Chapter 2

From State Collapse to Chaos: Security Vacuum and Migration Dynamics in Libya ⓐ

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Abstract

The African continent, endowed with substantial potential due to its rich natural resources and vibrant youth demographic, concurrently confronts significant structural challenges stemming from security issues and large-scale migration movements. Armed conflicts, terrorist activities, and persistent political instability have led to the displacement of millions, while these extensive migration flows further complicate existing security dynamics and introduce new threats. This study examines the interdependent relationship between security challenges and African migration phenomena. In this context, post-2011 Libya is utilized as a case study. Following the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi's regime, the nation entered a phase characterized by political instability, armed conflict, and the erosion of central governance. This power vacuum has rendered Libya a pivotal transit point along irregular migration routes from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe. Consequently, this study explores how Libya's security issues cause regional instability and how migration pressures exacerbate the precarious security environment.

Introduction

The popular uprising that began in 2011 under the influence of the Arab Spring led to the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya. Nevertheless, this upheaval has precipitated long-term political instability and a security vacuum in the country. The collapse of central authority, compounded by the ongoing power struggle among various militia groups, tribes, and armed gangs, has effectively fragmented the country. This ongoing security crisis in Libya has had far-reaching consequences, not only for the local population but also for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa. Thousands of individuals from eastern and western Africa embark

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on perilous journeys to Europe via Libya and the Mediterranean, seeking opportunities for a better life. However, the absence of effective governance in Libya has transformed the country into a focal point for egregious crimes, including human trafficking, modern slavery, forced labour, and sexual exploitation. Irregular migrants in Libya are often detained in camps overseen by militias and armed groups, where they are subjected to severe violations of their fundamental human rights and have extremely limited access to humanitarian aid. Furthermore, every year, thousands of people lose their lives during sea voyages from Libya's shores to the European coast.

This case study highlights the intricate and often delicate relationship. In states where the authority of a state is weak, migrants become victims of the security vacuum, and the migration phenomenon can lead to larger regional instabilities. The Libyan scenario underscores the imperative for security policies to be addressed not only within national boundaries but also within the broader regional context.

In this study, the initial section will present a comprehensive overview of Libya's historical context, examining the political and social landscape of the country before the Arab Spring. The subsequent section will evaluate the fundamental causes and extensive repercussions of the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, with particular emphasis on migration-related challenges and the ensuing power vacuum. The final section will analyze intersections of insecurity and migration from the humanitarian perspective and both regional and international responses to the Libyan crisis, exploring the roles and strategies of various state and non-state actors.

1. Historical Background: The Libyan State Before the Collapse

Following the Italo-Ottoman War, Libya came under Italian control with the signing of the Treaty of Ouchy (also known as the Treaty of Lausanne) in 1912. From that point until 1951, Libya was governed by Italy through a system of seven provincial governors (Khalidi, 1952: 221-228). During World War II, the country was divided into three separate regions: the Emirate of Cyrenaica, the British-occupied zone, and the French-occupied zone (Acet, 2018: 253). In the post-war period, Libya was placed under the temporary administration of a United Nations commission and ultimately declared its independence on December 24, 1951. Thus, Libya became the first country to gain independence through a United Nations mandate (Anderson, 1982: 516-534). Following independence, the first general elections were held on February 19, 1952, and a federal constitution based on a monarchical system was adopted. The discovery and

extraction of oil in 1959 led to profound changes in the country's political and economic structures. Significant improvements were made, particularly in infrastructure, communication, and transportation networks. However, the monarchy under King Idris struggled to maintain effective control over the rapid social transformation. Eventually, on September 1, 1969, a military coup brought an end to the monarchy, marking the beginning of a new political era in Libya (Otman and Kalberg, 2007: 474). Free Officers Movement, under the leadership of Muammar Gaddafi, successfully executed a military coup that deposed the Libyan government and terminated King Idris's monarchy, signifying a pivotal moment in Libyan history (Anderson, 1982: 520). Under Gaddafi's regime, the Libyan Arab Republic was founded on the tenets of "freedom, socialism, and unity." The post-revolutionary agenda prioritized the promotion of Arab-Islamic ideology, resistance to Western influence, and the expansion of trade. Furthermore, the closure of foreign military bases contributed to an increase in Gaddafi's popularity among the Libyan populace (Prashad, 2021: 255).

Muammar Gaddafi's Pan-Arabist policy facilitated the strengthening of relations between Libya and other Arab states during the 1970s and 1980s. Notably, Libya's ties with neighboring Egypt were particularly robust, with unification efforts emerging through discussions between Gaddafi and Gamal Abdel Nasser. Subsequently, Syria joined this initiative. Conversely, Libya's relations with Western nations deteriorated under Gaddafi's leadership. The nationalization of Libyan oil in 1971 and Gaddafi's advocacy for an oil embargo during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War -prompted by Western support for Israel- exacerbated tensions. The embargo resulted in a rapid doubling of oil prices, bringing Libya's relations with Western countries to the brink of collapse (Ronen, 2013: 675).

The transformation in Libya's foreign policy initiated under the Gaddafi administration, coupled with prolonged United Nations embargoes, led Libya to fortify its relations with Sub-Saharan Africa. Consequently, as part of its Pan-African policy, Libya welcomed thousands of Sub-Saharan Africans, becoming a significant destination for individuals from Sudan, Niger, Mali, and Chad. However, the civil war in Libya and the subsequent collapse of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 fundamentally altered migration dynamics. Africans fleeing unrest in other regions of Africa and those deported by Libya began seeking new safe havens in Europe. It is estimated that between 2002 and 2013, approximately 7,000 African migrants perished or went missing en route to Europe. Specifically, between 2002 and 2005, 1,292 individuals were reported dead or missing; between 2006 and 2009, this

number rose to 2,557; and between 2010 and 2013, 2,436 individuals were reported missing (IOM, 2015).

2. The Collapse of the Libyan State: Causes and Consequences

The Arab Spring, a political movement that began in Tunisia in 2010 with demands for freedom and democracy, rapidly disseminated and evolved into a significant event in the region. This process ultimately led to the collapse of autocratic regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. In Libya, Muammar Gaddafi was killed during the Arab Spring, and NATO's intervention played a crucial role in the success of the revolution. Conversely, the Arab Spring movement encountered setbacks in neighbouring countries (Erdağ, 2017: 85).

The events in Libya have directly impacted Middle Eastern security and occupy a distinct position within the Arab Spring. While NATO's intervention led to the overthrow of Gaddafi's regime, Libya subsequently faced significant issues, including a security vacuum, political instability, and the rise of terrorist organizations (Yetim, 2014: 391-410). After Gaddafi's death, uncertainties emerged regarding the true purpose of the Libya Operation, and the conflicts were classified as international armed conflicts (Kobo and Zamir, 2012: 403-436).

Following the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, Libya held its first democratic elections in July 2012. However, a power struggle emerged between political Islamist groups and secular-liberal factions. These tensions quickly escalated into violence, leading to the outbreak of the Second Libyan Civil War. Although a ceasefire was signed on August 21, 2020, lasting peace has not been achieved. The country remains divided between two rival administrations, and armed groups continue to operate as a major threat to national security and stability (Yeşilyurt, 2023: 1-21). In the context of the 2014 elections and the establishment of a new government, Libya was effectively partitioned into three principal regions: the Tobruk Government, headquartered in Benghazi and supported by the Libyan National Army; the United Nations-endorsed Government of National Accord, based in Tripoli; and the Berber tribes in the southwestern deserts, led by Tuareg and Tebu families. The Tuaregs, proponents of traditional Berber tribalism, were reluctant to cede their authority to a centralized government following the conflict (Cantürk and Şengül, 2018: 45-69).

The success of the civil war can be attributed to three primary factors: the active support from the United Nations and NATO, the establishment of the National Transitional Council by the opposition with international

endorsement, and the unification of all opposition groups. Nevertheless, the victory in the war did not result in enduring peace for Libya. Following the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, internal conflicts arose among the opposition factions. One of the most pressing challenges in post-Gaddafi Libya is the influence of tribal structures. The tribalism that was subtly perpetuated during Gaddafi's regime continues to exert significant influence on Libyan society today. Prominent tribes, including the Tuareg, Warfela, Migraha, and Kazazife, occasionally engage in conflicts, particularly concerning the control of oil fields (Cantürk and Şengül, 2018: 45-69).

An interview with a Nigerian woman in Italy revealed a significant shift in her perception of Libya following a violent shooting incident. Initially attracted by the prospect of improved employment opportunities, she became increasingly concerned for her safety after witnessing the death of a young boy who received no assistance. In response, she concealed herself in fear and sought divine protection, ultimately accumulating sufficient funds to flee to Italy. However, not all migrants have experienced similar fortune (Kuschminder, 2020).

In 2018, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that 600,000 migrants in Libya were vulnerable to abuse and human rights violations. By 2020, 71% of migrants reported having limited or no access to healthcare, a particularly concerning issue during the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis exacerbated their circumstances, with many losing employment and facing escalating food prices due to disrupted supply chains (Kuschminder, 2020).

2.1. Migration Dynamics in Libya

Libya has historically been a crucial point for migration routes from Africa and the Middle East to Europe, primarily due to its geographical position. The country's western coastline is only 350 km away from Europe's southernmost territories, Malta and the Italian island of Lampedusa, making it a natural transit point for migrants traveling through the Mediterranean. Furthermore, Libya has long served as a gateway between the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa due to its central location in North Africa. Libya has functioned as both a destination and a transit country for migrants from Africa and Asia. 2009 and hosted 2.5 million migrants and assumed responsibility for migration control through its 2008 Friendship Treaty with Italy. This arrangement exemplifies the externalization of European border security to non-EU states (Toaldo, 2015).

After the Cold War, the number of irregular migrants attempting to reach Italy by sea increased. Between 2008 and 2014, the number of migrants, particularly from countries affected by the Arab Spring, was notably high. Political instability and internal conflicts directly influenced migration, making it difficult to distinguish between forced migration and economic migration. This created challenges for European Union countries (Massari, 2015: 12-37).

During Gaddafi's regime, the implementation of an open-door policy and visa waivers starting in the 1990s transformed Libya from merely a transit point to a final destination for many migrants seeking employment opportunities. Libya's relatively higher level of economic development compared to other African nations made it an attractive destination for migrants looking for work. Migrants contributed to Libya's illicit economy in various ways. First, they paid for their journey to, within, and from Libya to Europe, with each stage of the journey carrying its own set of costs. Second, many migrants were forced to work illegally or under duress in border regions or main coastal cities, providing low-wage or unpaid labor that was crucial to both the illegal and legal economies. Third, both official and unofficial detention facilities across Libya effectively became part of a system of migrant and asylum-seeker kidnapping, where release could only occur upon payment of a ransom by their families. These payments benefited not only human traffickers but also government officials nominally in charge of the detention centers. Moreover, human trafficking was an important part of the social contract between the regime and the country's peripheral areas. The security apparatus turned a blind eye to illegal trade in exchange for political support. After the revolution in Libya, this social contract was liberalized, with a more open market for illegal activities and a more direct relationship between those running the illegal business and political figures (Toaldo, 2015).

The agreement between Italy and Libya in 2008 led to a significant decrease in irregular migration. Strict border controls, pushback policies, and deportation measures reduced the number of irregular migrants crossing from Libya to Italy. However, the violence and conflict caused by the Arab Spring forced many people to migrate. Libya became the primary point for irregular migration from Africa to Europe, with many migrants losing their lives in the desert before reaching Libya. Afterward, most attempts to cross the sea ended in deportation back to Libya, where migrants faced poor conditions in detention centers before being sent back to their countries (Massari, 2015).

During the regime of Gaddafi, Libya maintained a centralized authority capable of managing migration on behalf of Europe. However, the collapse of this regime resulted in the absence of effective state institutions, leading to the disintegration of migration governance, particularly post-2014. Human smuggling through Libya should be conceptualized as a criminal activity not only perpetrated by local criminal networks but also facilitated through their connections with formal state structures. The escalation of migration flows from Libya across the Mediterranean is attributed not only to the limited efficacy of European—especially Italian—policies but also to a range of critical factors: the robustness of human trafficking networks, Libya's fluctuating policies toward sub-Saharan Africa, the country's economic appeal, its internal security conditions, and the conflicts and humanitarian crises in the countries of origin of migrants and asylum seekers (Toaldo, 2015).

The humanitarian intervention in Libya in 2011, while ostensibly aimed at addressing humanitarian concerns, resulted in the emergence of other issues. The ongoing instability in Libya has led to an increase in the number of irregular migrants seeking to cross into European territories. Consequently, there was an increase in the number of migrants attempting to reach Libya's shores and subsequently cross the Mediterranean to reach Italian islands, resulting in a rise in fatalities. The death rate of irregular migrants in the Mediterranean increased from 0.4% between 1998 and 2002 to 2.1% from 2003 to 2014. In 2014 alone, more than 3,000 lives were lost. Even during the Gaddafi regime, Libya was a pivotal transit point for migration to Europe, particularly due to its status as a significant oil exporter (Baldwin-Edwards, 2006).

The strategic importance of Libya's geographical position has rendered it a pivotal transit point for irregular migrants seeking to travel from various regions of Africa to Europe. In the early stages of the Arab Spring, the European Union's response was deemed inadequate, and the 2008 Libya-Italy Friendship Agreement was utilised to impede illegal migration from Libya. However, Italy's practice of returning migrants was found to violate European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) law, and Italy was ordered to pay compensation. After the agreement, there was a marked decline in irregular migration from Libya to Italy via sea, indicating that when the Libyan government demonstrated the requisite political determination, irregular migration could be averted despite its extensive coastline (Koka and Veshi, 2019: 26-52).

2.2. Effects of Security Vacuum on Migration in Libya

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, Libya experienced a period of profound instability, leading to a mass exodus of over a million individuals seeking refuge elsewhere. Between the years 2014 and 2016, there was a notable increase in irregular migration from Libya to Europe, with 170,000 in 2014, 154,000 in 2015, and 180,000 in 2016. The prevailing uncertainty in Libya has been identified as a contributing factor to the escalation in human trafficking, rendering the nation an attractive target for armed groups (Shaw and Mangan, 2014). The economic collapse of Libya has pushed its coastal residents, who are unemployed, into human trafficking. Most migrants attempting to cross from Libya to Europe do not meet the criteria set by the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, which defines migrants as those fleeing life-threatening situations. Many migrants, especially women and children, face various dangers such as a lack of food, access to healthcare, and exposure to violence in search of better economic conditions. Italy's policy of pushing back migrants, sending them back to Libya, detaining them in detention centers, and returning them to their countries is considered problematic and only partially successful.

Following the fall of Gaddafi, the Toubou ethnic group established and maintained dominance in southeastern Libya, exerting control over the movement of people, financial resources, and goods. This control has been monetized through the kidnapping and extortion of Eritrean and East African migrants. Moreover, the southwestern region has experienced persistent power struggles, particularly between the Toubou and Tuareg tribes. This area, serving as a critical entry point for West African migrants, has gained notoriety for reports of slave markets and human trafficking. After the Gaddafi regime, migration through Libya increased due to the lack of governmental oversight. During the period of regime, human trafficking and extortion emerged as significant sources of income for numerous Libyan communities, often to the detriment of vulnerable migrants. Between 2014 and 2017, approximately 625,000 migrants arrived in Italy by sea, predominantly departing from Libya, with a peak of 181,000 arrivals in 2016, as reported by the UNHCR. Following the Italy-Libya agreement, the number of arrivals significantly decreased to 23,000 in 2018 and further declined to 11,000 in 2019. In the first half of 2020, around 7,200 migrants reached Europe via the Central Mediterranean route (Kuschminder, 2020).

The post-Gaddafi transition in Libya has faced significant challenges from the outset. With the collapse of the regime's security apparatus, this vacuum has largely been filled by a hybrid system composed of

"revolutionary" brigades (militias) that had fought against Gaddafi. These groups, integrated into either the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Defense, have formed uneasy alliances with the remnants of the old army that defected from the regime in 2011. This hybrid security structure is also evident in the management of migration control. While detention centers were once entirely under the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration of the Ministry of Interior, in the civil war period, only six out of twenty were managed by this institution, with the rest either fully under militia control or subject to mixed governance (Toaldo, 2015).

Several Nigerian individuals have been employed in Libya for extended periods. Among them, a man named Abu operated a clothing store in Tripoli, where he resided for seven years. Following the onset of the civil war, he returned to Nigeria but subsequently returned to Libya when the situation appeared to stabilize. Due to deteriorating conditions in Nigeria, his wife and children later joined him. However, the death of Gaddafi resulted in a power vacuum, leading to violent confrontations among various factions. Abu, who sought refuge in Italy in 2016, reported that the emergence of ISIS in Libya exacerbated the situation. He recounted that his daughter was tragically killed by a stray bullet during the conflict (Kuschminder, 2020).

3. Intersections of Insecurity and Migration: A Humanitarian Perspective

The significant migration flows in the early 2000s were strategically utilized by the Gaddafi regime as a tool to strengthen its relations with Europe. In this context, the first bilateral agreement between Libya and Italy was signed in 2000, aiming to foster cooperation in combating irregular migration, terrorism, and organized crime. This agreement laid the foundation for a broader diplomatic rapprochement, culminating in the 2008 Libya-Italy Friendship Treaty. The cooperation on migration management was structured around three main pillars: joint maritime patrols in the Mediterranean, the implementation of electronic surveillance systems on Libya's southern borders by Italian companies, and Italy's diplomatic mediation on Libya's behalf within the European Union (Toaldo, 2015).

Migration routes from Nigeria to Libya have historically existed since the precolonial era and were institutionalized through the transatlantic slave trade. Over the past fifty years, these routes have continued to be utilized by individuals seeking employment opportunities in North Africa or Europe, including low-skilled agricultural laborers and, subsequently, trafficked sex workers. However, following the collapse of the Libyan state in 2011, these

networks became significantly more organized and widespread, leading to a substantial increase in human mobility. This shift has marked a significant transformation in regional migration Dynamics. Simultaneously, a so-called "anti-smuggling" market emerged along Libya's northwestern coast. In the summer of 2017, armed groups previously engaged in human smuggling began to rebrand themselves as anti-smuggling actors to avoid United Nations sanctions. This strategic repositioning culminated in a 19-day armed conflict in the coastal city of Sabratha. The ambiguous roles played by these actors complicated the security landscape and contributed to the reconfiguration of smuggling networks (Eaton, 2025).

Search and Rescue (SAR) operations mitigate the risk factor by reducing the mortality rate at sea. Consequently, Italy has been held accountable for the rise in migration flows, as these operations are often perceived as a contributing factor to the increased number of migrants attempting the journey. This situation has contributed to the emergence of xenophobic and anti-immigration political parties. Historically, the number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean from Libya was typically below 40,000 annually; however, in 2014, this figure escalated to 120,000. This surge is frequently associated with the Italian Navy's Mare Nostrum Operation. Notably, 2014 became the deadliest year in the Mediterranean, with 3,419 lives lost (Toaldo, 2015).

The Triton operation had a much more limited scope compared to Mare Nostrum, operating only near EU shores, whereas Mare Nostrum extended as far as the Libyan coast. The increase in migration is mainly driven by two key "push" factors. First, the rapid deterioration of security in Libya led migrants who would have otherwise remained there to attempt crossing the sea to Europe. Second, the migration flows into Libya originate from three main regions: West Africa, the Horn of Africa, and Syria. The Syrian civil war triggered a more recent wave, with West Africans entering Libya from the southwest, migrants from the Horn of Africa through the southeast, and Syrians and Palestinians often traveling via Egypt before reaching eastern Libya by sea (Toaldo, 2015). In addition, the EU's Operation Sophia, which had rescued approximately 48,000 migrants in the Mediterranean between 2015 and 2018, was replaced by Operation Irini in 2020. However, Irini refrained from deploying naval assets and relied exclusively on unmanned aerial vehicles, which were not equipped to carry out sea rescues. This shift raised substantial concerns regarding the safety and protection of migrants at sea (Eaton, 2025).

As a result of these developments, the number of irregular migrants arriving in Italy from Libya sharply declined—from 162,895 in 2016 to 108,409 in 2017, and further down to 12,977 in 2018. However, this reduction in sea arrivals did not immediately translate into a decrease in the overall number of migrants transiting through Libya. A large migrant population was already present in the country, and several smuggling routes remained unaffected by the external interventions. Consequently, Libya experienced an internal surge in migrant numbers and a corresponding increase in migrant detention practices. These outcomes have intensified critical debates surrounding the humanitarian implications of the EU's externalized border management strategies (Eaton, 2025).

Although European policymakers and the media focus on the migrants' boats, an important aspect of human smuggling is the safe houses where migrants and asylum-seekers are often held for weeks. In these safe-houses and on the boats, they are deprived of necessities like water, food, and life jackets. Additionally, they are usually given very little information about their intermediate and final destinations or the means of transport (Toaldo, 2015).

3.1. Regional and International Responses to the Libyan Crisis

The European Union is implementing economic strategies to address the current situation. In 2014, the EU established the "Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund," which is set to distribute 3 billion Euros regionally for seven years. A substantial portion of this fund is designated for national programs aimed at enhancing the asylum systems of member states. These national states utilize the fund exclusively to fulfill the basic needs of migrants, including food, health, and education. The Italian government, for instance, provides migrants with free accommodation, mobile phones, 3 Euros per day in envelopes, and education within migrant reception centers, where migrants reside voluntarily (Farrel, 2015). Additionally, the Trintex program was initiated under the auspices of Frontex in 2014 to support the Italian government. Triton operations, another initiative based in the Mediterranean, focus on migrant rescue efforts to assist the EU in meeting its international obligations (EC, 2014).

The European Union responded to the Libyan crisis through both diplomatic efforts and humanitarian aid focused on civilian protection. A total of €154.5 million was allocated, most of which was transferred to international organizations to address irregular migration. While Italy bore the primary responsibility for managing migration flows through Libya, the

2013 Lampedusa tragedy, where over 200 migrants died at sea, negatively impacted both Italy's and the EU's human rights records. The UN Human Rights Committee presented direct evidence against Italy regarding these deaths (Övgü, 2021). Following the tragic incidents in Lampedusa in 2015, where over 700 migrants lost their lives and many others were at risk, the European Union was compelled to adopt new measures regarding the migration crisis. With Council Decision 2015/778, the EU launched a military naval operation initially called the European Union Naval Force – Mediterranean. It was later renamed Operation Sophia, after a baby born aboard one of the mission's ships in September 2015. The operation aimed to train personnel from the Libyan Navy and Coast Guard, as well as to enforce the UN arms embargo along Libya's coast. A Task Force was established and granted the authority to monitor, search, and seize vessels suspected of smuggling, under international law (EUNAVFOR, 2020).

The European Union signed a new bilateral agreement with the Fayez al-Sarraj government of Libya in 2017 to curb irregular migration, following the 2008 Friendship Treaty with the Gaddafi regime. Additionally, the EU cooperated with Central African countries like Niger and Mali to prevent migration at its source. In 2018, the EU provided a total of €291 million in aid to Libya, using these funds to deliver medical and humanitarian assistance to tens of thousands of migrants. While 27 official refugee camps were reported to be active in Libya, the actual number is believed to be higher, with additional illegal camps reportedly run by armed groups. Furthermore, it has been observed that some migrants were abandoned without water in the deserts between Libya, Chad, and Sudan (Nielsen, 2022). The European Union has implemented an externalization policy in its migration and security relations with Libya, successfully reducing irregular migration from Libya to Italy. The aggressive and sometimes unlawful behavior of the Libyan Coast Guard toward migrants has been cited as a factor in this reduction. However, the EU's informal approach to managing migration relations with Libya has led to covert and extra-legal practices in preventing irregular migration. Instead of formal agreements, temporary arrangements have been used to facilitate the return of migrants, with the most significant negative impact felt in Libya (Baldwin-Edwards and Lutterbeck, 2018: 15).

In 2017, agreements signed between the European Union, Italy, and Libya marked a significant shift in the dynamics of human smuggling across the Central Mediterranean migration route. On 2 February 2017, Italy signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord, followed by the Malta Declaration endorsed by EU leaders in Valletta on 3 February. Within this framework, the Libyan Coast

Guard assumed responsibility for search and rescue (SAR) operations near the Libyan coastline during the 2017–2018 period. Concurrently, European state-led rescue missions gradually withdrew from Libyan territorial waters, and non-governmental organizations conducting SAR operations faced increasing restrictions on their activities in the region (Eaton, 2025).

Conclusion

Since the 1990s, international sanctions have substantially weakened the agricultural sector in southern Libya. This economic downturn has created conditions conducive to the expansion of cross-border trade and, more prominently, smuggling activities. The fall of the Gaddafi regime, along with enduring political instability, has positioned Libya as a pivotal transit hub on migration routes to Europe. During this period, smuggling networks facilitating maritime passage for migrants to Europe expanded rapidly; between 2011 and 2016, the number of irregular migrants arriving in Italy via the Mediterranean increased from 28,500 to approximately 163,000. The ensuing power vacuum has fueled clashes among rival armed groups vying for control over strategic transportation routes, critical infrastructure, and state institutions. This complex conflict environment has enabled the rapid expansion of Libya's informal economy, with illicit activities, particularly migrant smuggling and human trafficking, emerging as primary sources of revenue (Eaton, 2025). Furthermore, the ongoing migrant crisis underscores the significant humanitarian challenges confronting vulnerable populations, which are intensified by limited access to essential services and increasing violence.

The international community's response to the Libyan migration crisis has developed into a multifaceted framework characterized by security-driven, financially supported, yet ethically contentious strategies. Although the substantial decrease in irregular sea crossings since 2017 may be perceived as a policy success, it has incurred a humanitarian cost, including increased migrant detention, abuse in unofficial camps, and reliance on non-state actors of questionable legitimacy. The dependence on informal arrangements, rather than binding international agreements, has further compromised transparency and accountability. The European Union's evolving response to the Libyan crisis indicates a transition from a focus on humanitarian concerns to a securitized approach to migration management. Initially, efforts prioritized the protection of migrants and collaboration with Libyan authorities. However, subsequent strategies increasingly emphasized externalization, military operations, and support for the Libyan Coast Guard. Although these measures have led to a reduction in irregular arrivals, they

have also raised significant human rights concerns, particularly regarding the treatment of migrants in detention and at sea. The lack of formal legal frameworks and the reliance on ad hoc agreements further complicate the ethical and legal accountability of EU migration policies in Libya.

The relationship between security issues and migration on the African continent should be understood as a complex, mutually reinforcing dynamic rather than a linear connection. The case of Libya exemplifies how the collapse of state authority and the emergence of a security vacuum can accelerate migration flows, which, in turn, further destabilize an already fragile security environment. In the post-Gaddafi era, Libya has emerged as a critical zone of risk, affecting not only its internal security but also broader regional stability. Irregular migration flows, coupled with Libya's weak governance structures, have facilitated the empowerment of armed groups within the country while simultaneously intensifying migratory pressures toward Europe, thereby influencing the international security agenda.

Consequently, ensuring lasting security in Africa and effectively managing migration are not only humanitarian imperatives but also strategic necessities for both regional and global stability. The Libyan case underscores the urgent need to strengthen state capacity, enhance international cooperation, and implement comprehensive policies that address the root causes of migration in a multidimensional manner.

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