controlling much of the country. The Libyan Penal Code (1953) criminalizes slavery and forced labor but lacks a comprehensive definition of trafficking. These types of offenses are prosecuted under laws against illegal migration rather than human rights violations. As reported by the US government, Libyan law criminalized some forms of sex trafficking but did not criminalize labor trafficking. For example, law. 19 of 1378 FDP (2010) on Combatting Illegal Migration affirms that:

Foreign illegal immigrants shall be penalized by detention with hard labour or by a fine not exceeding 1,000 LYD. In all cases, a foreigner convicted of any of the crimes set forth in this law shall be expelled from the territory of the Great Jamahiriya immediately upon execution of the sentence.

Migrants, including trafficking victims, face detention, deportation and abuse. Despite international condemnation, the Libyan government cooperates with militias, allowing them to regulate migration and security operations. Finally, the judicial system is for the main part nonfunctional due to ongoing conflict.

3.3.2 Migrants: types and definitions

At the international level, there is no universally accepted definition for "migrant"; however, the International Organization for Migration defined it as:

An umbrella term, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons.

Migration can be classified into different categories based on its causes and legal status. Two main classifications are whether it is regular or irregular and forced and voluntary.

Regular migrants	Irregular migrants
Refugees	Victims of human smuggling
Asylum seekers	Victims of human trafficking
Labor migrants	Undocumented migrants

Figure 3.2 This table represents the different types of migrants. They can be classified as regular and irregular migrants, depending on how they migrate.

This research will take in consideration irregular migration, as it is a critical security and humanitarian issue in Libya, deeply connected to transnational security policies by external actors, such as Italy, and internal issues, namely human trafficking. The EU defines an “irregular migrant” as:

In the global context, a person who, owing to irregular entry, breach of a condition of entry or the expiry of their legal basis for entering and residing, lacks legal status in a transit or host country.

Nevertheless, it is important to provide a general background on the types of migrant, in order to better understand the phenomena and its correlation with arms and human trafficking.

Libya's geographical position has made it both a key transit point and destination for different migrant populations seeking better opportunities, fleeing conflict, persecution, poverty. The period between 2011 and 2015, especially, was characterized by a significant flow of migrants reaching Libya, many of those trying to reach Europe; in 2015 alone, over 153.000 migrants arrived in Italy. Beyond the migrants looking to reach Europe, Libya has also become a destination for those seeking asylum and refuge. Here, an important distinction must be made as there is a difference between asylum seekers and refugees. While the person seeking asylum is described as (UNHCR):

An individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualized procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it.

Refugees are (UNHCR):

people forced to flee their own country and seek safety in another country. They are unable to return to their own country because of feared persecution as a result of who they are, what they believe in or say, or because of armed conflict, violence or serious public disorder.

The definition of refugee is established under international law, specifically the 1951 Refugee Convention; countries can decide to expand it to who they consider refugees but cannot limit it if they signed the Geneva Convention.

Refugees and asylum seekers, particularly from conflict zones, arrive in Libya with the hope of finding temporary accommodation. In 2023, for example, the number stood at 962.000. Unfortunately, Libya's inability to provide proper legal protection for both types of migrants led many to end up in arbitrary detention, exploited by traffickers and uncertain of their future. The UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations attempt to

provide support, though the critical issues created by a precarious situation in Libya and a state of lawlessness undermine the effectiveness of these efforts.

In parallel, Libya continues to present a large number of labor migrants, primarily from neighboring countries like Egypt, Tunisia and Chad, that choose Libya for its oil-driven economy and the demand for workers in sectors such as construction, agriculture and services. These people are defined by the IOM as:

A person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national.

These workers encounter two problems in Libya: the presence of internal conflicts that undermines their possibility to find a job and the lack of security, which entraps workers in the country, with little possibility of escape.

3.4 The self-reinforcing nature of arms proliferation and human trafficking

The availability of weapons empowers militias and criminal networks, allowing them to maintain control over illegal systems of human trafficking. In turn, the profits generated from trafficking sustain the purchase of more arms, consolidating more violence and instability in the region. This cyclical relationship became deeply rooted in Libya's security, economic and political scenario, especially after Gaddafi, making it difficult to break it off.

In terms of arms proliferation as an enabler of human trafficking, the opportunity to easily find weapons in Libya has empowered non-state actors, allowing them to gain and strengthen their control over critical migration routes and trafficking hubs, especially after Gaddafi's large armaments were raided in 2011 and dispersed across the region, including sub-Saharan Africa. The presence of weapons increases significantly the possibility of coercion by traffickers, who use firepower to impose payments, prevent the escape of migrants and intimidate rival groups. In fact, with more weapons available,

competition among militias for the control over these profitable smuggling routes intensifies, leading to escalation of even more violence and instability.

On the other side, the revenue sourced from human trafficking and smuggling serve as a financial tool for the acquisition of arms as smuggling routes of human are very profitable. Not only, they are also used to recruit fighters and to expand territorial control. This financial cycle ensures that militias can continue to sustain armed conflicts, gaining even more power and control. As trafficking routes become more militarized, the demand for weapons increases, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which the more profitable human trafficking becomes, the more arms are required to protect and maintain these operations.

At the heart of this cycle, the political and security vacuum after Gaddafi's fall. As reported by the Global Initiative (2021):

With the country awash with weapons, there was a rapid increase in criminal activity, including the radical expansion of seaborne fuel smuggling, arms trafficking, human smuggling and trafficking, as well as kidnap for ransom and muggings. [...] Militias and armed groups started funding themselves directly or indirectly through the black economy, furthering the expansion of criminality, which found fertile ground with the breakdown of state law enforcement bodies.

Furthermore, the policies, especially from Italy, of border control have inadvertently strengthened some militias by granting them control over detention centers. This newfound power and wealth were leveraged by militias to acquire more weapons.

To provide a practical understanding of this nexus, I'll report an extract of my meeting with Jason Pack. He argued:

The greater the state implosion in Libya the easier for Zuwara and Zawiya militia, because those are examples of ones that might be involved in both

arms and human trafficking, to control the territory. [...] There is a greater degree of order in some parts of western Libya, it was more difficult to do arms and human trafficking.



Figure 3.3 This map shows the cities of Zuwara and Zawiya, both in western Libya and close to the capital Tripoli. Their location make it a key node for illicit activities, by land and sea. Source: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2021).

Zuwara, being a departure point for Mediterranean migration routes, represents a hotspot for smuggling operations, as it reportedly facilitated the trade flows by controlling key trafficking routes and ensuring the passage of migrants through various checkpoints. For example, in 2016, the UN reported that Libyan militias were extremely involved in these operations as migrants were transferred from southern Libya, through the desert and to the coast, where illicit groups in towns like Zuwara would help them board overcrowded boats to Europe. An article published by Medecins Sans Frontieres in 2018 affirmed that there were about 800 migrants and refugees held in detention centers in Zuwara in inhumane conditions and reported violence and exploitation by armed groups.

Zawiya, on the other side, located further east along the coast, is another critical location for trafficking operations. Like Zuwara, Zawiya's militias have been involved in both human and arms trafficking, and even oil smuggling, often in collaboration with other local armed groups. As reported by the Chatham house (Eaton, 2023), Zawiyan armed group members have been placed under UN sanctions for their alleged involvement in human trafficking. In response, Zawiyan factions tried to present themselves as effective in countering people-smuggling to the international community; yet the flows of migrants have persisted and armed groups continued to participate in the activity. Rather than blocking the flows altogether, Zawiya's armed groups seem to have regulated the movement of people from Western Libya. This move allowed them to maintain control over the flow, through which they can receive, indirectly, the support of the international community, while still getting profits from their engagement in people-smuggling and trafficking.

Finally, as Pack affirmed, around 2013 and 2014, when there was relatively more order in parts of western Libya, Libya experienced improvement in state control over the territory. For example, in 2013, the LCG, in cooperation with EU forces, began to strengthen its presence along the coast, leading to a temporary reduction in illegal trafficking. In 2014, the EU funded operations under the Operation Triton initiative, in collaboration with Frontex, to improve border security and address human trafficking. This effort, alongside stronger military presence, rendered difficult for militias along the coast like Zuwara and Zawiya to operate without interference. Nevertheless, militias were still able to adapt to the situation by using alternative routes in less policed areas and increasing the use of more covert operations, although more difficult. Recently (February 2025), the Libyan Army's West Coast Military District announced the beginning of military operations in the city of Zuwara as "part of the decisive action to eradicate organized crime dens and confront outlaws". The target are organized crime gangs that are involved in illegal fuel smuggling, human trafficking and illegal migration.

3.5 Impact of arms proliferation on human trafficking: main migration routes

At the national level, despite the distinct characteristics and variety of actors in the region, one factor commonly undertakes the way the illicit economy developed since the revolution: illegal markets have become the key drivers of conflict. What has been underestimated is the extent to which the main coastal cities developed in recent years in new hubs of criminal activity, not only as a transit point for trafficking and smuggling, but also as illicit market on their own.

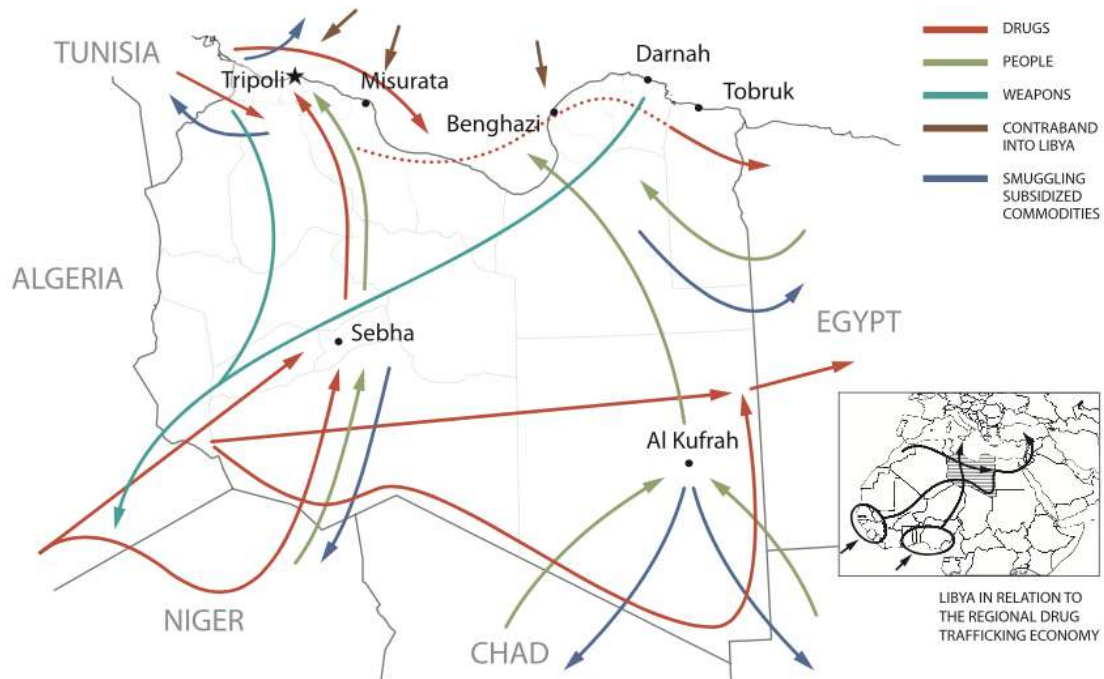


Figure 3.4 This map reports the intersection and the main trafficking routes of drugs, people, weapons, contraband and smuggling of commodities. Source: *ILLICIT TRAFFICKING AND LIBYA'S TRANSITION PROFITS AND LOSSES*. Report by PeaceWorks (2014).

People are smuggled into Libya from the southwest, southeast and across the Egyptian border, mirroring the routes used for arms and commodities smuggling. While weapons have been historically moved from Libya's coastal cities to the southwest, a newer flow of arms crosses the Egyptian border, fueling conflicts beyond Libya, including in Syria. These overlapping networks demonstrate the deep interconnection between human smuggling, arms proliferation and illicit trade, with coastal cities acting as both departure

points for weapons as well as arrival hubs for trafficked individuals and goods (Shaw & Mangan, 2014).

For example, in western Libya, the militias that controlled Zawiya, Sabratha and Tripoli, used their monopoly over the arms supplies to dominate the human trafficking routes, securing their territorial and economic gain. In the south, smuggling networks passing through countries in the Saharan region expanded migrants transport operations with the help of looted Libyan weapons and cooperation with rebel groups in Niger, Chad and Sudan (Lacher, 2020).

3.5.1 Factors inducing migration: Libya as a destination country

Libya has been, mainly since 2011, both a transit and a destination country for migrants due to its geographical location, economic opportunities and limited border control. The main factors that create migration flows to Libya are armed conflict, economic difficulties, climate change and political instability in the countries of origin. As Pack affirmed: “They migrate out of necessity, not out of desire. There is a human crisis going on”. Nine out of then migrants in Libya are from African countries, with nearly half coming from the sub-Saharan region.

One of the reasons why, if not one of the most prominent ones, people immigrate is the presence of war and violent conflict that break out in their country. In Sudan, country that shares its north-west border with Libya, the Darfur conflict (2003 - present) displaced millions due to widespread violence, forcing many to escape both to Libya and Chad. The instability in the region of Darfur led to over 11.3 million people displaced both in Sudan itself and in bordering countries; just a little less than 1 million were able to return to their homes in 2024 (UNHCR, 2025). Chad, which borders on the south with Libya, has also been affected by armed conflicts, particularly internal rebellions, jihadist violence and regional instability, especially since the early 2000s. This, alongside widespread poverty and underdevelopment, led both to internal displacement and a rise of migrants seeking refuge in Libya. Chad itself is also a transit hub for people fleeing violence in the Sahel

region. Moreover, conflicts escalated in Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Somalia experienced civil war, Islamist insurgencies and a lack of central government, which, combined with extreme droughts, led Somalis to take refuge in Kenya and Ethiopia and Libya; the latter as a transit path to Europe in this case. Ethiopia presents a similar case, particularly with the Tigray conflict (2020 – present): widespread famine and violations of human rights drove people to Libya and Sudan. Finally, akin situations can be found in Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria due to Jihadist violence and the civil war in South Sudan (2013 – 2018).

A second factor that ignites migration to Libya is monetary and it includes economic hardship and limited employment opportunities in countries like Gambia, Guinea, Senegal and Nigeria. Gambia has high unemployment rates, particularly among the youth, due to the lack of a diversified economy, reliance on agriculture and issues in the tourism sector. The IOM reported that Gambians are one of the largest groups trying to find employment abroad, including Libya. Similar situations can be found both in Guinea, which experiences high poverty rates and a fragile economy, and Senegal, which, although is one of Africa's more economically developed countries, still presents high youth unemployment. In terms of employment in Libya, according to the IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) data from previous data collection, more than half of migrants (53%) reported that they were unemployed at the time they left their country. In contrast, only 17% were without a job in Libya, indicating that many of them found it when arriving, especially Gambians.

Furthermore, only in recent years, climate change has emerged as a significant variable when looking at the causes of migration, as it worsens already existing socio-economic difficulties. In particular, in 2024, Chad experienced significant rains and floods that resulted in 341 deaths and left 1.5 million people homeless, according to a report published by the UN OCHA. In Niger, the rainy season brought severe flooding in 2024, impacting around 333.000 people, causing problems to the infrastructure, agriculture and food security. In the Sahel, the loss of essential resources intensified competition over

them, sometimes resulting in conflicts and political instability, creating even more displacement, including towards Libya.

3.5.2 Western route

The western route is the primary corridor from West and Central Africa to Europe, which includes Agadez (Niger), passes through Sabha and Bani Walid, all the way to the coastal cities of Sabratha and Zawiya, close to Tripoli, where migrants try to cross the Mediterranean to Lampedusa, Italy. Agadez has functioned as a logistical hub for trans-Saharan migration, with smugglers organizing transportation for migrants travelling north. Before 2015, it was tolerated by the Nigerian government, but international pressure, especially from the EU, led to the criminalization of migrant smuggling. Nevertheless, this policy did not stop migration but instead made it covert, making the journey more expensive and dangerous. Smugglers used remote, less policed routes into the desert that increased deaths due to dehydration, vehicle breakdowns and abandonment by traffickers (Micallef, 2017). One in Libya, migrants reach Sabha – located in the Fezzan region – is divided between two dominant ethnic groups: the Tuareg, that controlled networks in the western desert, and Tebu, operating along Chad and Sudan. These groups weaponized migration, using arms obtained from Libya's black market to enforce control over trafficking routes, detaining migrants in informal prison where they are forced to call family members to send ransom payments. Those who fail are subjected to forced labor, physical torture or sold to other traffickers (Micallef, 2017). Notably, Bani Walid, also known as the “migrant slave market”, is a location of beatings, electrocution, forced labor and death. Finally, they reach Sabratha and Zawiya, which are controlled by powerful militias that act both as traffickers and “border enforcers” for the Libyan government and the EU. For example, the al-Dabashi (Sabratha) shifted alliance to work with the Libyan Coast Guard in exchange for EU funding (Pack, 2021), and al-Nasr Brigade (Zawiya), officially aligned with Libya's Interior Ministry but secretly involved in human trafficking, running some of the most violent detention centers along the coast. As long as migration is framed as a security threat rather than a humanitarian

crisis both by internal and external actors, Libya's Western route will remain a battleground where traffickers, armed groups, and political actors profit from human suffering rather than seeking to end it.

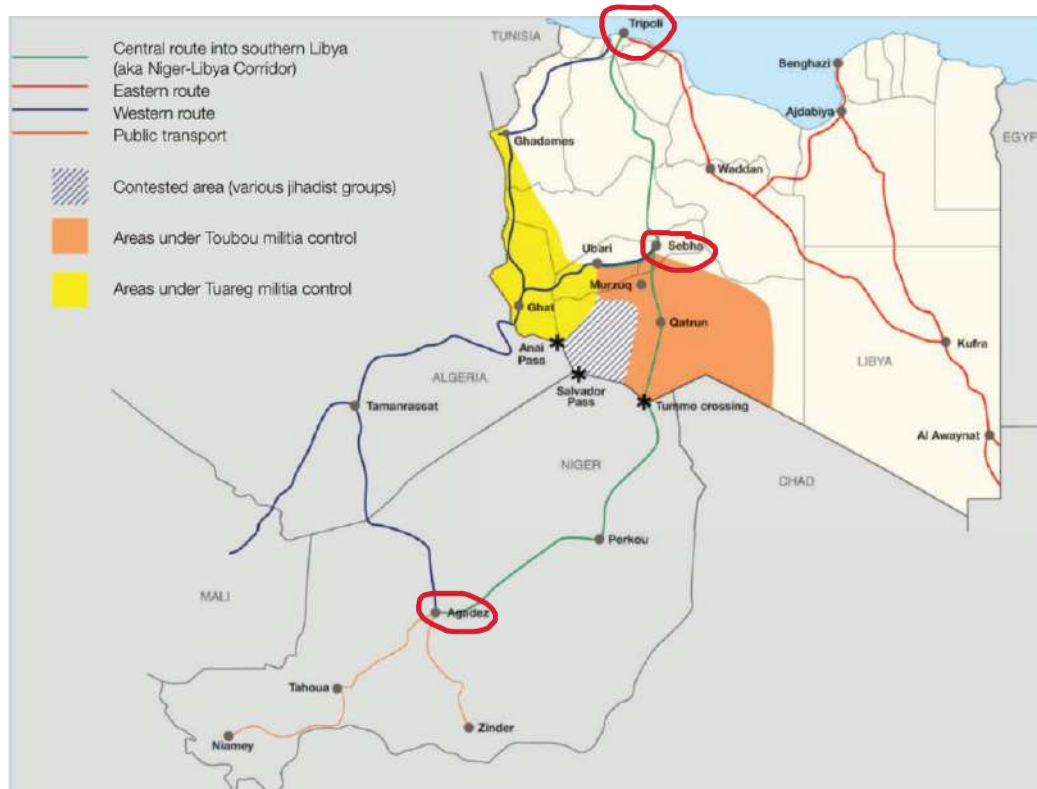


Figure 3.5 This map represents the main routes into Libya from Niger, also known as the Western route. Circled in red, the main cities mentioned above, through which migrant pass in order to reach Europe. *Source: Institute for Security Studies and The Global Initiative.*

3.5.3 Central route

The second main route through Libya is the Central one which includes Chad and Sudan, passes through Libya, and again, reaching Italy and Malta. This route is not just a migrant corridor, it is deeply intertwined with arms trafficking, as the same smuggling networks that move people, also transport weapons to Libya's ongoing conflicts (US Department, 2012).

The southern part of the path, near Chad-Libya and Sudan-Libya borders, is controlled by Sudanese and Chadian armed groups, including the Darfur rebel factions, Chadian militias and former Janjaweed fighters (Shihundu, 2021). Many of these groups found a new source of revenue in engaging both in human trafficking and arms smuggling, usually working alongside Libyan militias in Kufra and Ajdabiya. Weapons from Libya's post-Gaddafi black market reached the hands of groups in Sudan and Chad, fueling conflicts, while migrants travelling north became a source of wealth through their exploitation. The people following this route face extreme risks, such as kidnapping and extortion of ransom, and forced to contact their families for payments that can reach thousands of dollars. Those who cannot afford it are often sold to traffickers in Kufra, subjected to forced labor, sexual exploitation or transferred to detention centers controlled by Libyan militias (Micallef, 2017).

It is important to mention that men and women experience detention centers in different ways. As the IOM (2023) affirms:

There is emerging evidence, for example, that the nature of difficulties faced by migrant women are significantly different from those faced by migrant men.

As the Organization reports, there is a evident gap in the number of men and women that emigrate in Libya: men account for 87% of the adult migrant population in Libya, while women reach 13%, in 2023. However, the percentage of migrants who reported security issues as one of the top three difficulties they faced during their migration is higher in women: 29% compared to 19%. As a Nigerian woman told the ONCHR:

To be sold and forced to have sex with Arab or African men either to pay [for] the journey or to extract your money is a common thing to happen to you as a woman or a girl, all over the journey from day one in the desert until you depart Libya.

In fact, the vast majority of migrant women reported either being raped by smugglers or traffickers in Libya or witnessing other being taken away from their accommodation and returning physically hurt or distraught. In particular, Kufra is a notorious hub in which migrants are traded and exploited by human traffickers to gain profit.

As people move up north, they face issues both in Ajdabiya and Benghazi, which are areas controlled by Libyan armed factions, including Haftar's forces and local militias. Migrants are either forcibly recruited into militia ranks or, again, transferred to detention centers. Even those who manage to make it to the coast often fall into the hands of armed groups that collaborate with smugglers or security forces to maintain control over migration routes (Pack, 2021).



Figure 3.6 This map represents the main stops taken by migrants passing through the Central route to Libya, which extends approximately for 2478 km. *Source: Google Maps.*

3.5.5 Eastern route

Finally, the Eastern route that starts in the Horn of Africa, passes through Libya and reaches Europe, is one of the most dangerous paths to the Mediterranean and it is primarily used by Eritrean, Somali and Ethiopian migrants. The first stage takes migrants from these countries into Sudan, often through Kassala and Gedaref, near the Eritrean border. This corridor is highly controlled by Eritrean smuggling networks, many of whom have direct connection to Sudanese groups, such as the Rashaida Tribe¹⁶, security forces and Libyan militias. Eritreans are particularly vulnerable as they often flee from imposed indefinite military draft and severe repression (Gallagher, 2010). Migrants usually pass through Khartoum, Sudan's capital, where traffickers organized convoys to the north, mixing arms contraband and human exploitation (Shihundu, 2021). Here, Sudanese paramilitary groups, including the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), have been accused of collaborating with traffickers in exchange for bribes, allowing them to move freely to Libya (Micallef, 2017). Once in Libya, they reach Kufra, which has been mentioned for the Central route, as it represents the main transit hub for migrants, alongside Sabha. Finally, they reach the coastal cities like Tripoli, Benghazi and Ajdabiya.

Alike the Central and Western route, the Eastern one is characterized by a deep interaction between migration, arms trafficking and organized crime, including human trafficking.

¹⁶ The Rashaida are a Bedouin ethnic group in the coastal plain of the Red Sea, which includes both Sudan and Eritrea. It is also important to mention that not all Rashaida are involved in smuggling and trafficking refugees from Eastern Sudan.



Figure 3.7 This map represents the main stops taken by migrants passing through the Eastern route to Libya. To provide a measure of the route, the path from Somalia – Ethiopia – Sudan – Kufra to Tripoli extends for 4.653 km. *Source: Google Maps.*

3.6 Key case studies: main hotspots in Libya

3.6.1 Tripoli and Benghazi: the coastal area

The coastal area of Libya, particularly Tripoli and Benghazi, is an important zone in the context of Libya's political and economic scenario and, above all, the migration crisis. The role of these cities and the broader coastal region as key points for migration is shaped by their geographical location, economic opportunities and the political dynamics within Libya.

As Libya's capital and largest city, Tripoli has been the center of political power and diplomacy since Gaddafi's fall in 2011. It is still an important junction for trade,

diplomacy and migration, especially from sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the site of political rivalries, shifting alliances and armed confrontations. Tripoli's port, the industrial sector and the closeness to international trade routes make it a chosen destination by migrants, who see it as a crucial step in their journey to Europe. Nevertheless, due to its geographical and economic importance, the city is a focal point for smuggling and trafficking networks.

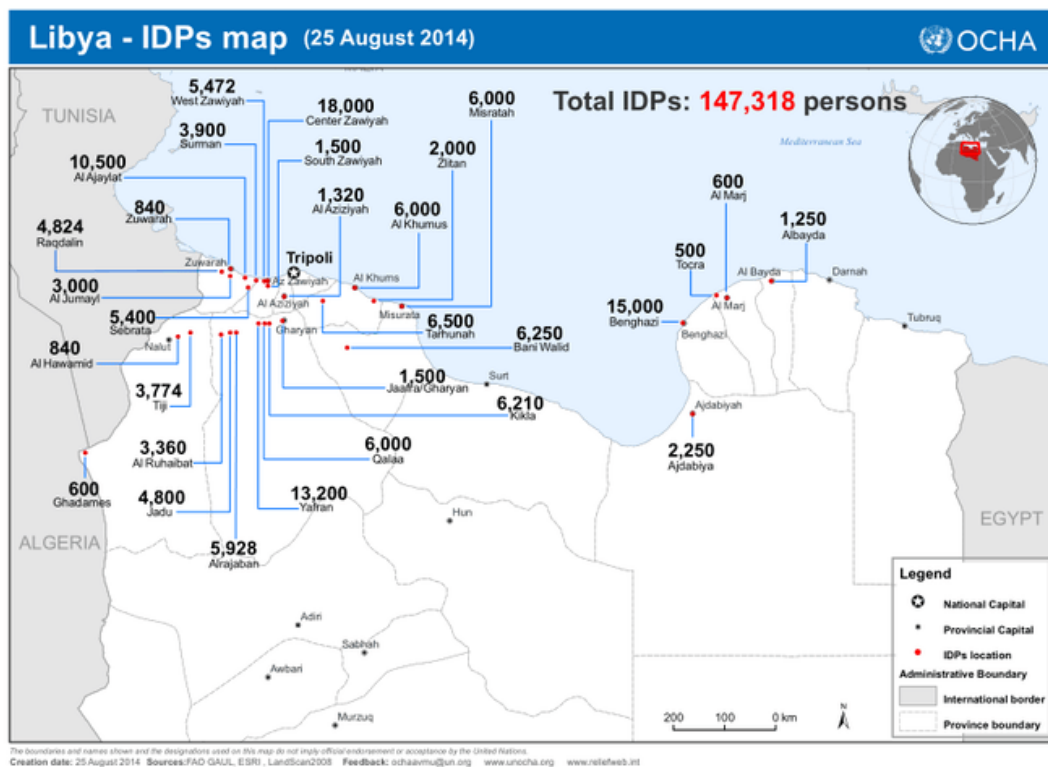


Figure 3.8 This map shows the number of Internally Displaced People in Libya, in particular close to Libya's capital, Tripoli. IDPs have been forced to flee their homes by conflict, violence, persecution or disasters, however, unlike refugees, they remain within their own country. Source: OCHA. Retrieved from ReliefWeb.

Migrants often pass through Libya with the goal of reaching the coast to board boats in order to reach Europe, mainly Italy, passing through the Mediterranean Sea, where many people lose their lives. These flows are not only a humanitarian challenge but also an opportunity for human traffickers and smugglers to exploit vulnerable people trying to

find a better life. Amadi, a 24-year-old Malian that was arrested and brought to one of Tripoli's detention centers (he cannot recall which one) told InfoMigrants that:

The guards treat us badly: they hit us for no reason. They open the cell door and just hit us. Whenever they came to the door, I hid in the back of the room so I wouldn't be beaten. There are about 350 to 400 of us in each cell, which are like giant warehouses where they pack in the migrants. They separate the whites (Egyptians, Bangladeshis...) from the blacks (East and West Africa). I don't know why.

And:

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) comes by from time to time but they don't help us much. They tell us that they will come back to help us return to our country but then we don't see them again. I know it's not their fault, they don't have enough power in Libya.

Tripoli and its surrounding area count the majority of detention centers but significant facilities can be identified. One of these is the Tajoura Detention Center, located in the east of Tripoli. In 2019, an airstrike targeted this center, resulting in the death of 53 people and 130 injuries. Survivors reported being forced to work in neighboring weapons workshops by local militias, including the LNA, indicating the presence of arms within the facility. The LNA and its foreign alliances was accused of the strike but, although it confirmed that it targeted a nearby militia position, denies to have hit the prison.

Another significant facility is the Tripoli gathering and Return Center, usually known as Al-mabani, which was established in 2020. It was integrated into the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM) and it is a department of the interior ministry. Reports confirm the use of torture, inhumane conditions, sexual abuse and forced labor. Furthermore, Amnesty International detailed the presence of armed militias that are also involved in other illicit activities such as arms production and drug distribution. Between

January and June 2021, the EU-backed Libyan coastguards intercepted around 15.000 people at sea and returned them to Libya, 7.000 of them to Al-Mabani.

Finally, the Mitiga Prison, located close to Mitiga International Airport, has been linked to severe human rights violations. The facility is reported to be controlled by armed groups that are directly linked to the Government of National Unity (GNU). Again, people that got out of the prison have noted that there were instances of torture, forced labor and sexual violence within the prison. It is believed that this prison, among others, was controlled by Osama Almasry Nijeem, who has been recently the center of media attention; which will be analyzed in the following chapter. On him, a refugee claimed:

I have seen it, several times. In both Al Jadida and Mitiga, I was in both places for several months. As soon as I arrived, he had a big stick, and he started hitting us with it.

Numerous armed groups, including those who control the Mitiga Prison, have access to sophisticated weapons. Violations of the arms embargo from Russia and Turkey brought weapons into Libya, which exacerbated the conflict, contributed to violence within detention centers, Mitiga among them, and led to a process of militarization of various factions.

Benghazi, the second-largest city in Libya, is considered both for its historical importance and as the site of considerable political and social instability. Located in the eastern part of the country, Benghazi was characterized by military clashes and revolts, particularly between the forces guided by General Khalifa Haftar, the LNA, and other local factions. The 2011 revolution began in Benghazi; after the overthrow of Gaddafi, this territory saw many conflicts, leading to different political dynamics compared to Tripoli.

While Benghazi is not as focused on migration as Tripoli is, the city is still an important location due to its closeness to the central Mediterranean and the north African smuggling routes. Its location on the coast makes it another departure point for migrants trying to

reach Europe, often passing through the eastern or central migration route. Like Tripoli, Benghazi is also a hub for trafficking and smuggling, where migrants may stay on a temporary basis before continuing their travel to cross the sea. The coastal city faces its own challenges related to the migration crisis, but due to the city's ongoing conflict and political fragmentation, the situation is more variable. The presence of armed groups and militias also complicates the efforts of international organizations to intervene and offer humanitarian assistance.

A notorious detention facility is the Ganfuda Detention Centre, controlled by militia, the Departments of Anti-Infiltration and Illegal Immigration. As of January 29, 2023, this center held 356 detainees, including 340 men, 13 women and 3 children. As of the end of 2022, across Libya, 3,489 foreign nationals were detained in centers operated by the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM), with 88% being male and 12% female, as reported by the UNHCR. Nevertheless, comprehensive annual statistics for detainee numbers in Benghazi's facilities are limited due to difficulty of access and the presence of armed militias. Regarding the EU's involvement, reports indicate that the Union supports the Libyan authorities, particularly the Libyan Coast Guard, which have "indirectly" contributed to the interception and return of migrants to Libyan detention centers, where they experience severe human rights abuses. This support has been criticized for "aiding and abetting" rights violations against migrants.

In general, Libya's coastline, stretching for more than 1700 km along the Mediterranean, is one of the most significant routes for migrants trying to cross Europe. The closeness of Libya's ports to Italy made the country a transit hub for people fleeing conflict, poverty and instability in sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the Middle East. The coastal region is heavily involved in smuggling and trafficking activities. Migrants attempting to reach Europe are often forced to pay smugglers in order to be released from detention centers and to arrange their transportation by boat. Many boats leave from various points along the coastline, particularly, as mentioned, Tripoli and Benghazi but also Zuwara and

Tobruk. These boats are often overcrowded and poorly equipped, contributing to the high death toll in the Mediterranean.

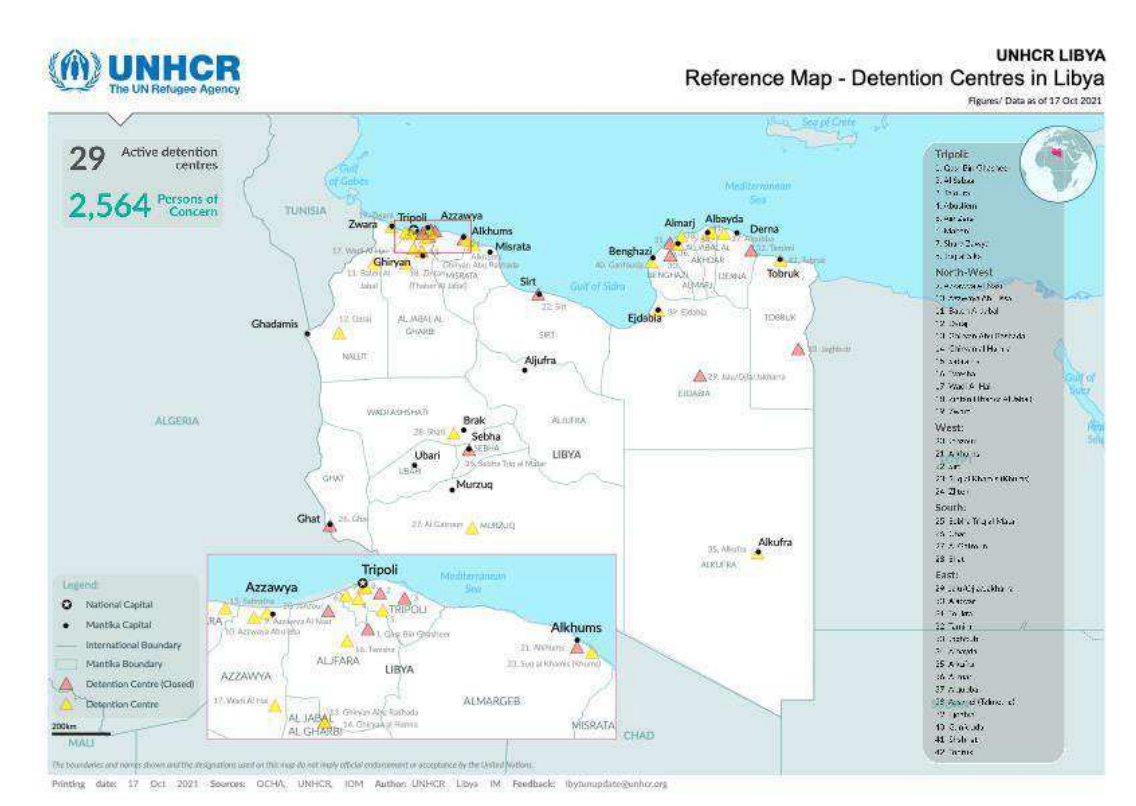


Figure 3.9 This map shows the detentions centers present in Libya, with a focus on the Tripoli area. Source: UNHCR.

The EU and various humanitarian organizations have focused attention on the Libyan coast due to the high number of migrants trying to cross the sea in hopes to find a better life. The EU attempted to address this problem, through border control policies and anti-smuggling operations like Operation Sophia, aimed at combating human trafficking. However, Libya's ongoing instability, the lack of a unified government and the presence of multiple armed factions have lessened these efforts.

Finally, the coastal area, dominated by armed groups and militias, are not only hubs for human rights abuses but also crucial zones of arms proliferation. Migrants, including

women and children, face severe exploitation, such as forced labor, sexual violence and extortion, and are often at the mercy of armed factions involved in weapons smuggling.

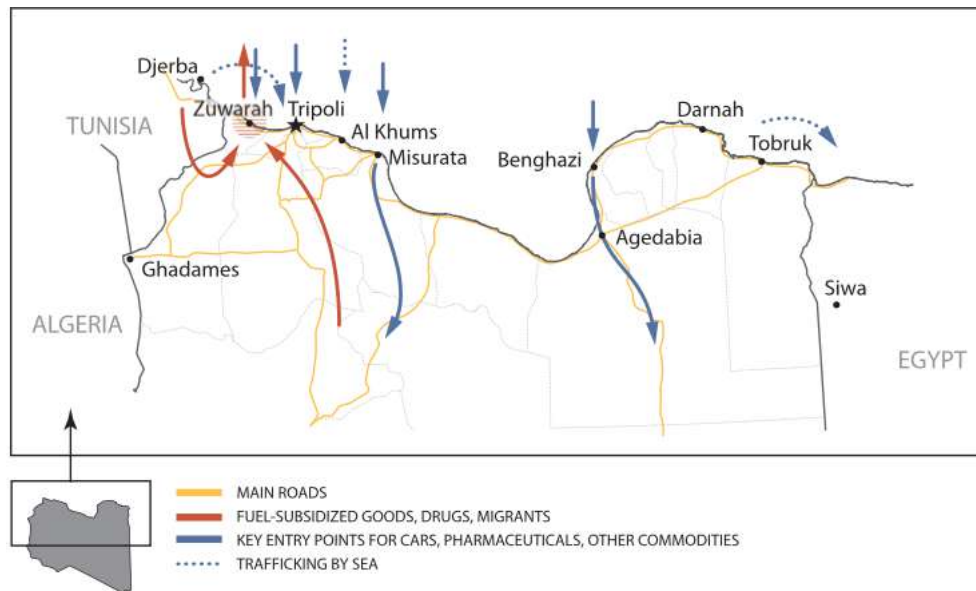


Figure 3.10 This map showcases the dynamics of Libya's coastal cities, including the main roads, the fuel-subsidized good, drugs and migrants, as well as the entry points for cars, pharmaceuticals and other commodities. Source: *ILLICIT TRAFFICKING AND LIBYA'S TRANSITION PROFITS AND LOSSES*. Report by PeaceWorks (2014).

These militias, some linked to Libya's security forces, control detention centers where trafficked migrants are held under brutal conditions. The Libyan Coast Guard, backed by EU funding and training, has been accused of intercepting migrants at sea and returning them to detention facilities.

Furthermore, Libya's coast has always been a departure point for those who wish to reach Europe due to the proximity of other countries: what is called the Central Mediterranean route. It encompasses the maritime borders of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Malta and Italy. Although it represents the final part of the long journey that migrants embark on, which usually takes from 2 to 5 years, it is also one of the deadliest and most heavily used

migration corridors in the world, contested with the eastern Mediterranean route depending on the year of report (EU, 2025).

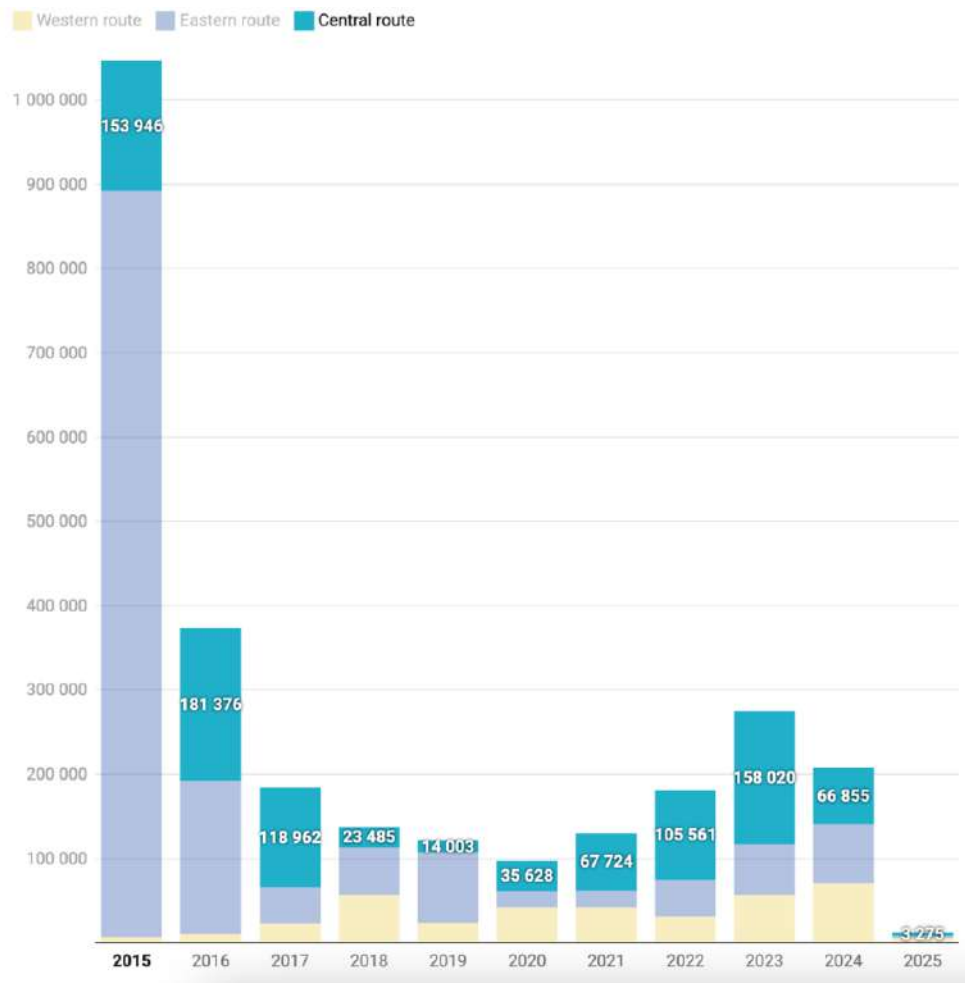


Figure 3.11 This graphic represents the three migration routes that take place in the Mediterranean: western, eastern and central. While a large migration flow from the east was registered in 2015, the central route, on average, is the most heavily travelled. Source: Council of the European Union.

As far as destination countries, the primary one is Italy for most migrants departing from Libya. The most common place migrants land in are Lampedusa Island, the closest Italian territory to North Africa, Sicily, including the major ports of Pozzallo, Augusta and Catania, and Calabria - although less common. A secondary but still significant destination is Malta but, compared to Italy, the Maltese government adopted very strict

migration policies, often not allowing people to disembark, leading to diplomatic disputes with Italy and humanitarian organizations.

The dangerousness of the crossing mainly lies in the boats that smugglers use to transport people, which are often overcrowded and very old or even inflatable, leading to frequent tragedies. In 2024 alone, more than 2.200 people lost their lives or went missing while trying to reach Europe, according to The Guardian. Moreover, since 2014, the Central Mediterranean received the title of deadliest migration route in the world, with over 17.000 recorded deaths and missing people (MMP, 2025). This is due to the length of the journey at sea, which can take days, and increasingly dangerous smuggling patterns, gaps in search and rescue capacity and restrictions on the life-saving work of the NGOs. Many boats can also depart at the same time, making it more difficult for rescuer to locate them and send personnel to help. Although the number disappearances and death are already very high, the actual figures of people that go missing is even higher. The Missing Migrants Project indicates that many ship wrecks are invisible, meaning boats in distress disappear with no survivors, and therefore go unrecorded. For example, MMP recorded hundreds of human remains found on Libyan shores that are not linked to any known ship wrecks.

3.6.2 Southern Libya and cross border smuggling

Southern Libya serves as a critical connection for cross-border trafficking, including human and arms trafficking. The region's porous borders and limited governmental control created an environment where various armed groups and criminal networks operate with limited consequences. This instability created the basis for human trafficking networks to thrive. Migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and other regions transit through this area, often are subjected to severe exploitation, as mentioned before. In 2024, Libyan authorities managed to dismantle a human trafficking network in the southwest, arresting key members accused of murder, illegal detention, torture and rape of migrants. The

investigation documented abuses affecting about 1.300 migrants, showcasing the extensive hold of these networks. As Reuters (2024) declares:

People smugglers operating with impunity in Libya have sent hundreds of thousands of migrants by sea to Europe, mainly Italy, since 2014. Thousands have died during the voyages.

Quantifying the exact number of trafficked individuals annually between 2014 and 2024 is challenging due to the clandestine and illegal nature of these operations and inconsistent reporting. On this, the Foreign Policy Research Institute affirms that:

[...] the Department was unable to give Libya a score, since, during the recording period, the UN-recognized Libyan Government of National Unity (GNU) did not exercise control over a portion of Libyan territory and the country's judicial system was not fully functioning. Because of this, it is impossible to measure the full extent of trafficking in the country. These factors, in addition to the overall political unrest and violence throughout the country, have not only prevented Libya from addressing human trafficking, but have also perpetuated the issue.

However, Libya consistently ranks among the highest globally for human trafficking incidents. The Global Organized Crime assigned Libya a score of 8.5 out of 10 for human trafficking, demonstrating a widespread and deeply rooted problem.

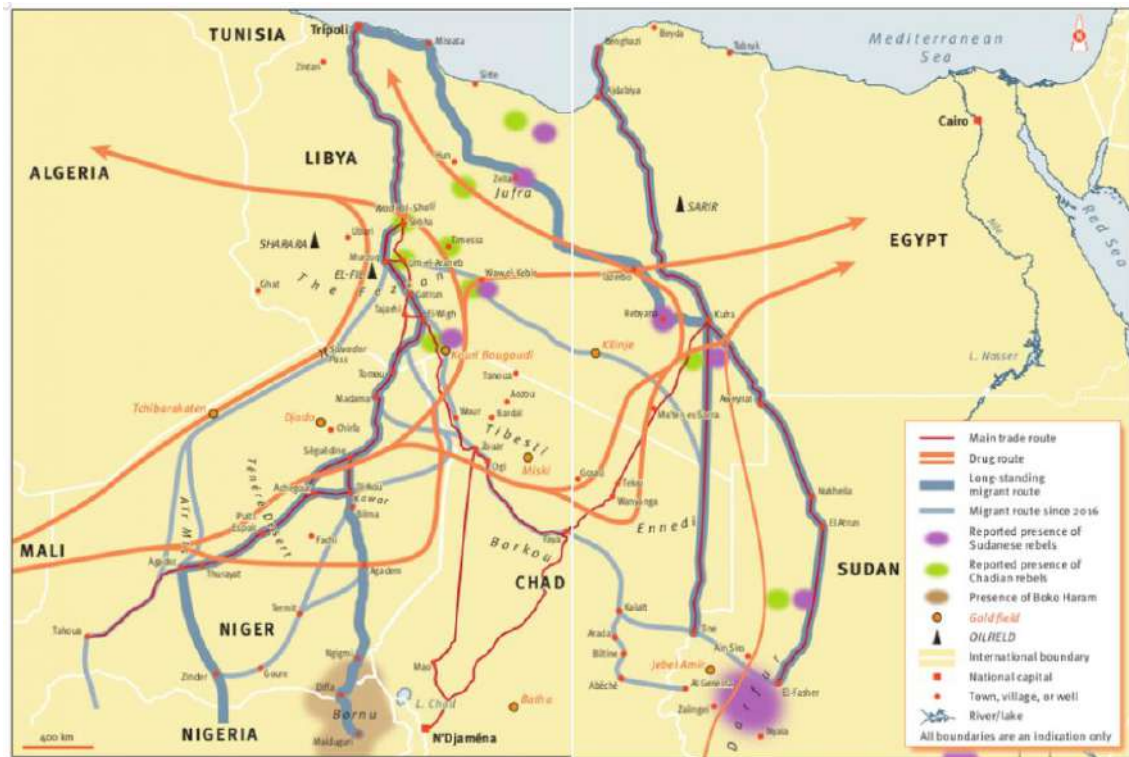


Figure 3.12 This map illustrates the main routes through which migrants and illicit networks pass. It is a representation of Southern Libya smuggling. Source: Libya Tribune.

The same conditions that help human trafficking in southern Libya also enable the proliferation of illegal firearms. Border regions are critical points for arms trafficking, with networks exploiting weak law enforcement to smuggle weapons that fuel local conflicts and terrorism. These flows not only worsen regional instability but also empower the militias and criminal groups involved in human trafficking, creating a vicious cycle of violence and exploitation.

The same smuggling corridors used for moving arms are also exploited for human trafficking (Figure 3.9). Weapons and migrants both pass through key transit hubs like Sebha, Kufra and Ghatrun before reaching coastal cities like Tripoli, Benghazi and Misrata. Cross-border arms shipments often follow migrant smuggling routes into Libya from Niger, Chad, Sudan and Egypt, taking advantage of the weak controls along the borders and the influence of armed groups over these areas, such as the Sudanese and

Chadian rebel groups. Furthermore, as shown on the map, key smuggling zones align with Libya's oilfields and gold fields, suggesting that illicit incomes from arms and human trafficking also fuel extractive economies that fuel conflict.

Arms trafficking fuels human trafficking by providing militias and smugglers with firepower that is needed to secure and control the smuggling routes, detention centers and extortion networks. The profits accumulated from human trafficking, at the same time, are often invested into purchasing arms from illegal markets, strengthening militia control; making the two networks self-reinforcing.

CHAPTER IV: THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS IN THE REGION AND THEIR INTERESTS

4.1 The EU and Italy

Ever since the 2011 uprisings and the subsequent death of Gaddafi, the European Union (EU) and Italy have engaged in diplomatic relations with Libya, mainly driven by migration concerns and regional stability. Italy, alongside Turkey, Qatar, Germany and the UK, support the UN-led government GNA. Because of Rome's support to the GNA, the Haftar's guided government openly labeled Italy as an enemy, as of 2016; Haftar supporters can be seen burning an Italian flag to protest this alliance.

By applying the securitization framework, these rapports reveal how migration has been framed as a security threat, leading to policy measures in line with this approach. Within the context of the global enduring disorder (Pack, 2021), a scenario marked by persistent geopolitical instability, these relations are further complicated, revealing the underlying interests of the EU, and especially Italy, in the region. Finally, the discourse analysis showcases the narratives that have shaped policies and public perceptions regarding Libya.

Italy, due to its geographical position, experienced a significant inflow of migrants in the period post-Gaddafi, leading to the portrayal of migration as an important security issue. This securitization approach is clear when looking at Italian political discourse, where migration is frequently linked to national security threats, justifying stricter border controls and collaboration with Libyan authorities to regulate the flow of migrants.

Diplomatic relations between the EU, Italy and Libya have been significantly influenced by this securitized perspective (Buzan et al, 1998). A pivotal year was 2017, when the Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Libya was drafted, which aimed at

combating illegal migration, human trafficking and increase border security and control. Despite criticism of human rights violations, the MoU was renewed in 2020, demonstrating the prioritization of migration control over addressing humanitarian issues.

At the EU level, the 2017 Malta Declaration laid down the measures to curb migration flows from Libya into Europe. This plan included training and equipping the Libyan coastguard, disrupt smuggling networks and enhancing support for local communities to improve socio-economic conditions of the population. These policies showcase the strategic shift towards externalizing border control by empowering Libyan authorities to manage migration before it reaches European shores.

Furthermore, the concept of the global enduring disorder (Pack, 2021) contextualizes these diplomatic strategies within the broader framework of ongoing geopolitical instability. Libya is the prime example, or microcosm as Pack calls it, of this disorder, dealing with long-standing internal conflict and the involvement of different external actors that promote conflicting interests. This intricate and chaotic scenario complicates diplomatic relations, as the EU and Italy act in a landscape where traditional state structures are either not present or very weak and where non-state actors have considerable power. These conditions make it more difficult for EU and Italy to operate effectively using conventional diplomatic strategies, leading to the adoption of adaptive approaches to address the nexus between security, migration and regional stability.

In recent years, Italy tried to redefine its rapport with Libya through the “Mattei Plan” (Piano Mattei), an initiative named after the founder of the energy company ENI. Proposed in 2024 at the Italy-Africa Summit, the program focuses on establishing equitable partnerships with African countries, focusing on energy cooperation, economic development and addressing the root causes of irregular migration. Through the Mattei Plan, the two countries signed a declaration that promotes economic and industrial cooperation in energy, critical raw materials and green technology sector with the aim at stabilizing Libya, reduce migration pressures and position itself as an energy hub for Europe. On the economic side of the relations, Italy’s priority was to maintain stable

energy supply from Libya, which found its practicality under the agreement between Eni and Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) in January 2023. This agreement aimed at developing two offshore gas fields, enhance gas output for both Libya's domestic market and exports to Europe.

Finally, Italy's relations with Libya also delve into arms trade, demonstrating the complex interplay between economic interests and security issues. Between 2007 and 2010, Libya signed substantial arms transfer agreements with major European suppliers, including Italy. These deals were part of a larger effort to strengthen bilateral ties and secure access to Libya's energy resources. The 2011 NATO intervention and subsequent arms embargoes put a stop to the arms trade but reports speculate that illegal firearms transfers had been made, contributing to regional instability. In 2017, for example, Italian nationals were accused of illegal arms exports to Libya and Iraq, highlighting ongoing challenges in controlling arms proliferation.

4.1.1 The economic exploitation of Libya: oil and energy deals

Italy and Libya always maintained a somewhat stable relation in terms of economic deals, both during and after Gaddafi's regime. A series of agreements were made on oil and energy resources, which reflect the connection between economic interests, security concerns and geopolitical dynamics. Throughout Libya's history, oil and gas were used both as an economic revenue and as political leverage, which shaped the country's economy and international relations, particularly with Italy.

The securitization framework demonstrates how Italy framed its energy dependence on Libya as a national security concern. Political rhetoric highlights the necessity of stable energy imports to maintain national security and economic stability. This framing justifies Italy's engagement in Libya's energy and oil sector, despite the country's internal issues and political instability, and it therefore shapes the policies that prioritize maintaining energy resources. Furthermore, applying the rentier state theory, Libya's economy is mainly reliant on oil revenues. This dependency can lead to economic

fragility, as it happened during the '90s, and governance challenges, as the state focuses on resource extraction it may under develop other sectors. Italy's energy agreements with Libya indirectly led to reinforce the rentier state dynamics by perpetuating its dependence on oil exports. In fact, to provide some figures, in 2023, hydrocarbons accounted for about 60% of Libya's GDP, 94% of exports and 97% of government revenues, as reported by the World Bank. The global enduring disorder theory can also further explain Libya's economic landscape: the chaotic environment complicates Italy's energy agreements as it interacts with a fragmented political landscape where control over oil resources is fought for. For example, in February 2025, Arkenu Oil Company, a private Libyan firm connected to Haftar, began exporting oil independently (7.6 million barrels of Libyan oil to be exact), without sending the revenues worth at least €600 million to the Central Bank of Libya. Finally, discourse analysis accentuates that the portrayal of energy agreements as straightforward economic partnerships may hide the underlying political dynamics and the risks associated with dealing with an unstable context. This approach is used to reassure domestic audiences and international partners of the legitimacy and stability of these agreements, even if the internal realities are different.

One of the most significant post-2011 energy agreements between Italy and Libya is the January 2023 gas production deal between Eni and the National Oil Corporation (NOC). The \$8 billion deal aims at developing two offshore gas fields¹⁷ in Libya's Mediterranean waters, increasing gas production both for internal use and to export it to Europe. This agreement is particularly important after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as part of Europe's energy diversification strategy. A second project was resumed between Eni and BP, a British oil company, after stopping the operation in 2014. Onshore drilling and extraction are expected to increase Libya's oil production and potentially increase revenues and economic stabilization.

¹⁷ Also known as "Structures A&E". The fields are expected to produce 800 million cubic feet of gas per day.

In 2023, Libya's oil revenues were estimated to be \$30 billion, as reported by the U.S. Energy Information Administration; the vast majority of crude oil was purchased by Europe, reaching around 78% of the total exports from Libya. Italy, in particular, accounted for about one-third (33%) of Libya's total crude oil exports, making it one of the largest importers of Libyan oil. This new flow of revenues into Libya, especially after 2020, allowed the economy to breathe, but the rentier state dynamics stopped meaningful economic diversification.

In fact, the state kept control over the economy, with a limited growth in the private sector¹⁸ and in diversification. Furthermore, as a rentier state, Libya uses most of its income to maintain the political status quo, distributing oil revenues to keep a balance of power. However, internal divisions of factions that compete for control over oil production sites have caused interruptions to the extraction and distribution. For example, in August 2024, allies of Khalifa Haftar tried to shut down the El Sharara oil field, the largest one in Libya and operated by Spain, in response to an arrest warrant issued by Spain for his son over alleged weapons smuggling, showcasing the weak stability in Libya. These internal disruptions due to the rentier state model can also be transposed internationally. While agreements between Italy and Libya offer economic instability, they also reinforce the latter's dependency on European markets, limiting their bargaining power. Finally, the majority of oil revenues benefit small circles, figures like Haftar receive unofficial percentages of it; oil wealth is diverted through informal or illegal channels rather than being recorded by the state. As reported by the IPS Journal (2024):

Haftar unofficially received a cut of Libya's oil production, which is being smuggled into neighbouring countries. His troops also control the migration routes and the gold mines in the south-east of the country. These off-the-record revenues go directly towards

¹⁸ The public sector employs around 85% of the active labor force.

expanding Haftar's military and the state-run Libyan Development and Reconstruction Fund led by his son.

4.1.2 Mediterranean crossroads: Italy's migration policies and their impact on Libya

Between 2011 and 2016, Libya experienced a rapid expansion of migrant smuggling networks, which, in turn, increased the number of people moving through Libya and sometimes towards Italy. This led Italy to create policies based on border control and externalization. Italy's primary goal was to prevent people from reaching its shore, giving money to Libyan authorities to increase surveillance and enforcement. On this, during the meeting with Jason Pack, he affirmed:

There is no doubt that the Italian government, all the way to Renzi, which was a long time ago, but also Paolo Gentiloni - pretty much every Italian leader in the post-Gaddafi period - wishes to prevent migrants from flowing through to Italy because it's a domestic political issue and moves populist to the right.

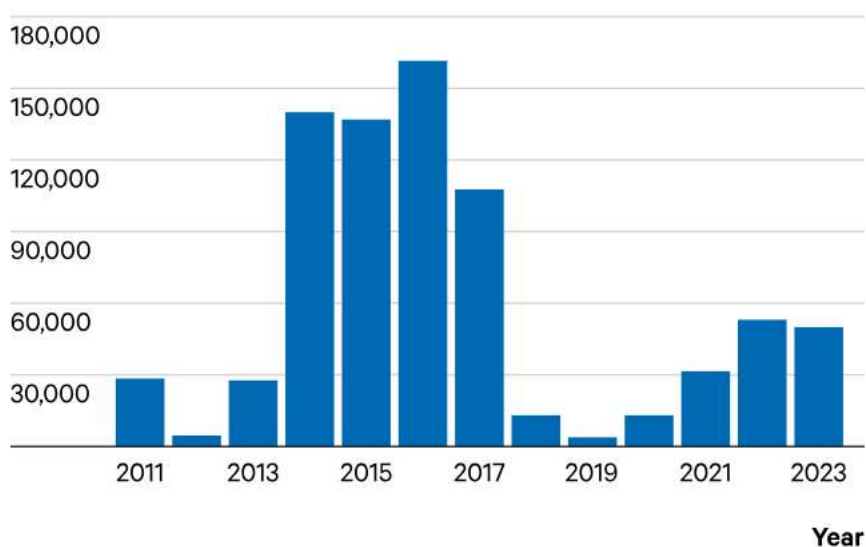
Italy's role in Operation Sophia (2015 – 2020), an EU military operation which aimed at invalidating migrant smuggling routes, signaled a significant effort in externalizing Europe's border control efforts in Libya. However, this cooperation was weakened by internal chaos, namely the presence of militias and factions (Lutterbeck, 2018). Furthermore, a MoU was signed in February 2017 between Italy and Libya to manage migration flows, especially from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe via Libya, through improving Italy's surveillance systems, training the Libyan Coast Guard to help control migration and funding detention centers to deter migrants from trying to cross the sea by allocating €32.6 million. The securitization was evident as migration was treated as a security threat to Europe, leading to more border control policies.

On the EU side, it is working to protect migrants and refugees and support local communities in Libya, while trying to reduce illegal migration through border control and anti-smuggling and trafficking of humans. In light of this, it created the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (2015 – 2021) in November 2015, which mobilized around €465 million in projects on “community stabilization”, “protection” and “border management”. It contributed to the return of 56.500 migrants to their country of origin with reintegration support and the evacuation of more than 7.500 refugees and asylum seekers out of Libya. However, this fund was criticized as the objectives and priorities were kept too broad, the job creation overstated and the monitoring of human rights violations weak. Furthermore, the EU signed the Malta Declaration in February 2017, a project that aimed at limiting the flow of illegal migrants to Italy by providing training to the LCG, as well as ships to the Libyan authorities. It also focused on intensifying the fight against smuggling networks and setting up reception structures for migrants in Libya. Three years after, the International Vice-President of SOS Mediterranee declared that:

With the Malta Declaration, the European Union has laid the foundation for a massive breach of international law, financed by European taxpayers' money.

In fact, the organization witnessed the LCG intercept people at sea and then bringing them back to the Libyan coast, instructed by the Tripoli Rescue Coordination Centre, even though maritime and international law demand that people are brought to a safe place, which Libya was not. Around 39.000 people have been brought back between 2017 and 2020.

Arrivals to Italy from Libya



Source: UNHCR

Figure 4.1 This chart represents the number of arrivals to Italy from Libya. In 2011, approximately 28,500 migrants arrived in Italy via the Mediterranean route. This number increased to nearly 163,000 in 2016. Following various policy interventions and agreements, arrivals decreased to 108,409 in 2017 and further to 12,977 in 2018. In subsequent years, the numbers fluctuated, with 49,740 arrivals in 2023. As of December 2024, a total of 30,147 migrants had made the journey from Libya to Italy. Source: Chatam House, retrieved from UNHCR.

Finally, the EU and Italy's collaboration with Libyan authorities has indirectly empowered local militias and non-state actors, who exert control over detention centers and migrant smuggling routes, leading to more and more human rights violations.

4.1.3 The EU and Italy on arms exports to Libya

When looking at Italy's approach to defense and military exports, it is important to keep in mind article 11 of the Italian Constitution which states that Italy "rejects war". Furthermore, Italy is recognized as a key provider of peacekeeping forces to UN, the EU and other international missions. The country is also signatory of the 2013 ATT and recognizes EU legislation that denies weapons licenses to countries in conflict or that

breach international law, transposed in Italy by law 185/90 on *New provisions on controlling the export, import and transit of military goods*, and also in line with Article 51 of the UN Charter. However, civil society and international control bodies criticized national and international legislation for a lack of transparency, for the presence of loopholes and an absence of clarity in the annual report on military transactions¹⁹, as well as weak knowledge on end-user destinations and export licenses.

A number of international monitoring initiatives have been launched at the EU level. For instance, the Lighthouse Reports and the Global Legal Action Network developed the EU arms website, which investigates on EU arms deliveries and the issues with end-user accountability over their use. Another example is the Transparency International's Government Defence Integrity Index which affirms that:

Parliamentary oversight remains relatively poor and [...] defence procurement is highly secretive and vulnerable to the influence of powerful industry actors, while anti-corruption standards on operations are extremely poor.

When a company or a state buys a weapons system, they are also paying for post-salve services, i.e., future updates, structural training and a scheme for maintenance. In practice, these services have created continuing, large-scale and routine dependance between EU supplying states and companies and abusive end-users. As the EU arms website claims, through these “invisible links”, EU companies and states indirectly supported violations of international law, such as war crimes and proxy wars. These activities remain covert from the public and are under-regulated both by national and international law, regardless

¹⁹ The law requires the Italian government to deliver an annual report on all authorized military transactions, i.e., type of military equipment, quantity, monetary value, to Parliament.

of their scale or consequences. It is important to note that these post-sale activities, are a backbone of the arms industry and a major source of its global revenues.

Although the data is limited on post-sale services, the Lighthouse reports that there was a significant increase in “other” expenditures in 25 EU countries, of almost 20% between 2012 and 2018. Furthermore, between 2006 and 2014, “operations and maintenance²⁰” expenses accounted for the second largest are of defense budget expenditures by 27 EU countries, indicating that the relationship between arms producers and buyers goes well beyond the initial sale.

Taking in consideration Italy, although it is one of the largest arms exporters in the world, Italy has not exported weapons to Libya since 2013 as it complied with the UN and EU imposed arms embargo on Libya. Despite the official alt to exports, reports of Italian weapons reaching Libya have surfaced, leaving a gray area around the arms trade. Back in 2011, a substantial stockpile of weapons has been removed from an Italian arms deposit but the Italian government did not issue a statement about it. The weapons were moved around the time Italy change position on Libya during the civil war, after a call by President Obama. The weapons could have reached the hands of the rebels, which would have violated the embargo.

Another example of possible collusions between Italian entities and Libya occurred between March and July 2018. An investigation published in 2020 by “Il Fatto Quotidiano” found that ten Italian navy personnel, plus an official from the LCG, were accused of illicit trade of goods and weapon repairs for the Libyans. The journalists found that cigarettes were being smuggled from Libya, but it also uncovered that the Italian military allegedly carried out repairs of arms, in violation of the international embargo.

²⁰ Maintenance includes: repair and overhaul of military equipment, providing replacement parts and logistical support.

Not knowing he was being listened to, Marco Corbisiero, a Navy Official, affirmed (translated and paraphrased):

It's all illegal [...] We did the Libyan weapons repair, despite the embargo [...] if this thing comes out, it's a mess [...] so we went to make the supports of the arms to the ships.

To this, the Navy has never relied nor offered an alternative explanation. That same year, the Ministry of Defense allowed 121 licenses for the “supply of training and maintenance services” that were worth more than €645 million, mainly to Leonardo S.p.A. (62) and Rheinmetall Italia (12).

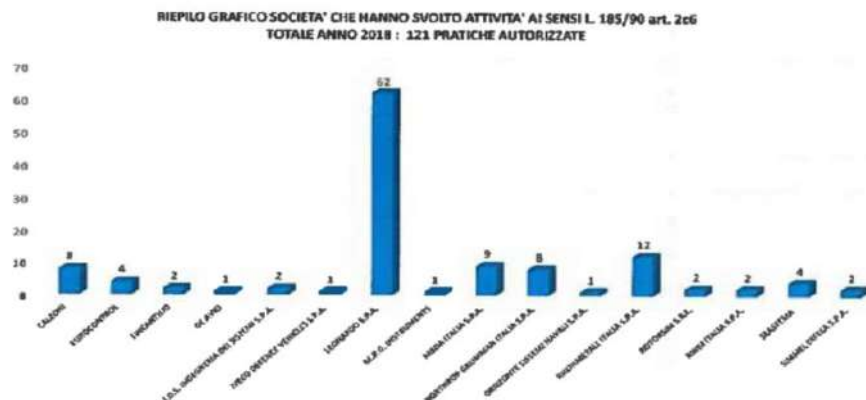


Figure 4.2 This image represents the graphic summary of companies that carried out activities under art. 185/90 in 2018. Leonardo S.p.A. counts for the majority of licenses granted, which stands at 62. Source: UN Security Council S/2019/914.

Another case that involved the Navy, but that is much less detailed, occurred in December 2017 and January 2018, when it was found in violation of paragraph 9 of Resolution 1970 (2011) covering, air and aviation violations, land service equipment, as it made maintenance work to vessels Capri (A5353) and Tremeti (A5349).

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Table 27.3
Maritime non-compliances

Generic Type	Means / Equipment	Responsible party(ies) in non-compliance with paragraph 9 to 1970 (2011)	Remarks
Military support	Landing Ship Tank <i>Ibn Ouf</i> (L132)	* Italian Navy ^a	* Maintenance work to an armed naval vessel in December 2017 and January 2018.
Transportation	MV <i>Amazon</i> (IMO 7702657)	* Akdeniz Roro Deniz Tasimaciligi Turizm Sanayi ve Ticaret Ltd STI (Turkey)	* Moldova forcibly removed the vessel's flag status on 25 May 2019. * Provisionally registered with Togo International Registration Bureau on 14 June 2019. * Togo cancelled the provisional registration on 20 August 2019.

^a Italian vessels *Capri* (A5353) and *Tremeti* (A5349).

Figure 4.3 This table represents the maritime non-compliances with paragraph 9 of resolution 1970 (2011) covering, air and aviation violations, land service equipment violations and maritime violations identified or confirmed by the UN Panel of Experts in 2019. The Italian Navy was found to have done maintenance work to an armed vessel in December 2017 and January 2018. Source: UN Security Council S/2019/914.

In general, the Italian involvement in Libya was shaped by economic and geopolitical interests. Italy has been one of the most open European supporters of the GNA, which translated in military cooperation, such as the deployment of military advisers and training of personnel; aimed at lowering Haftar's power. Italy was also very involved in the Operation "Sophia" (2015 – 2020) whose objective was disrupt human trafficking and smuggling activities in the Mediterranean. The country had a key role in its execution, deploying naval assets to monitor the sea. Finally, Italy kept military bases in Libya, particularly in Misrata and Tripoli, which have been used to support the GNA, including air support in the form of airstrikes and logistical assistance, both to help counteract Haftar's forces and extremist groups in the region. The Libya Review (2023) reported that for several years, an Italian military mission has been present within Misrata airbase, consisting of over 300 soldiers which entered the territory under the guise of providing medical aid to government forces fighting in Sirte in 2016.

4.2 International organizations

4.2.1 The consequences of NATO's involvement in 2011 and today

In 2011, NATO initiated and successfully conducted an intervention aimed at protecting civilians under Gaddafi's regime. Despite the achievement of the immediate goal, the long-term consequence, due to a lack of planning, was a power vacuum characterized by political fragmentation and civil discontent. This gap resulted in the proliferation of armed militias and a lack of centralized government, leading to a lack of security in the region. The absence of a cohesive post-intervention strategy has been criticized for worsening the situation in Libya. Two main critiques have been moved on NATO: some say that the Alliance has expanded its goal from civilian protection to regime change, stretching its UN mandate, others blame it for the current state of chaos and instability post-2011. Nevertheless, by most, the operation was archived as a success as no allied lives were lost and its price stood just at \$1.1 billion.

The narrative on NATO's intervention changed and evolved over time. This discourse reflects the wider debates on the effectiveness and ethics of military interventions, even if done in the name of "export of democracy", without a detailed post-conflict measures and strategies.

Following the intervention, NATO's direct presence and involvement in Libya lessened significantly. As of now, there are no direct military operations taking place in the country. However, it continues to engage with Libya by providing some form of assistance, mainly in the areas of security and governance. The Alliance provided training and assistance to Libyan security forces, focused on border security, counterterrorism and defense reform: these efforts help Libya create a more capable and professional security sector with the aim of stability²¹. Furthermore, it expressed support to the UN's resolution to mediate in the region and help create a political settlement for the ongoing conflict.

²¹ This type of support is offered through NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, a partnership initiative designed to strengthen ties with non-NATO members in the region, including Libya.

NATO's involvement also includes wider regional security concerns, especially in the Sahel and the Mediterranean. It collaborates with international institutions and partners in the region, including the EU and the African Union, in order to address important issues, i.e., terrorism, human trafficking and arms smuggling. Finally, the Organization has the role of advisor in terms of helping Libya with defense sector reforms and rebuilding the military and security system.

It goes without saying that all these efforts are limited by the internal divisions that are present to this day and the instability that characterizes Libya ever since 2011. NATO is not taking in consideration direct military involvement, as the scenario in the region is still complex and difficult to govern.

4.2.2 The mediator: United Nations' efforts to stabilize the region

The Security Council of the UN instituted a sanctions regime that included an arms embargo, assets freezes and restrictions on oil exports in order to prevent armed groups to benefit from the system. Over the years, these measures changed in response to changes in the Libyan landscape. Other than the Resolutions approved in 2011, the UN each year, extended the mandate for the following period, including UNSCR 2292 in 2016, which also authorized the inspection of ships that were suspected of carrying illegal weapons; 2702 (2023), which broadened its reach to support Libya's political transition and national reconciliation efforts; and finally, 2769 (2025) which imposed new sanctions for individuals engaged in the illegal trade of oil, allowed the investment of its frozen assets, and exempted specific operations from the arms embargo on Libya.

Furthermore, the UN established the Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) in 2011, whose job is to sustain an inclusive Libyan-led political process, also to facilitate the elections, and to support the implementation and monitoring of the Libyan Ceasefire Agreement of October 23, 2020. Finally, it conducts human rights monitoring and reporting and helps consolidate the governance, security and economic arrangements.

From a discourse analysis perspective, UN officials framed Libya's crisis as political, rather than purely as a security problem. Recently, the UN put out statements that emphasize governance and institution-building as the foundation for peace, recognizing that without political legitimacy, stabilization efforts will be more difficult. However, the global enduring disorder model suggests that external diplomatic efforts by themselves cannot prevail the deep-rooted problems that continue to destabilize Libya, worsened by the presence of armed factions.

Finally, given Libya's rentier state model economy, the UN tried to regulate oil exports to prevent illicit revenue from financing militias. The Council's Panel of Experts has documented on smuggling networks that erode Libya's economy and contribute to instability. Nevertheless, while sanctions aim at lessening these activities, their enforcement remains still very difficult due to limited monitoring capacity. Security sector reform has also been another priority. The UN had a role in the negotiations towards the unification of the armed forces but local powers deviated these efforts; this can be explained through the securitization framework, i.e., different factions justify their control over security forces by presenting as protects against external threats, making their disarmament politically expensive. Moreover, foreign interventions played a contradictory role, in fact, while the UN aims at stability, other actors, such as Russia, Turkey and the UAE, have supported rival factions, complicating the situation. this also reinforces the concept of the enduring disorder.

4.3 The US

4.3.1 The "leading from behind" strategy in Libya

The United States has played an important role in Libya, ever since 2011, engaging in military operations, political mediation and economic assistance. During the intervention in 2011, the Obama administration used a "leading from behind" strategy: it provided support through intelligence, logistics and airpower, without taking direct leadership over the military campaign, allowing European countries – mainly UK and France - to have

the public role. The aim of this was to reduce US military exposure, particularly after invading Afghanistan and Iraq, and costs while still reaching strategic objectives.

After the fall of Gaddafi, the US still maintained ground in Libya, particularly in counterterrorism operations, such as the Operation Odyssey Lightning (2016) and airstrikes against ISIL militants. While the “leading from behind” strategy was mostly operated in 2011, its logic remained in the counterterrorism operations, as the US carried out precision strikes but avoided large-scale military commitments.

Politically, the US maintained its presence in diplomatic efforts to stabilize Libya, working through the UN. Washington recognized the GNA in 2015, as it backed the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), which was seen as a critical step towards resolving Libya’s political crisis at the time. Moreover, the Biden administration emphasized the need for new elections and supported UN efforts to resolve issues over the country’s political future; leveraging its influence to reinforce the UN efforts that were aimed at facilitating the electoral process. Despite internal challenges, the US advocates for a way to unify Libya’s institutions and promote a peaceful resolution to the ongoing instability.

Finally, the US’ presence in Libya was initially (2011) framed as in humanitarian terms, as President Obama said:

Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different.

However, as the post-intervention instability got worse, the narrative changed. Obama himself said, years later in 2016, that the lack of a post-conflict plan was the “worst mistake” of his presidency. Since 2017, US officials framed their involvement through counterterrorism and regional stability, not referring to any ambition for nation-building.

Nevertheless, as of today, the US is a key provider of finances towards humanitarian causes in Libya, which were in support of the economic struggles due to the weaknesses of the rentier state model. For example, the US provided over \$900 million in aid since

2011, including humanitarian relief and development assistance, as reported by the US Department of State.

4.3.2 Economic and political interests: oil and arms trade

The US interests in Libya are both economic and political, including energy resources, arms flows and broader geopolitical concerns. In particular, Libya's large oil and gas reserves have been central in the American foreign economic policy. The US, in fact, has always expressed interest in maintaining the flow of Libyan oil to international markets, understanding its importance for global energy stability. This is transposed through the involvement of US oil companies in Libya, such as the ConocoPhillips, which owns 16.3% of Libya's Waha concessions: around 13 million acres of land. The situation in Libya, however, has often caused problems to oil production and distribution, scattering global oil prices and supply chains. For example, on August 26, 2024, internal political tensions led to lower extraction rates, with an output of circa 1.18 million barrels per day in July. On this Reuters reported:

Oilfields in eastern Libya that account for almost all the country's production will be closed and production and exports halted, the eastern-based administration said on Monday, after a flare-up in tension over the leadership of the central bank.

Nevertheless, the average crude oil exports remain somewhat stable, with a decrease of just 2% in 2024, compared to the year before. These issues demonstrate how Libyan oil can be used as political leverage, as internal actors guide the narrative but it also highlights the strategic importance of energy resources from Libya for the US.

Furthermore, in terms of the arms industry, despite maintaining its support for the embargo, the US occasionally considered sending weapons into Libya to support the GNA. Trump surprisingly followed along this approach for two years, although promoting a less active engagement, focusing on counterterrorism cooperation with the

GNA, without getting more involved in Libya's internal affairs. Later on, in 2019, he shifted his support to the LNA.

In an instance back in 2019, US made weapons, which were sold to the UAE in 2008, were found in the hands of loyalists of General Haftar. The GNA said that among the armaments they seized, they discovered US-made Javelin anti-tank missiles with the label "armed forces of the United Arab Emirates". It is plausible that these weapons were originally sold to the UAE, a major buyer of US weapons and one of Haftar's main international supporters, in 2008. This goes to show that even if the initial intent was not to arm Libyan factions by the US, sometimes the flow of weapons indirectly supplies opposing forces.

By 2020, as Libya's situation escalated into a proxy war that involved foreign partners such as Turkey, the UAE and Russia, the US became more polarized, criticizing violations of the arms embargo; this was supported in 2021 by the Biden Administration. In 2025, Resolution 2769, backed by the US, proposed possible exceptions to the arms embargo once the 5+5 Joint Military Commission (JMC) and the two Chiefs of Staff which represent the two Libyan armed forces, complete their unification process. If this and other conditions are met, the Security Council may allow the sale, supply or transfer of military equipment to Libya. This Resolution is important because it opens up the possibility of loopholes which would allow some military presence under specific conditions, and it could be exploited by external actors.

4.3.3 Focus on counterterrorism efforts

America approached Libya with a counterterrorism mentality, targeting terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. The US conducted over 550 airstrikes on the territory ever since 2011, reaching a high point in 2016 during the campaign to get ISIS out of Sirte. Moreover, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) launched Operation Odyssey Lighting (2016) which gave air support to the GNA to free Sirte. This operation was crucial in diminishing ISIS's chokehold on Libya. Under Trump, targeted drone strikes continued,

for instance the 2020 airstrike in Ubari that killed Al-Qaeda militants. The US also trained and shared intelligence with the GNA, sharing discussions on military cooperation with Libya's 5+5 Joint Military Commission in 2023, with the aim of unifying the fragmented military forces.

In terms of the discourse on counterterrorism, Official US statements point to the enforcement of the arms embargo, at the same time, they advocate for military support to selected factions in Libya. The Biden Administration, in particular, expressed commitment to stabilizing Libya while pushing for counterterrorism operations in 2024. US officials criticized arms transfers but did not openly talk about violations of the embargo by US-allied states, including the UAE and Turkey.

The focus on military solutions, which has been true for most of America's history, rather than taking the time to address root economic and political instability in Libya, creates a vicious cycle of violence. In line with this, the US framed the instability in Libya as a security threat that has consequences far beyond Libya, both at the regional and international level.

4.4 Turkey and Russia

Libya's instability has been worsened by foreign interventions, with Turkey and Russia siding for opposing actors. Despite the arms embargo, Turkey has openly backed the GNA, supplying military equipment to secure economic and strategic gains. Meanwhile, Russia has covertly supported Haftar's LNA through the Wagner Group and arms transfers, aiming to expand its influence in North Africa. As Pack discussed during our chat:

The Emiratis, the Turkish and the Russian introduced arms into Libya, as part of a broader process of supporting their favorite actors. It is more a political strategy. The Turks and Emiratis and Russians, and before that

the Jordanians, they violate the arms embargo to support their preferred side or to work with a specific militia leader.

4.4.1 Turkey's military and political support for factions in Tripoli

The involvement by Turkey in Libya contributed to the situation of instability of today. Even though the embargo is in place, the country has often supplied advanced weaponry, military personnel and mercenaries to factions in Tripoli, particularly the GNA, and later in 2021, the GNU. As reported by the International Crisis Group, Turkey has covertly provided armored personnel carriers, drones including the Bayraktar TB2 armed drones, and sophisticated weapons systems, to the government; this became official in 2019, when it signed two security and maritime Memoranda of Understanding with Tripoli. Turkey is not the first foreign power to intervene in Libya but it is the first that was open about it.

Table 27.1
Air and aviation non-compliances

Generic Type	Means / Equipment	Responsible party(ies) in non-compliance with paragraph 9 to 1970 (2011)	Remarks
New equipment	Bayraktar-TB2 UCAV ^a	- Turkey - GNA	- The Member States have not responded to Panel enquiries. - Supply and import.
New equipment	Orbiter-3 UAV ^b	GNA	- The supply chain has yet to be ascertained as Member State has not responded to Panel enquiries. - Import.
Transportation	Ilyushin IL-76TD Registered UR-COZ	- Turkey - Turkish Office of ProAir-Charter-Transport GmbH^c - Plures Air Cargo,^d Turkey	- Destroyed on ground at Misrata international airport on 6 August 2019. - Panel identified 130 tonnes of suspicious freight cargo on five flights between 3 to 6 July 2019 consigned by the Libyan Embassy, Ankara to the Ministry of Interior, Libya.

Figure 4.4 This image represents the air and aviation non-compliances by Turkey and the GNA. The information was obtained by the UN Panel of Experts in 2019. The table summarizes the non-compliances with paragraph 9 of resolution 1970 (2011) covering, air and aviation violations, land service equipment violations and maritime violations identified or confirmed during the period of this report. The Panel also finds the GNA to be in non-compliance with paragraph 9 of resolution 1970 (2011) for all these cases. Source: UN Security Council S/2019/914.

An example of possible cooperation between Turkey and the GNA occurred on December 13, 2019: the day after Haftar announced his new offensive and before Turkish legislators had the time to approve the new deal with Libya, a Boeing 747-412 cargo aircraft, which belonged to Moldovan charter service Aerotranscargo, flew from Istanbul to Misrata. Experts widely believe that this plane was transporting a mix of weapons, ammunition and other military equipment for the GNA. Additionally, plane watchers using a tracking software spotted what could have been a Turkish-made Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aircraft, which can be configured to carry weapons, to Misrata.

However, there have been some instances in which Turkey refused to cooperate with the EU conducted Operation IRINI. For instance, in September 2024, Turkey denied the inspection of the vessel “MV Matilde A”, making it the 12th refusal, according to reports by the Libya Observer.

As Pack said during our meeting:

Turkey used its military support in 2019 and 2020 to establish tremendous leverage over Tripoli, Misrata and the western part of the country to then bring about an economic system with the ejection of Sanalla, which favor the interest of their construction companies and repayment of back payments and NOC marketing, petroleum contracts.

In line with this, the ICG identified (2020) two main reasons as to why Turkey intervened in Libya: protecting the Tripoli government and its own strategic ambitions. First of all, the advancing Haftar forces, backed by UAE weapons and Russian private military contractors, jeopardized the GNA’s survival; because of this, Turkey decided to be open about its military and diplomatic support on December 21, 2019. The country’s help was not merely altruistic. Ankara signed a maritime deal with Libya which sought to prevent the creation of other states’ projects that would exclude Turkey from the eastern Mediterranean and reduce its influence. Furthermore, economic interests play a role in the relations: Turkey tried for a long time to expand the market for its consumer goods

and secure deals for its construction companies. The same day it decided to militarily support Libya (ICG, 2020):

Turkey's independent Industrialist and Businessmen Association (MÜSİAD) announced that it hoped to boost exports to Libya by over 500 per cent, reaching around \$10 billion compared to \$1.49 billion in 2018. Turkey's defence industry, which is providing most of the weapons shipped to the pro-government forces, will likely account for a sizeable portion of these exports.

Finally, Turkish officials assumed the role of stabilizers in Libya in the political discourse, portraying their actions as a response to external threats, especially from France and the UAE. This rhetoric legitimized military actions that, in reality, have just contributed to escalating the conflict.

4.4.2 Russia's strategic interests in Libya and the support for Haftar

In the last ten years, Russia went from being a marginal power to a significant competitor in Libya, and therefore in the broader MENA region. In 2011, Russia lost its access to Libya and its billions in contracts but in 2012 Moscow started to regain it and expanded its naval capacity. After two decades of little action and presence in Libya, Russia saw a window of opportunity to insert itself on the territory following the Syrian civil war (2011 – present) and the request by the Syrian President for help, in 2014.

Haftar asked Russia for military and diplomatic support back in 2015, promising in exchange energy deals and port access; offer that Putin accepted. Ever since 2018, Russia deployed the Wagner Group²² in Libya to achieve strategic objectives, mainly to establish

²² Officially known as PMC Wagner, the Wagner Group is a Russian state-funded private military company.

control and leverage in North Africa; which Russia still denies and dismisses as Western propaganda. The BBC reported:

[...] the BBC has a "shopping list" for state-of-the-art military equipment which expert witnesses say could only have come from Russian army supplies.

Supplier	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2011-2024	Percentage	Sum total years	Percentage of total
Russia			56												56	18%	56	18%
Total exports to Libya	8	73	116												197	100%	197	

Supplier	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2011-2024	Percentage	Sum total years	Percentage of total
Russia										188	5	5			197	63%	197	63%
Total exports to Libya HoR*				17	37	13	6	11	31	188	5	5			312	100%	312	

Figure 4.5 These tables represent the total export of arms to Libya by Russia between 2011 and 2024. When the LNA was established in 2014 in Libya, Russia sided with Haftar's forces and supplied weapons both to support the newfound government and to gain a strategic position on the territory. A major increase in weaponry occurred in 2020, possibly due to the escalation of the conflict between the LNA and the GNA. Source: SIPRI database.

When the Tripoli conflict formally ended in October 2020, Wagner operatives remained in the territory under Moscow's pay, serving Russian objectives. Nevertheless, relations have not always been linear: Haftar reportedly walked out of a meeting during a diplomatic summit hosted by Moscow in January 2020. Moreover, the failure of the Tripoli offensive led to even more strained relations between the LNA and Russia, which transposed on the ground, brought to divergences between Wagner operatives and the factions in the east.

While the exact figures of arms transfers can be challenging to obtain due to the covert nature of these operations, reports indicate that Russia sold advanced weaponry, including air-defense systems, to the LNA. In 2020, US Africa Command reported that Russia, through the Wagner Group, continues to position military equipment in Libya.

Additionally, Russia allegedly relocated air-defense equipment from Syria to Libya to reinforce its presence under Haftar's control.



Figure 4.6. This image showcases the presence of Russian military air-defense equipment in Libya on July 13, 2020. In the image: SA-22s, aircrafts IL-76s and Su-24 Fencers. Source: U.S: Africa Command.

Another instance occurred in April 2024, when Russian vessels arrived in the port of Tobruk with artillery, armored personnel carriers and rocket launchers, according to a video released by Libyan Fawasel Media. The equipment could have been sent to sustain Russia's military presence in eastern Libya but are also likely destined for countries south of Libya, such as Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, where Moscow has ties to leaders.

Russia's interests in Libya go beyond the military approach. Before Gaddafi's fall, Russia intensified economic cooperation with Libya, signing a €2 billion for a railway line and making investments to extract energy resources and purchase Russian weapons. In recent years, the goal is to get contracts for the reconstruction of Libya, including transport and

energy infrastructure. These deals can be profitable, as Libya has the 10th largest oil reserves and the NOC announced that it wants to increase production.

As of today, Russia's presence in Libya is not only the result of a competition with the West, it is mostly due to national interests, many linked to Africa in general²³: Libya being a crucial starting point due to its geographical location and political instability. The latter creates the opportunity for Russia to establish control through alliances with both local and official factions. Finally, it guarantees Russia access to air and naval military bases to coordinate its military operations, expanding its military reach.

²³ Namely Sudan, Chad, Niger and other Sahel and Central Africa countries.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of key findings

This study investigates the extent to which arms proliferation and human trafficking networks in Libya are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. The research question that guides this study is: To what extent is there a correlation between arms proliferation and human trafficking networks in Libya? How do these two phenomena interact and reinforce each other within Libya's security and political landscape? The hypothesis asserts that these illicit networks sustain and mutually reinforce each other and that this dynamic maintains instability, sustains armed non-state actors and interferes with both national and international efforts to reduce the issue. Moreover, fragmented governance structures and weak enforcement mechanism allow militias to work without impunity, controlling both arms flows and human trafficking routes.

The findings of this study confirm the hypothesis, demonstrating a clear and self-reinforcing nexus between arms proliferation and human trafficking in Libya. These dynamics are particularly highlighted along Libya's main migration routes and in conflict zones where instability is rampant. The availability of arms and Libya's lack of a central governance allows traffickers to operate in a lawless environment, while financial gains from human trafficking provide the means to acquire more weapons and expand their arsenal.

Following the end of Gaddafi's rule in 2011, Libya fell into a chaotic state, with a fragmented governance system that allowed militias to emerge as primary power players. Without the system of patronage that characterized Gaddafi's regime, these militias turned to find alternative revenue sources, finding both arms and human trafficking as viable and remunerative options. Groups such as the Zuwara and Zawiya, along the

northwestern coastal region of Libya, have been heavily involved in both trades, taking advantage of their control over key migration routes, detention centers and coastal departure points. The income made from smuggling migrants within and from Libya were used to purchase more weapons, allowing these groups to consolidate their power and influence over hotspots in Libya through military power.

Moreover, the proliferation of weapons in Libya, both from Gaddafi's vast armament and external actors, worsens the human trafficking crisis by intensifying violence, which in turn fuels displacement and migration. In fact, the presence of large quantities of weapons led to more clashes between militias competing for territorial control, particularly over lucrative smuggling routes, such as the central one from Chad and Niger to Libya, and detention centers, particularly in coastal cities like Tripoli, where migrants are held for ransom. Furthermore, the escalation of conflicts in the sub-Saharan region, sustained by the proliferation of weapons – especially from Gaddafi's stockpile – contribute to the growing number of displaced people seeking refuge in Libya, therefore increasing the demand for smuggling services.

Another critical factor is the cross-border smuggling infrastructure that helps both arms and human trafficking. Libya's porous borders, particularly with Niger, Chad and Sudan, have become transit hubs where traffickers exploit the same logistical networks to transport both migrants and weapons. Armed groups provide protection for these operations, making sure that profits remain high and keeping up the status quo.

Furthermore, beyond being a departure point for migrants trying to reach Europe, particularly Italy and Malta, Libya is also a destination country. Many migrants move to the region in hopes to find a job, driven by the wish to escape war, poverty, natural disasters and political repression in their home countries. However, the country's unstable landscape makes them extremely vulnerable to manipulation by traffickers, who use them for labor, sexual exploitation or economic profit as people are made to pay a ransom for their release. The large availability of weapons allows traffickers to maintain control over

migrants through violence and coercion, making human trafficking even more profitable and difficult to dismantle.

A secondary research question aimed at understanding how external actors, both state and non-state, contributed to the proliferation of arms and the expansion of human trafficking networks in Libya, and what are the implications of their involvement for regional security and governance. The hypothesis is that external actors have played a significant role in maintaining and even worsening Libya's situation by putting their economic and political interests first, indirectly or directly influencing arms and human trafficking. The findings of this research confirm the hypothesis. In fact, rather than stabilizing the region, their interventions, particularly Italy, Russia and Turkey, have often contributed to the militarization of trafficking routes, reinforced militia power and prolonged conflict, eventually preventing meaningful efforts to take down trafficking networks and establish long-term solutions.

A crucial difficulty in Libya is the systematic failure of meaningful collective action due to external actors prioritizing their own strategic objectives over long-term regional stability. Some efforts have been made towards the latter, such as the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (2015 – 2021), however, they have specifically been focused on short-term goals, such as border management, rather than addressing the deeply rooted causes of instability. The EU, despite its legal and practical involvement, lacks enforcement power due to Libya's fragmentation and the lack of a cohesive and systemic policy approach, as Libya is a secondary item on the agenda. Along the same lines, international organizations such as NATO and the UN did not have much success in creating a stable governmental system. NATO's intervention in 2011 was crucial in killing Gaddafi but did not provide a post-conflict plan to manage the different factions in Libya, leading to a power vacuum that various local actors exploited. The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), struggled to enforce and maintain peace due to Libya's complex political scenario and competing actors' interests, both internal and external.

Moreover, Italy's involvement in Libya is the prime example of prioritization of economic interests, particularly in the energy sector, including oil. Also, while migration remains a political issue, Italy's policies have mainly focused on securitization of migration rather than addressing its root causes. This approach has indirectly reinforced human trafficking networks through the adoption of border control policies. Although the country has respected the arms embargo since 2011, a gray area exists, especially in cases like the Italian Navy's military reparations in 2018. While the Italian government does not officially supply weapons, certain Italian entities operate along legal loopholes.

The US has adopted a "leading from behind" strategy since 2011, with its primary political focus on counterterrorism efforts. However, economic interests remain relevant in Libya, particularly in the energy sector. On weapons' supply, the discovery of US made weapons in Libya suggests indirect involvement in the proliferation of arms. In general, the US adopted a strategy of containment, but without a structural commitment to political stability. Turkey, on the other hand, has played a crucial role in Libya's arms trade, particularly between 2019 and 2020, when it was reported that it supplied large quantities of military equipment to Libya, with disregard to the arms embargo and to Operation IRINI, when it refused to let them check vessels to Libya. Turkey's involvement has been mainly political, through the military involvement with the GNA. This move allowed Turkey to gain control over a part of the territory to counter the influence of rival states in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, it was partly economic as, through this collaboration, it aimed at acquiring infrastructure and energy deals.

Russia's management of the Libyan situation is similar to Turkey's but operates more covertly. Supporter of the LNA, Russia provided military assistance both in terms of personnel and armaments, including the deployment of the Wagner Group mercenaries since 2018, although Russia denies it. Russian military equipment is widely present in Libya, showcasing its role in arms proliferation. The country's actions and motives are mainly driven by political motives as it seeks to expand its influence in Africa, with Libya

as a starting point. However, some economic interests are still evident, particularly in the oil sector, where Libya has leveraged its resources as a political bargaining tool.

While Turkey and Russia's operations are relatively public – Turkey more than Russia – those of Italy and the US remain more covert, making it more difficult to trace their involvement in arms proliferation. Nevertheless, Libya's fragmented context allowed these external actors to gain from the instability: state failure and ungoverned space have facilitated militias' thriving, which in turn has fueled both arms proliferation and human trafficking.

In conclusion, the self-reinforcing cycle of conflict-migration-arms and human trafficking is maintained by geopolitical competition and the lack of a common plan for the governance of the country, as external actors remain too focused on short-term objectives rather than addressing Libya's internal challenges: weak governance and security. Each country has its own agenda in Libya, with various degrees of involvement, but collectively, their intentions have worsened Libya's crisis rather than limiting it. The constant presence of external powers has directly or indirectly fueled human trafficking and arms proliferation, extending Libya's instability and preventing meaningful progress toward peace.

5.2 Policy recommendations

To introduce this section, I will report the words of Jason Pack as he answered the question: "In the last chapter of your book, you ended on a semi-pessimistic note saying that the disorder is enduring, so, unlikely to recede in the short-term; I wondered what could help actually transitioning to a less disorderly world, as 4 years have passed since the publication of *Libya and the Global Enduring Disorder*, and perhaps things have changed".

I don't think that the EU can make coherent policies towards Libya when it can't make coherent policies towards Ukraine or the Trump

administration or climate change, so I stand by that [author's note: referring to the long-term nature of the disorder]. In terms of various specific things, obviously it would be good if there was more funding for jobs in sub-Saharan Africa so that these people don't need to migrate. They migrate out of necessity, not out of desire. There is a human crisis going on. Obviously, it would be nice if there was a coherent European policy to cut out the militias from refined petroleum smuggling, to crack down on the Sicilian and Calabrian and Maltese mafias, who participate in this refined petroleum smuggling. I would also say to pressure the Libyan government to abandon subsidies, to pressure the Libyan government to float the Denar and for the devalue of the Denar; the gap in the Denar rate allows militia enrichment. Given the current situation with Trump there is not going to be any major push by the EU or Italy to try and reform the Libyan economy or to work on a coherent way of dealing with migration that is essentially not even close to happening. There were some things that could've been done 5 or 10 years ago but we are not in that position anymore.

While the long-term solutions when addressing the Libyan crisis could be more difficult to implement on the ground and actually provide meaningful changes, some short-term options are valuable, even if still challenging.

5.2.1 Legal policy proposals: EU level and international governance

Part of Libya's instability can be attributed to the proliferations of arms, human trafficking and economic corruption, all sustaining militias and criminal networks. To counter this, external powers, the EU in particular, must strengthen legal frameworks, for instance, those that regulate arms flows and trafficking, and support financial reforms in these sectors. Enhancing enforcement of the ATT and expanding monitoring programs,

such as Operation IRINI, are some steps that can be taken by external actors to address these issues.

An important step towards limiting the flow of weapons within Libya is to enhance the monitoring and enforcement of the ATT. The EU must demand for stricter compliance both by member states and external actors involved in arms transfers to Libya. This would entail expanding EU-led monitoring programs, especially Operation IRINI, which has a key role in tracking violations of the UN embargo; this can be done through strengthening satellite surveillance, intelligence sharing and better coordination with international entities – as the UN panel of experts. Additionally, harsher enforcement mechanisms should be put in place to penalize EU-based arms manufacturers that do not comply with ATT provision, making sure that weapons do not reach conflict zones like Libya through legal loopholes or indirect transfers.

Other than monitoring, the EU should also take stronger diplomatic and economic measures against actors fueling arms smuggling in Libya, including imposing targeted sanctions on private military contractors, shipping companies and economic institutions that help illegal arms transfers. Cutting off financial channels and restricting access to EU markets, would significantly lessen supply chains capacities that sustain militia groups. Furthermore, the EU should leverage its diplomatic influence to pressure states like Russia and Turkey to reduce their military presence in Libya. This could translate in coordinated sanctions with international partners, increased examination of military help and direct negotiations to ensure compliance with the UN embargo.

Arms smuggling is highly connected to the presence of human trafficking networks in Libya, as well as militia financing; these factors reinforce a cycle of instability that goes well beyond Libya and therefore needs to be addressed. To fight these networks, the EU has to push for international cooperation on investigations and intelligence-sharing, while holding the Libyan government accountable for human rights abuses, namely through EUROPOL and INTERPOL. By enhancing the data-sharing mechanisms and joint investigations, European and international law enforcements agencies can weaken

trafficking operations more effectively. Also, the possible involvement of the African Union would help with the coordination of regional actors with international ones.

Beyond law enforcement, focusing on human rights abuses is crucial. The EU could use development aid on concrete improvements in human rights protections as leverage for the implementation of independent monitoring of detention facilities and take legal action against those who are responsible for abuses. Furthermore, the EU could use legal frameworks like Magnitsky sanctions²⁴ as a bargaining tool to directly target individuals and entities that profit from human trafficking, freezing their assets and restricting their international activities.

5.2.2 On-the-ground practical measures

As it is understood, addressing issues in Libya is a very complicated and substantial task; however, some steps can still be taken to do so. These require both economic and security-focused interventions. Reducing militia financing from the energy sector is crucial, as armed groups use oil revenues and smuggling to fund human trafficking. At the same time, strengthening law enforcement and security support can make a dent in trafficking networks and improve border control. Finally, bettering the control of external arms transfers is important to prevent more militarization of migration routes. Incorporating these measures can help address the root issues.

Irregular migration from sub-Saharan Africa to Libya, as sometimes to Europe, is fueled by both economic and structural factors. Many people move out of their country of origin not out of choice but due to a lack of economic opportunities. Addressing this issue at the root requires a multi-faced approach that tackles local employment, reinforces important industries and makes sure that international aid directly benefits the communities.

²⁴ These refer to laws that provide sanctions to those who have committed human rights abuses or have been involved in significant corruption.

A first step could be to invest in vocational training²⁵ and skills development that are in line with the demand of the labor market, including agriculture, renewable energy and construction sectors, of countries such as Niger, Chad and Sudan. These nations are a key transit path for migrants travelling north, making them strategic locations for intervention. Creating technical local training centers and job placement programs could directly help young students find a job in companies that need skilled labor. This could be done through the expansion of the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), adding a “Economic Resilience and Education” section.

Other than training, supporting local industry development is very important when considering long-term economic resilience. Many regions prone to migration deal with underdeveloped infrastructure, weak supply chains and limited access to markets: investments in transportation networks, electricity and internet access can help small businesses in the long run. In particular, in agriculture – the backbone of many African economies – improving irrigation systems, provide farming equipment and modernize the supply chains can increase productivity and therefore income.

While the economic approach is of vital importance, ensuring effective governance and transparency is equally of relevance. In many cases, even if there are fundings towards certain countries in the sub-Saharan region, many times they are diverted and end up in the hands of corrupt officials and militia-linked networks. Although it is difficult, international funding should be tied with strict accountability measures, with independent monitoring mechanisms that control aid distribution. This could be put in place by partnering up with African civil society organizations, such as the Transparency International Kenya or AFRODAD (African Forum and Network on Debt Development), to ensure that the money actually reaches its intended destination. New solutions,

²⁵ It refers to training in skills and teaching of knowledge related to a specific trade, occupation or vocation in which the student or employee wishes to participate.

including the blockchain-based tracking system²⁶ could also provide transparency, providing real-time data on how resources are allocated and spent.

A second possible step in terms of on-the-ground solutions would be reducing militia financing from the energy sector, in order to limit both arms and human trafficking. These groups in Libya take up an important share of income from the smuggling of refined oil, exploiting fuel subsidies and weak regulatory control to maintain their activities. The same groups that profit from the smuggling of fuel are often the same ones that exploit vulnerable people by running human trafficking networks and migration routes.

One of the first steps in limiting these financing networks is to work alongside the Libyan government to digitally track fuel sales and enforce border checkpoints. Although it is complex in terms of practical capacity, implementing a fuel distribution monitoring system would help authorities detect illegal trades of fuel.

Moreover, as Pack suggested, phasing out fuel subsidies is also very important, replacing them with targeted direct cash transfers to citizens. Rather than benefitting from the manipulation of subsidized fuels, militias would lose access to this sort of revenues, while citizens would continue to receive financial support in a more transparent, secure manner. Digital cash transfer systems could allow these funds to fall directly in the hands of vulnerable populations without being blocked by armed groups.

At last, strengthening international cooperation to enforce arms embargoes and obstruct financial networks used by militias could largely lessen both arms and human trafficking in Libya. By better monitoring the systems of weapons shipments and the financial movements of illicit revenues, external actors like the EU could, even if in part, lessen militia financing and limit their access to the resources that ignite conflict and trafficking

²⁶ Blockchain asset tracking allows for supply chain data tracking which in turn facilitates asset management and drives sustainability and trust.

operations. All together, these actions would help break down the economic power of militias, making it more difficult to monetarily support illegal activities through the energy sector.

A third possibility when addressing grassroots is tackling law enforcement and security support. In fact, one of the most important steps in combating both arms and human trafficking is improving border security. The EU could implement the use of advanced surveillance technologies, such as drones and satellite tracking systems, along Libya's southern border; a key route for both trafficking networks. Through this, border monitoring would be improved, offering real-time data to identify illegal crossing and shipments. This would not only help limiting smuggling activities but also help capturing key traffickers and arms dealers.

Another important aspect is the training and professional development of local security forces. In Libya, these entities frequently struggle with the presence of militia: EU led training initiatives could improve the efficiency of local border patrols. As of today, local law enforcement mostly deals with the migration crisis as it is, not being able to prevent much of the causes of it; shifting their focus on dismantling trafficking routes would generate more significant results. This could involve specialized training to identify trafficking routes, recognize illegal arms shipments and carrying out coordinated operations. By improving the capacity of local security personnel and adjusting their priorities, EU efforts can help the fight against trafficking.

Additionally, in many regions of Libya militias are regarded for security, due to the government's struggle to maintain control. One effective approach to weaken militia is to offer incentives, including monetary, protection programs and community development projects, to local tribes and communities to report trafficking networks and arms stockpiles. By supporting community policing initiatives, where locals work alongside law enforcement to safeguard their neighborhoods, militias' authority can be diminished. EU assistance in terms of funding and training for these initiatives would be vital in ensuring that local policing remains effective and free from corruption.

A fourth, and final, proposal lies in the **enhancement of the monitor of external arms transfers**: a critical way to reduce arms proliferation and, subsequently, human trafficking. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is through strengthening the UN and EU naval operations in the Mediterranean, with particular focus on the Operation IRINI. The naval and aerial capacity could be expanded in order to increase its possibility to find and intercept illegal arms shipments in the sea. Due its position, the Mediterranean is an entry point for weapons shipments to Libya: increasing its surveillance, particularly through advanced surveillance technologies such as drones, radar systems and advanced tracking equipment, could help identifying illegal arms shipments before they reach Libyan shores.

Another important tool would be enhancing satellite monitoring; through this system, the EU and the UN could track suspicious maritime activity, for instance, illicit ships, unauthorized dockings, allowing for preventive and proactive action when dealing with arms shipments before they reach their intended destination. This approach also connects to the broader geopolitical dynamics of Libya's conflict, as it targets external arms shipments from countries like Russia and Turkey, increasing diplomatic pressure to comply by the rules of international law. Strengthening enforcement of the UN arms embargo would signal that their military involvement cannot be tolerated.

Moreover, reducing arms flow also impacts militia control over human trafficking networks. Militias often use these routes to fund their operations: limiting their firepower would mean also limiting their ability to maintain control over these networks. This would decrease the economic incentives for both arms and human trafficking.

In conclusion, the aforementioned recommendations to tackle Libya's problems are valid and possible to implement. Nevertheless, one must take in consideration the reality of the Libyan situation, characterized by many self-reinforcing narratives and issues that need to be addressed, but that are difficult to put in practice. In the words of Jason Pack, in theory, many things could be done but the shifts in the geopolitical landscape both in Libya and bordering countries, as well as the inability by the EU to make coherent

policies, make it more complicated to pursue meaningful action compared to five or ten years ago.

5.3 Limitations of this study and direction for future research

While this thesis' goal is to provide an in-depth analysis of the extent of the correlation between arms and human trafficking networks in Libya, as well as the role of external actors in the region, there are inherent limitations to the study that must be taken into account, since, as with any research, not every aspect of a complex issue can be fully explored in one thesis. Furthermore, the covert and illegal nature of both arms and human trafficking, combined with the challenging security context in Libya, limits the availability of data. Finally, the ever-changing dynamics of the conflict and the rapid shifts both nationally and internationally of the political scenario, create issues when establishing definitive, long-term conclusions. Provided that these limitations exist, several areas can be addressed in future research in order to deepen the understanding of these issues.

First of all, one major issue that this thesis has met is the scarcity of data availability. Accessing accurate, up-to-date and comprehensive figures on arms and human trafficking in Libya can be extremely difficult due to ongoing conflict, instability and the illegal nature of these activities. Much of the data on arms exports and proliferation on the ground is not available to the public and human traffickers do not usually keep a record of their illicit activities, making reliable statistics hard to find. Future research could attempt to focus more on developing data collection methodologies in conflict zones or it could expand the scope by doing ground research in Libya. This could include leveraging alternative data sources, for instance, interviews with local actors, NGOs or even using satellite imaging or geospatial data to track smuggling routes. Also, longitudinal studies focused on the post-conflict period in Libya could provide valuable knowledge once more information becomes available.

Furthermore, while this study encompasses arms and human trafficking and the role of external actors in Libya, it can be difficult to separate the roles and interests of the latter from the dynamics on the ground. It is complex to precisely say what their impact is on the two phenomena on the ground. Research can compare studies of other conflict zones in the MENA region or Africa where external actors are involved, especially Russia. Analyzing how external influences in Libya compare to each other in Syria, Yemen or Sudan could help understanding the wider patterns of international intervention and its effects on local conflicts, particularly in relation to arms and human trafficking.

Thirdly, the constantly shifting dynamics in Libya make it difficult to determine the long-term impacts of arms proliferation and human trafficking. In the future, researchers could use a temporal perspective, focusing on how the arms and trafficking networks evolve in conflict zones over time. For example, a study could record shifts in trafficking routes or the role of different militias as the conflict changes from civil war to post-conflict reconstruction, alongside the differences in peace agreements and foreign mediation.

While external actors are a key part of this study, the role of local actors could be expanded, both in terms of how they shape arms proliferation and human trafficking. Local militias, criminal organizations and tribes may have different approaches, incentives and objectives that are usually not in line with the actions of international powers. Focusing on this could provide a deeper understanding of local dynamics driving these phenomena and offer important insights into peacebuilding or stabilization initiatives that focus on grassroot interventions.

Finally, there are significant legal and institutional barriers when addressing arms proliferation and human trafficking in Libya. the fragmented national legal framework and the lack of state control make efforts to enforce the law more difficult. It could be interesting to look at how international legal frameworks, such as arms control treaties and human trafficking conventions, can be applied to fragile states like Libya and, consequently, help in the construction of a more stable national law. A future analysis

could focus on other case studies from post-conflict countries to explore what institutional reforms may contribute to fighting these issues.

CONCLUSION

This research explored the link between arms proliferation and human trafficking in Libya, highlighting how these two phenomena reinforce each other within a context of constant instability. The historical and contemporary analysis of Libya demonstrated how Gaddafi's regime created a highly centralized government, maintaining a tight control over every political, economic and social aspect in Libya, leading to popular discontent, which burst in 2011 with the Arab Spring. The fall of Gaddafi in 2011 was the start of a decade of conflicts characterized by a fragmentation of power, an increasing interference of external actors and a weakening of state institutions. This scenario favored the uncontrolled spread of arms and the strengthening of criminal networks that control migrant trafficking, making the country a crucial hub for migration.

At the heart of this study: the correlation between human trafficking and arms proliferation in Libya, with the aim of understanding the extent, its causes and consequences. The fragmentation of power and competition between militias increased the demand for arms, which in turn has contributed to the militarization of human trafficking networks. The absence of a strong central government after Gaddafi's fall, made Libya an unlawful environment in which illegal arms trade thrived, facilitating the rise of armed groups that often profit from human trafficking and from controlling migration routes and the arms market. This issue is important when looking at international security policies and stability in the Mediterranean. Libyan instability has a domino effect in the region, influencing migration flows to Europe and aggravating the risk of terrorism and transnational crime. The European Union and Italy, for example, face a dual approach: on the one hand, the need to contain migration flows and fight human trafficking; on the other hand, economic - especially in the energy sector - and strategic involvement in Libya, which often results in ambiguous and contradictory policies towards Libya.

Furthermore, the analysis of Libyan dynamics shows how the intervention of external actors, rather than stabilizing the country, contributed to continued instability. Competition between regional and international powers is evident: Turkey and Russia support opposing factions, the GNA and the LNA, while the EU and Italy maintain a pragmatic approach, often dictated by economic and internal security interests. The United States, while adopting a 'leading from behind' strategy, has nevertheless influenced developments in the conflict, especially with regard to counter-terrorism and energy agreements. The implications of these findings are multifaceted. Firstly, a self-reinforcing cycle that links conflict, migration and trafficking emerges: more conflict means more migration, due to insecurity and economic collapse, more migration leads to the proliferation of human trafficking networks, as criminal networks grow stronger to support the demand, and finally more human trafficking, more demand for weapons in order to protect the trafficking and the militias involved. This complex dynamic creates a difficulty in regulating arms trafficking and countering human trafficking. Although control mechanisms exist, such as the UN arms embargo, its enforcement is not very effective due to continuous violations by state and non-state actors. Arms proliferation not only fuels internal conflict, but also strengthens local war economies, making a transition to peace and stability more difficult.

In the future, Libya's possibility at stability will depend mainly on the international community and its ability to create and adopt coherent and coordinated policies. The gap between the economic interests of states and efforts for regulation and international cooperation is an important barrier: on one hand, Libya's arms market and energy resources continue to draw foreign actors, on the other, diplomatic and humanitarian initiatives try to contain the disorder without addressing its root causes. In this regard, a long-term solution would entail the use of a multi-level approach, by strengthening Libya's institutions, improve arms control monitors and a migration strategy that does not only focus on border control. In particular, it is fundamental to develop policies that involve more participation from civil society and humanitarian organizations on the ground, as well as more effective coordination among the states that are involved in the

conflict. Moreover, a comprehensive disarmament strategy would need to be out in place, along with reintegration programs for militia members.

At the same time, economic cooperation that provides sustainable alternatives to war economies is necessary to reduce the presence of militia and their dependence on illicit trade to survive. In particular, investments in education, infrastructure development and job creation are essential in breaking the mutually reinforcing cycle of conflict and organized crime. Furthermore, transparent mechanism for arms trade regulation and international monitoring efforts should be reinforced to prevent the flow of weapons into Libya from external actors.

Finally, without a concrete plan in this direction, the risk that Libya will continue to be in a state of chaos and disorder is very high, with consequences both in the Mediterranean and in Libya itself, as people cannot sustain these conditions. The role of the EU, and particularly Italy, will be very important in shaping the conflict, only an approach that considers the political, economic and humanitarian dimensions of the crisis can provide long-term stabilization. This research has highlighted the necessity of shifting from reactive policies to proactive, addressing both the short-term humanitarian crises and the underlying structural causes of conflict and illicit activities.

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