

## **Smuggling Networks in Libya**

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### **Introduction**

This report is based on my work as freelance journalist in Libya since 2013, during which I have often focused on the phenomena of migration across the sea and smuggling networks, and conducted extensive interviews with all actors involved – migrants, smugglers, state officials and militias.

In the central Mediterranean region, Libya is one of the main transit routes for migrants; here the phenomenon acquires significant proportions since 2002 with the transit of migrants from the Horn of Africa. Since then the number of migrants flowing into Libya has gradually increased. However the previous regime used to play ‘border diplomacy’ leveraging the threat perceived by European states in relation to migration in order to bargain its power in the international arena. In this political frame the numbers of migrants in transit through Libya and heading to Europe were under control. Only in 2008 the migrants’ flow reached the peak with 37,000 migrants registered on the Italian shores. In the same year the Treaty of Friendship between Italy and Libya marked a turning point over the relations of the two countries and in 2009 the regime launched a crackdown on the smuggling business in Libya: all the factories of wooden boats along the Libyan coast were shutdown and big number of smugglers were arrested. In 2010 the number of arrivals in Italy dropped to 4400, a decrease of almost 90% in just two years.

The departures massively resumed only after the outbreak of the Revolution in 2011, when the smugglers were released and pushed by the regime to cram migrants into boats and send them to Europe, as revenge on European countries support to the revolutionaries on the ground. Throughout 2011, tens of thousands of sub-Saharan Africans, mostly seasonal workers in Libya, fled the war torn country because the revolutionary brigades used to carry out the executions against them as suspected of volunteering with Gaddafi forces. That year, approximately 59000 crossed the Mediterranean Sea and reached Italy from Tunisia and Libya, while thousands sought shelter at Choucha camp set up by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Tunisia. In the same year over 1800 migrants lost their lives at sea.

At the end of the Revolution of 2011, the structure of the human smuggling resulted fragmented because of the refusal of big numbers of smugglers to return to the nasty job. “The hope for a Libyan future was high. Many smugglers felt moral obligation to respect the spirit of martyrs’ blood and backed off from the business in order to endorse the human rights’ new call. Even the positive economical-financial developments in the post-revolutionary Libya contained the spread of business of the human smuggling: during 2012, the peaceful transition plan towards democracy combined with substantial foreign funds poured into the country and oil export’s resume brought Libya back to a prosperous track.

Late on 2012 tens of thousands of Syrians fleeing the war in their country settled in Libya to avoid refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Migrants from sub-Saharan countries and the Horn of Africa, Tunisians and Egyptians returned to seek job in the Northern African country where labour force is entirely based upon foreign workers, while the Syrians occupy positions in the construction workers. Only

Eritreans and Somalis returned to cram the embarking points for Europe. In fact by the end of 2012 about 10,380 migrants arrived via sea to Italy and in Malta, cutting off 82 per cent of the migrants' flow compared to the figures of 2011.

However during 2013 the transition process of the country suffered its first setbacks: the former revolutionary brigades refused to surrender their weapons and therefore the interim Government put them on its payroll as security forces, while cadets of Police and Army were sent to Italy and United Kingdom for training. But quickly the country fell hostage of these armed formations. In June 2013 the Federalists of the Eastern region of Cyrenaica took the control over the oil terminals hub in the Gulf of Sirt staging a prolonged blockage of oil export, accusing the authorities in Tripoli of corruption. The disillusion about a peaceful transitional process and the state of anarchy prompted a quick set-up of channels throughout the country for migrants heading to Europe.

### **Human smuggling along the coast after the Revolution**

Priorities such as the enduring fighting in the weapons awash country lowered the guard of local security forces towards the irregular migration and smuggling. The weakening of national security forces resulted from the ouster of previous regime, massively affected even the counter irregular migration sector. During Gaddafi time, General security forces, Passport Police and Counter Illegal Migration forces, all operating under the Ministry of Interior, were in charge of patrolling the Libyan coastline to stem the human smuggling. Even if the corruption was widely spread among those forces, controls were still in place. After the Revolution, the State was replaced by the new paradigm of State-city where each city is controlled by revolutionary brigades. Even national corps like Coast Guard, Passport Police, Counter Illegal Migration Department (DCIM) were infiltrated by Revolutionaries to replace previous members accused to have being closed to the Gaddafi regime. In several cases, people with no training and policy references were in charge of the patrolling and very often they simply abused their power to participate the business. Moreover the tribal structure on which the Libyan society is build up above often led local security forces to turn their eye blind on the city fellow smugglers.

In spite of some training delivered in 2013 by the European Union Borders Assistance Mission in Libya to the local border security forces, the corruption and the Libyan tribal structure breeding complicity, left the borders porous.

Veteran smugglers of migrants returned to their business as soon as they lost hope for a peaceful transition towards democracy in the Libya. The dispute over the political isolation law, banning Gaddafi time senior officers from any position in the national institutions, led to the first split in the Revolutionaries' array: forces from the most powerful revolutionary cities Zintan and Misrata started to fight each others. The law passed on May 2013. Since then all the militias across the country started to buy and stock weapons, getting ready for a potential civil war. On November, 15, clashes between civilians and a militia from Misrata in the Gargour neighborhood in Tripoli claimed 47 lives, marking the beginning of the enduring civil war.

Along them two new entries joined the business: militias and "crazy horses". Several ex revolutionary groups started to exploit the human smuggling business, often aiming to fund their weapons. Moreover the lack of security and controls gave room to youth, who were less than 18 when at the Revolution's time broke out and they

fought, joined the business as new challenge. “Crazy horses”, as described by experienced human smugglers. However all smugglers were by then armed while in Gaddafi time no one of them even dared to bring weapons; and the higher leverage of smugglers on migrants led to an escalation of violence too.

In late 2013 the standards of the smugglers’ service drastically dropped: very often the migrants were put at sea with no life jacket, no satellite phone or GPS, as security forces members reported in a round of interviews carried out on June 2014. While the vessels used to smuggle people through were, as before the Revolution, ribs (mainly imported from Tunis, United Arab Emirates and Turkey), small fishing boats (made locally), big fishing boats (made locally or imported from Tunisia). Old or unfinished wooden boats were repaired in the local workshops. Late 2013 a shortage of wooden boats in the Libyan ports pushed the smugglers to renew abandoned vessels too and to use even big metal boats with over 500 people capacity thanks to the widely spread sense of impunity in the Libya anarchy, according to a security source from Zuwara interviewed on 11 March 2015. However the metal boats, imported from Alexandria, in Egypt, were mainly monopolized from the oil smuggling network, as the security source from Zuwara explained:

*“They started to use also big metal boats, imported mainly from Alexandria, Egypt, due to the lack of controls on shores. However the metal boats are usually absorbed from oil smuggling’ s circuit”.*

The big numbers of people demanding for a passage to Europe led the smugglers to often act as mediators. Smugglers counting dozens of migrants in their farms to fill up small boats, started to sell them to smugglers putting at sea big boats.

The flow of Syrians on late 2012 in the Libyan migrants’ routes was the only element to counterbalance the escalation of violence underway. The massive presence of the Syrians in the stream of people in Libya heading to Europe boosted new methods in the smuggling circuit. For Libyans, the Syrians are "blood brothers" as Syrians were fighting their dictator Bashar Al Assad as well as Libyans defeated Gaddafi. A key element for smugglers who often boast big role in the 2011 Revolution’s fighting. Syrians were given normal flats to stay in before the sea crossing while African migrants were stock as ever in creepy farms. Syrians were put on the deck while Africans in the hold. Libyans and their country fellow smugglers also referred to them as ‘refugees’ and not migrants, while even Eritreans and Somalis were never recognized as refugees.

The closure of Choucha camp, set up by the High Commissioner for Refugee on 2011 to receive the migrants fleeing Libya during the fighting, pushed big numbers of people to seek a way to Europe back in Libya. In an interview realized on March 2014 with an Eritrean man in a Western outskirts of Tripoli, the source said that he fled Libya in 2011 to shelter in Choucha camp where he stayed with his wife and child till November 2013. He explained:

*“We were stuck there, because we could apply for asylum neither be smuggled into Europe. So we decided to come back to Libya and embark to Italy via sea. We crossed through the border South of official frontier of Ras Jadeer, moved to Tripoli to work and fund our sea crossing. But I was arrested by unidentified security people in the*

*capitol, who brought me to the DCIM detention center in Gharian, on the Western Mountain. I was held there for three months, beaten up and threatened to death by the guards asking for ransom. Only after my family in Eritrea paid a ransom of 1000 USD, I was released.”*

The family left for Europe a few weeks later. Also the method of payment changed inside the human smuggling circuit changed after the Revolution switching from cash payment for all the migrants into money transfer for Eritreans and Somalis with the full control of the mediators, usually their fellows. In fact Eritreans and Somalis hauled up in a perfectly organized smuggling network, pay to the foreign intermediaries only when they reach the destination. Their intermediaries pay in advance the Libyan smugglers across the North African country, through ‘Awala’ system or Western Union and - in order to prevent mistakes, they assign to each migrant a serial number. While Syrians pay in dollars and Sub-Saharan Africans as well as Bangladesh in Libyan currency, following their long stay in Libya to work and raise the money for the sea crossing.

### **Central Western Mediterranean route**

Libyan 4,383 km land border and 1,770 km coastline on the Mediterranean, completely out of control, left the borders porous to big numbers of migrants trying to reach Europe. Due to the fighting on the ground the routes across Libya stayed fluid and continued to change according to the security situation on the ground. The new phenomenon of fundamentalist groups along the migratory routes through the North Africa country also determines the latest.

Refugees from West, Central and Southern Africa are smuggled through the Sahel, from Mali to Libya via southern Algeria, through Niger to Agadez (a major trafficking hub) and up through southern Libya to the coast. However, for the growing number of sub-Saharan migrants, there are several alternative routes. Refugees from Eritrea, Somalia and the Horn of Africa are most likely to come overland through Sudan or via the Red Sea and the Sinai Peninsula before crossing into Libya. Another possibility is through Algeria and then Tunisia. Syrian refugees, also coming via Egypt or Sudan, enter Libya from the southern desert.

The second leg of migrants’ journey is from borders to the connection houses in the North. Migrants first are smuggled to the connection houses along the coast and then taken to Tripoli, where the mediators distribute them among the embarkation point all located on the Western coast of Libya. The embarkation points are in the Western Libya because of two reason: boats departing from East would head to Greece and Turkey, but both those countries had been sending the boats back for long, so the route was shut down: moreover the majority of migrants aim to reach directly Italy. Secondly the waters between Libyan Western shores and Italy are shallow compared to the deep ones dividing Libya and Turkey or Greece, and the percentage of failure for the creepy vessels used for the human smuggling is higher. In fact the embarkation spots are concentrated - due to terrestrial and marine morphology - across just 200 km of coastline, from the city of Misrata, 250 km East of Tripoli, to the town of Abu Qammash, 25 km East of the Tunisian border.

The main routes fuelling migrants to the embarkation points in the North pass through two large southern Libyan cities, Sabha and Kufra. From Sabha, migrants head to

Tripoli across the Nafusa mountain in the West, while those passing by the Jebel Sherif, 130 km South-West of Kufra, are smuggled to the city of Ajdabiya, in the Eastern region of Cyrenaica, the first collecting point for the human smugglers' network.

However Ajdabiya is the first migrants' gathering point in the Northern coastline for the smuggling network. Here there are dozens of *connection houses*, the places where smugglers keep migrants waiting for the transfer to the embarkation points, are spread all over the countryside around the town. Even Sirte was once a migrants' gathering point for smuggling network. But since fell under the control of fundamentalists, the city is no longer a gathering point and traffickers move all migrants from the Libyan southern desert to Ajdabiya. Then numbers of migrants are smuggled through the Tunisian border directly to Tripoli.

Private farms or abandoned factories are the common facilities used from smugglers to store migrants from a week up to two months. Sudanese and Ethiopian migrants on Libyan smugglers' payroll supervise the migrants inside. Women are often sexually abused and men beaten up for no reason. Smugglers wait to reach a certain number to move them to Tripoli.

The transfer to the capital is usually carried out by night-time, on board of normal cars, trucks and or even by refrigerators trucks. From Ajdabiya the smugglers drive southwards to city of Bani Walid or to village of Marada, only to avoid the city of Misrata where the security is tighten specially after the city launched the full fledged alert for the Islamic State in Sirte. Bribing is the way to sort out the mission on the road to Tripoli, but security groups often stop them and take migrants to the closest detention center, that is located in Kararim, about 20 km East of Misrata. Here migrants are kept for months. Deportation to the migrants' origins countries occurred - although rarely - only for migrants whose embassies cooperate with DCIM, operating under Libyan Interior Minister. So far people from Senegal and Bangladesh were transferred on the expense of their Governments. In fact DCIM complains to operate with no budget.

In Tripoli migrants do not stay in connection-houses but free in buildings packed with new entry – migrants in transit. However in Tripoli many migrants stay longer only to work and collect the money to continue their trip, although they are mainly from Ghana, Gambia, Senegal and Bangladesh. Very rarely Eritreans or Somalis do work in Libya to rise up funds for their trip. Smuggler from Eritrea, held in the detention center of Triq Siqqa in Tripoli, in an interview realized in November 2015, reported:

*“I used to work in the coffee shop of the Eritrean embassy and at the same time I used to help a migrants' mediator who works in the administration office at the embassy.”*

In Tripoli, smugglers have to select fixers to arrange for the release of migrants who have been arrested by police or militia. If migrants are kept by militias, it seems that ransoms are directly extorted by these groups from families abroad.

However the main departure's locations for the sea crossing are Misrata, Zliten (20 km West of Misrata), Garabulli (40 km East of Tripoli), Gargarish (Western outskirt of Tripoli), Tajoura (Eastern outskirt of Tripoli), Sabrata (80 km West of Tripoli) and

Zuwara (120 km West of Tripoli). Garabulli boasts as well as Zuwara a long experience in the human smuggling. The network disrupted by the previous regime in 2008, was quickly reassembled as the veteran human smugglers returned to their business, included the ones jailed by Gaddafi in 2008 and freed during the 2011 revolution. In the eastern outskirts of Tripoli, in Tajoura new entries in the business inaugurated the so-called 'low-cost journeys': driver chosen among migrants and old ribs characterize the trips offered for only 400 Libyan dinars, about 250 dollars. The latest new practise was set up by people with no navigation knowledge, but simple criminals armed, the above mentioned "crazy horses".

The majority of migrants taking this risk were Sub Saharan Africans. Sabratha, 77 km West of Tripoli, also should be given special attention as it is the only embarkation point in Libya where fundamentalist groups are involved in the business since the end of the 2011 Revolution, due to the long time presence of Al Qaeda affiliated groups.

For the maritime passage, the human smugglers along the Libyan coast need to rely on Libyan organizers who are also transporting passengers on their boats on behalf of other smuggling groups. Price for the crossing is currently variable: for large boats, the fee is about 800 dollars for a seat inside the hold; while 2,500 dollars for a place on the deck.

The treatment of migrants at sea acutely worsened, and violence spread out in the business' practises in the desert cross as well as in the connection houses and even on the shores before the departure to Europe. Migrants are often used as shield in the clashes between smugglers and security forces who seek their stake out of the business. An Eritrean migrant interviewed in the DCIM detention centre of Kararim in April 2015 said:

*"We were crossing the desert escorted by our smugglers when borders guards arrived and opened fire on us. Smugglers used us as shield and one of my friend died down there. We managed to escape. Then we were told that frontiers guards are in the business as well."*

In an interview with a member of security forces from Zuwara on 13 April 2015, the source said:

*"Libyan Coast Guard from Zawyia opened fire on a migrants' boat at sea only to stop them and force the smugglers to pay for the transit."*

While in Tajoura, migrants who failed to continue their journey after being rescued by the Libyan Coast Guard from Tripoli, reported that they were forced to get on board when they complained about the ill conditions of the vessel.

From 2013 the boundary between smuggling and trafficking practices tends to blur and migrants turn from volunteering clients into victims. Smuggled migrants are often sold out from one armed group to the other against their will.

### **Human smuggling in Libya at the time of operation Mare Nostrum**

Following the massive shipwreck on 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 2013, the Italian Government launched the humanitarian - military operation Mare Nostrum. By that time smugglers started to suffer a shortage of wooden boats. The presence of the Italian rescue vessels

off shore Libya gave an opportunity to the smugglers to put at sea even worn out boats. In an interview realized on 15 March 2015, a human smuggler from Zuwara reported as following:

*“No boat was made locally since the shut down of the local factories along the coast in 2008. A shortage of wooden boats hit also the business by the end of 2013.”*

By time human smugglers lowered the standards of their service providing migrants not only unsafe boats but also ill-conditioned engines, less supplies and equipment for navigating and communication. In the interview with a security source from Zuwara, realized in November 2015, the source reported:

*“At first the smugglers got scared because they didn’t understand the nature of the Italian operation, but soon they understood its humanitarian aim and they quickly took the advantages from that, adapting the amount of fuel and supply’s to cover the shorter distance up to coordinates where Italian forces were. “*

Moreover bigger numbers of migrants were crammed on board, as a smuggler from Zuwara underlined in an interview realized on June 2014.

Smugglers used to instruct the un-experienced driver on the Mare Nostrum vessels’ positions through the website *marinetraffic* (<http://www.marinetraffic.com/>). Even departures in bad weather conditions started to be common. Moreover the smugglers, confident about the lack of controls, opened several accounts on social media to advertise their services. The ones active in 2014 were shut down and it is not possible to consult them anymore. The combination of key words such as ‘migration’, Libya ’ and ‘Libya’, all in Arabic language, on Facebook could lead easily to the groups where pictures of Italian forces rescuing migrants at sea were shown; and phone numbers of smugglers were available.

However one of the main changes in the smugglers’ practices was the reuse of the boats for several trips. Mare Nostrum engagement mission provided rescue operations at sea, after which the boats were left drifting. Soon the smugglers started to recover the vessels and bring back to the Libyan shores. Some used to recover the boats only to sell them to smugglers, but often smugglers themselves followed the vessel they sent and loaded it with migrants for a new trip. This new phenomenon actually led to lower standards of safety as smugglers put at sea boats worn out.

In the interview realized on 3 November 2015, the security source from Zuwara explained:

*“Also a new business appeared: after the rescue operations at sea by Italian forces, the boats left floating behind them were recovered by smugglers. At first it was normal fisher men who found the boats and brought them back to the ports, but by time the information spread out and a lot of people - even the ones not involved into the human smuggling - were looking for these boats left by Mare Nostrum forces, so they could sell them to the smugglers. The smugglers got so comfortable. This new*

*method resulted by Mare Nostrum engagement rules, solved the issue of the wooden boats' shortage emerged by the end of 2013, following the massive amount of sea crossing trips' delivered throughout the year in the absence of local wooden boats factories. So the boats were used more than once and were worn out and this was one of the main reasons of the increase of shipwrecks. We informed the Italian authorities to destroy the boats as soon as they rescue the migrants but nothing was done about this and also a lot of media outlets were given these information since early 2014."*

According to a human smuggler from Zuwara, interviewed on 15 March 2015, the reuse of the boats is one of the main factors that led to the increase of shipwrecks throughout 2014:

*"Following the migrants' rescue operations started by Italians on late 2013, the boats were left at the sea and smugglers started to bring them back to Libya. Then the boats started to be used back and forth up to six times. This led the smugglers to fill up with people old wooden boats that could easily sink. That's why in the summer of 2014 many shipwrecks occurred."*

The migrants also were aware about the presence of the Italian vessels and this represented a guarantee for them to reach safely the Italian shores. However even the information circulating in the detention centers for migrants across Libya did not work as deterrence for them.

During Mare Nostrum operation, Libya fell into a civil war and this led the country to a financial crisis and the evacuation of the international community. The major oil firms suspended their activities due to the security deterioration on the ground.

In July 2014, just after the elections of the new Parliament, clashes broke out at Tripoli International Airport between Fajr Libya armed coalition supporting the outgoing Congress and Karama forces aligned with the House of Representatives (HoR), the new Parliament. The first kicked out the latest and the West fell entirely under the control of Islamist led coalition Fajr Libya, while the rival forces took control over the East where HoR sheltered in the town of Tobruq. Armed confrontations quickly were replaced by air bombing campaigns where foreign countries interfered even arming the two sides.

The sense of disillusion spread into the country pushed local militias to seek more funds for buying weapons and the human smuggling was further exploited from them as funds raising activity.

#### **End of Mare Nostrum at the height of the Libyan civil war**

When Mare Nostrum ended by the end of 2014, Libya was entangled in the full-fledged civil war between the Fajr Libya and Karama forces. The human smuggling was the last concern for the forces on the ground. Both rival sides gave attention to the phenomenon only in terms of internal security. HoR banned certain nationalities from its territory such as Palestinians and Iraqis. While in the West Egyptians were suspected to be infiltrated by their intelligence, as the main sponsor of Eastern party is Egypt.



The level of violence widely spread out hit also the human smugglers' attitude. Cases of beatings and kidnappings and rapes up to the trafficking of humans entered the daily approach of smugglers to migrants, as reported by migrants during a round of interviews carried out from June 2014 to May 2015 across the country.

A migrant from Eritrea rescued by Libyan coast Guard off shore Al Khoms on April 13, 2015:

*"I was held with hundreds of people from Eritrea and Somalis and Sub Saharan Africans for two months in a connection house in Ajdabya. The guards were Sudanese. They took our phones and they did not give us food. They used to beat up. Each time we asked about the time of our transfer to Tripoli, the smugglers reply "It's not your business" and beat us up. And they used to take women one by one to rape them. We tried to defend the women just stand around them together, but we often failed because they were armed. Even during the transfer to Tripoli by night, they stopped the truck and they took two women. When they came back, they were crying desperately and we understood what happened to them."*

With regard to internal security, only in Zuwara an effective plan to stem the human smuggling was recorded. The civil society in the town of Zuwara and the local institutions exploited the fear for the Ebola contagion, back then massively spread, to engage the community against the human smuggling in the town.

Given the chaotic context, in spite of the end of Mare Nostrum – the human smugglers did not upgrade their practices, specially because they knew about the presence of the European operation Triton's vessels. The difference of the mission between the two operations was not perceived. Even the announcement of the operation Eunavfor Med did not result in any setback from the human smugglers. It only affected their approach to the press: in the previous months they became confident and they were easy to be approached, then they were not reachable anymore. On the social media, pictures of foreign personnel rescuing migrants off shore Libya survived the end of humanitarian mission of Mare Nostrum. Accounts opened from smugglers in Libya on 2015 are still active (e.g. *الى ليبي من الةجره (اي طالي)*).

However the number of Syrians started to reduce on early 2015. The high risk connected to the war in Benghazi and the presence of Islamists at the Egyptian-Libyan border cut off one of the main route of Syrians entering Libya. Moreover in 2014 the majority of Syrians flew from Damascus, Istanbul or Cairo to Algeri, from there they drove to the Libyan border, but by late 2014 the security of passage through the Western border also worsened because of the fight between Haftar allies, forces from Zintan, and Fajr Libya coalition in the region.

### **Eunavfor Med: threat to Libyan national sovereignty**

The European policy and the threat of an intervention of international forces in the Libyan territorial waters as well as on the Libyan soil - as provided by the article 7 of the Eunavfor Med engagement rules – drew Libyan rival factions' attention. HoR sheltered in the Eastern town of Tobruq and the Congress based in Tripoli, still negotiating for a unity Government through the National Dialogue process facilitated by United Nations Special Mission to Libya (UNSMIL) at the time of the launch of

Eunavfor Med operation, feared that the main goal of the EU mission was to legitimize a foreign military intervention on the ground in the lawless country.

Both Parliaments, governments and armed coalitions leverage the so-called frontier diplomacy, as Gaddafi regime used to, only to obtain the international recognition and the subsequent support to defeat the rival. The general Khalifa Haftar, the head of Karama operation, warned Europe over terroristic infiltration among the migrants' rows, accusing his rivals that are charge of the security in the area where the embarking points are located. However the main access into Libya for migrants rely on the swaths of Libyan territory under his control. Even the town of Ajdabiya, which is the first pit stop on the coast for the majority of migrants on their route to Europe through Libya, is under his control.

On the other side of the fault-line, institutions based in Tripoli launched a massive raid campaign on the ground and at sea only to prove their commitment to counter the phenomenon of irregular migration. Big numbers of migrants were picked up in night-time raids from their bad. By June 2015 Tripoli based Government started to roll out the figures of their work.

However in the East as well as in the West, the smugglers continued to enjoy the full control over the territory. Moreover the political stalemate of the country split into two Government caused also complications to the public administration to deliver the salaries. Uneducated guards inside the detention centers for migrants started to exploit the migrants' labour in big numbers, loaning them out of the prisons to local residents for a working day.

The prisons became overcrowded and DCIM launched a program for deportation of migrants to their country of origins. Due to lack of diplomatic missions on the ground, only few missions were accomplished, mainly involving groups of Senegales who were handed over to their authorities at the border with Tunisia. However for the thousands of Eritreans and Somalis present in the Libyan DCIM centers, the option of the deportation was not even possible. Payment of ransom to the guards stayed the only solution to get released.

### **Zuwara case**

Zuwara, Amazigh city (or Berber as it is more commonly known), was the main hub of the migrants' smuggling from Libya to Europe. Amazigh community in Libya boasts the 10 per cent of the Libyan population and Amazigh community was hardly repressed from the previous regime. In the frame, even the human smugglers were perceived as defiants of the Arab central Government at Gaddafi time.

Amazigh people joined the Revolution at its first stage, but soon they took distance from the national post-Revolution institutions due to a dispute over the Constitution Draft Assembly on late 2013. Only during the civil war erupted on 2014, they fought with Fajr Libya coalition in order to protect their cities lying on the front line with Karama forces backed groups in the West.

Due to its proximity to the Tunisian border, at the time of the embargo imposed by the United States against the Gaddafi regime in the early Nineties, the city developed a system of supply smuggling. Following the crackdown of the previous Tunisian

President Ben Ali on the local human smuggling in the second half of the Nineties, a network of migrants smuggler was soon set up in Zuwara. During the regime, the smugglers were perceived as heroes against the Arab regime.

Shortly after the end of Revolution, the Amazigh call for a 'state of law' was a deterrent to the local smugglers to return to the nasty business. However in mid-2013 the first setbacks of the peaceful transition to democracy freed the human smugglers to restart their activities. In terms of counter irregular migration forces, there was a vacuum: forces belonging to DCIM, in place since Gaddafi time, were the only ones on the ground and they were not committed.

Only in 2013, the counter crime unit, known as 'masked men' due to the balaclava they wore to avoid any family dispute over their duty' results, was formed in 2013 as a voluntary force to tackle crime in general. Officially endorsed by the Interior Ministry, the 90 former - revolutionary force set up a special plan to fight the human smuggling in Zuwara.

In summer 2014, the massive shipwreck that occurred off the local shores returned dozens of corpses from the sea. The horrific scene led the local institutions and the civil society to take action against the local smugglers and endorse the counter crime unit.

The smugglers for years were considered mere "service providers" in a market governed by supply and demand. The perception of a mere revenue opportunity for years prevented a deeper reflection on the same business dynamics. However the drastic increase in deaths at sea in 2014 and the fear of Ebola virus' contagion forced the local community to take the accountability over the phenomenon of the human smuggling.

In mid-August dozens of people took the streets to demonstrate against the smugglers. Photographs of migrants' mutilated bodies were exhibited in the main squares - to raise awareness among local citizens - and at checkpoints at the entrance to the city - as a warning to migrants in transit to Europe.

In three weeks the counter crime unit arrested 700 migrants and the local authorities called the Italian Government to activate a procedure for the transfer of migrants under their custody to Tunisia, but no response was given.

On 2 October 2014, on the first anniversary of the shipwreck that led the Italian Government to kick off the operation Mare Nostrum, 265 people drowned at sea about 10 miles off shore Zuwara. Within four days 30 bodies were brought back to shore by the current.

However by the end of 2014 the civil war moved the attention of Zuwara forces on the frontline. Massive aerial bombing campaigns were carried out by Haftar forces on Zuwara and even migrants, working in the factories there, were killed. The smugglers once again exploited the security vacuum to smuggle migrants, even granting them ill service.

At the time of the two massive shipwrecks on April 2015, Zuwara forces were still entangled with the civil war. Moreover both accidents occurred close to the Italian shores and the local public opinion did not get involved with latest accidents.

On August of 2015 three massive shipwrecks occurred few miles off shore Zuwara: the first one occurred on August 3<sup>rd</sup> and a double shipwreck on 27<sup>th</sup>. About one hundred corpses were recovered on the shores. The civil society took to the streets again against the vampires and the counter crime unit launched a raid campaign to arrest the local smugglers. In two months about 60 smugglers were arrested. Since then the security forces in Zuwara have held their grip on the local human smuggling. However big numbers smugglers from Zuwara moved to other cities along the Libyan coast, while others switched into the oil smuggling.

### **Conclusions**

European policy on the counter human smuggling for Libya has been designed for a cooperation with a State, while Libya – since the end of the Revolution – has never been a State due to the local powers that survived the 2011 Revolution. Local ex revolutionary brigades have never been replaced from national security forces and this prompted a deeper corruption system.

Even the training delivered by EUBAM along the coast was held only in the capitol. The several European missions which started to work in the North African country met representatives of different cities but any support was never delivered as the security groups of the latest were not recognized as national forces.

By late 2013 the situation on the ground in Libya deteriorated due to the enduring fighting; moreover European Union by then did not find yet a strategy to cooperate with a failed state country. So the only response to the humanitarian emergency as the death toll of migrants at sea could not be political but practical. In this framework the launch of Mare Nostrum operation served as important humanitarian mission to rescue lives at sea, but on the other hand increased the numbers of migrants taking the Libyan routes and facilitated the smugglers work. The reuse of the boats left by Mare Nostrum' forces at sea should be accounted as one of the main factors of the massive shipwrecks registered since the launch of the Italian operation.

The withdrawal of the Italian vessels and the immediate replacement with Triton forces gave a false perception to the smugglers as well as to the migrants about a continuity of humanitarian mission. Then smugglers and migrants continued to exploited the security vacuum.

Moreover the shift between Mare Nostrum and Triton occurred when the civil war in Libya was escalating. The bombing campaigns were carried out by Haftar forces on his rivals in the West, drew all the attention of the authorities and security forces in the region. On February 2015 the Islamic State took control over Sirte pushing the security forces of Misrata, assigned to counter the human smuggling in the Central Libyan sector, to move their men on the frontline in Sirte. Forces from Misrata lightened their grip on the human smugglers network operating between Ajdabyia, the first gathering point of migrants on the Libya coastline, and Tripoli.

In absence of a State in Libya and a solution to the Libyan political crisis from the international community, the rescue mission off shore Libya was still on 2015 the only practical response from Europe to prevent a massive death toll at sea. In fact in a lawless country, even threat such as the arrest of smugglers by Eunvafor Med cannot work as deterrence. The smugglers continued to work and still work nowadays and they will continue till local forces on the ground crackdown on them, as it was seen in Zuwara. However this scenario is not likely until Libya will enjoy stability.