Libya’s Fezzan in Focus: What Motivates the Human Traffickers?

Economic pessimism, community group tensions, and political instability regarding trafficking in Libya’s Southern border region.

by Ben Lowings

With the world’s attention on the slave auctions in Libya’s North, the original point of transit into Libya at its Southern borders has been neglected. Any steps to help resolve the migration crisis must also address the reasons behind human
trafficking within the Fezzan: economic pessimism, community group tensions and political instability.

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The 15th November report by CNN1 that revealed the existence of slave auctions in the Northern coastal cities of Libya, including Tripoli, has sparked a flurry of international condemnation. Much of the 2017 African Union-European Union Summit in Abidjan was overshadowed by this news, with leaders issuing a joint statement2 regarding the report, whilst proposing “voluntary resettlement” of migrants as a planned action to help to resolve this. In addition, on 4th December 2017, a public hearing at the European Parliament entitled “Prospects for Libya in the Current Regional Context” was largely occupied by Parliamentary questions regarding these reports. Meanwhile Amnesty International released a report3 on 11 December 2017 that also highlighted the human rights abuses of trafficked migrants.

Whilst acknowledging the necessity of the resolution of such human rights abuses, this focus has also allowed the lens to move away from another glaring issue of the migration crisis. And that issue is motivation. Not only what motivates migrants to travel at considerable personal risk from their countries of origin through Libya, but also what motivates the actions of the human traffickers themselves. The second group is under analysis here, and to do so it is useful to focus on Libya’s Southern Fezzan region where much of the human smuggling into Libya takes place4. Thus we ask, what motivates the traffickers? This question will be answered in regards to three interlinked sources: economic pessimism, community group tensions, and political instability.

**Economic Pessimism**

The possibility of finding new employment opportunities and financial sources is a historically strong motivation for migration, and is directly acknowledged in the United Nation’s New York

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4 Trafficking also occurs at Libya’s other borders, notably to the West of the country. See the Delma Institute (http://prisms.delma.io/borderlands/en/) for research into Libya’s Western borders with Algeria and Tunisia.
Declaration⁵. This is especially true for sub-Saharan Africans⁶ seeking a better life and economic prospects in Europe. Hence, due to the porosity of Libya’s borders, they have become a particular entry-point for African migration to Europe. Amnesty International⁷ recognized that Libya has been a country of transit for migrants to Europe since the late 1990s, when the al-Gaddafí administration supported the actions of tribes in Libya’s South, such as in the Fezzan region, which gradually helped to develop an alternative economy.

(Map of Libya⁸)

In a country with an unemployment rate in excess of 20%, Toaldo⁹ has suggested that human smuggling has in fact become the sole economic business for many of these border communities. In addition, the International Crisis Group (ICG)¹⁰ suggest that what remains of the legal economies of agriculture and oil in such border regions has all but disappeared due to government complicity for smugglers during the al-Gaddafí regime, a lack of authority post-Gaddafí, and the overall profitability of the trade. For instance, to work as a driver smuggling peoples from the Niger border to Sebha nets more than LYD 4,000 per month, around four-times the monthly salary of a policeman¹¹. Micallef¹² also finds that smuggling has become a legitimized activity for many communities where economic and security needs are not met through legal economic practices. Libya’s UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli has shown little

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⁶ Here “sub-Saharan Africans” is used loosely, to refer mainly to flows of migrants from countries such as Niger, Chad, Nigeria and Côte d’Ivoire.
⁸ https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/europes-true-southern-frontier-the-general-the-jihadis-and-the-high-stakes-contest-for-libyas-fezzan-region
⁹ http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiwp1514.pdf
action to attempt to improve economic opportunities in the Fezzan, and much of the region has effectively become isolated. Indeed, the airport in Sebha remains closed\textsuperscript{13}. Libya, regional countries, and the international community must strengthen the economic prospects in Libya’s border regions by galvanizing the legitimate agricultural and oil economies.

\textit{Community Group Tensions}

Much of the Fezzan was temporarily united during the 2011 revolution under a tenuous “anti-Gaddafi” banner. However, with the fall of Gaddafi, the power vacuum left led to a number of competing groups\textsuperscript{14} fighting for superiority in the space. Abderrahmane\textsuperscript{15} notes that the Ouled Slimane group has taken up much of the socio-political space that Gaddafi’s own group used to fill, in turn creating a large animosity between the two. In addition, the Tubu and Tuareg groups, found across Libya’s borders with Chad and Niger, have also presented a difficult situation as they have engaged in confrontation in the name of fighting terrorism. Warfare between groups is now widespread, with each group fighting for its own survival.

Specific groups control smuggling routes. For instance, the Tubu are accused of controlling much of the border between Libya and Niger, offering protection to traffickers and rendering local police forces and border guards practically inoperable\textsuperscript{16}. In addition, the disorder in the Fezzan has enabled a proliferation of Islamist extremists operating in the region\textsuperscript{17}. In such an insecure context, it is unsurprising that illegal activities such as human smuggling are an attractive option in order to maintain a living.

\textit{Political Instability}

The overall political climate of Libya has made both economic improvements and easing of group tensions problematic in the Fezzan. The military coalition led by General Haftar, the Libyan National Army (LNA), maintains some presence in the Fezzan at the expense of the GNA. Without a potent government able to enforce borders and crackdown on illegal activity, smuggling is likely to continue across the Libyan borders. In order to increase the security of the
region, a unified national army will be necessary which is impossible without all parties reaching a dialogue on the national level.

An end to the political instability will also enable much-needed reforms to improve the agricultural and oil sectors within the Fezzan, whilst providing a forum for differences between groups to be discussed. As a final word of caution, many reports\textsuperscript{18} have suggested that the divisions between groups in Libya have been reinforced by wider power politics between other international powers, including regional and those further afield. The international community must realize that in order to alleviate the many crises within Libya, all parties must be brought to the negotiating table.

\textit{The BIC recommends to all relevant parties in Libya,}

\textit{To improve economic prospects in the Fezzan:}

- Libya, regional countries, and the international community must strengthen the economic prospects in Libya’s border regions by galvanizing the legitimate agricultural and oil economies.
- The national army must become unified in order to maintain effective security for the Fezzan region and smuggling routes.

\textit{To ease tensions between the Fezzan’s diverse groups:}

- Representatives of the different groups must be included in a national dialogue to recognize grievances and requests in order to ease tensions and foster intra-group understanding.

\textit{To improve the overall political climate in Libya:}

- All political groups in Libya, including the GNA and LNA, must come together in dialogue in order to form political resolutions at the national level that will allow necessary reforms to be implemented.

\textsuperscript{18}https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_143%20Migration.PDF