

The kingpin of Libya's human trafficking mafia

Al Bija is the biggest player in the coast guard "mafia" that has established a stranglehold on the lucrative human trafficking business in Zawiya and the surrounding coastal region. Nancy Porsia has this exclusive investigation for TRT World.



Photo by: Ricardo Garcia/TRT World

In Libya, the line between "search and rescue" and the trade in human beings is increasingly non-existent. This detention centre for women refugees is in Surman, not far from Zawiya.

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ZAWIYA, Libya — Kalashnikov shots rumble from the city's port as he meets with *TRT World* in a café near the coast of the city of Zawiya. The man is tense while he cautiously hunts for an isolated table.

"They attempted to take my life twice already because they want me shut up," he says in an anonymous interview. He works in the security services and he is here to speak out about his attempt to fight against the trafficking mafia.

The port of Zawiya is a fort on the southern Mediterranean coast, 45 kilometres west of Tripoli.

"At sunset the clans involved in the trafficking [of oil and humans] even drive tanks around the main roundabout of the city centre," says the man, who agreed to speak with *TRT World* on condition of anonymity out of fear for his life.

Zawiya's port has become the "headquarters" of human and oil trafficking on the western coast of Libya. In addition to the highly-ranked security officer, *TRT World* spoke with multiple sources over a period of several months during the course of this investigation.

It's no coincidence that the largest oil refinery in western Libya happens to be located here. The Tripoli-based National Oil Corporation (NOC), which officially controls the oil exports remittances to the Central Bank of Libya, has no access to the funds generated here, although they are officially

supposed to oversee the management of the oil sector in Zawiya. Neither has the Central Command of the Libyan Coast Guard in the capital managed to bring Zawiya under its chain of command.

The collapse of the state

The Abu Hamyra tribe, which has amassed influence in this part of the country in the midst of the anarchic power vacuum created by the country's three competing governments, is the only real manager on the ground. Abu Hamyra is one of the main tribes in Zawiya.

Six years have passed since the ouster of the former Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi. Following the initial enthusiasm for the transition to democracy, the country has virtually collapsed into a spiral of violence, becoming a breeding ground for crime and illicit traffic.



Human trafficking is a risky but lucrative business for those involved. Photo: Nighttime raid in a Tripoli suburb to arrest people smugglers and irregular migrants on April 29, 2016. (Ricardo Garcia/TRT World)

The country marked the sixth anniversary of the Libyan Revolution last week, on February 17, yet Libya is tittering ever closer to bankruptcy, or even the prospect of the state splitting into multiple entities. Since the start of the civil war in mid-2014, various governments have been competing to establish control over the territory. None of them has been able to do this in any significant way.

The brigades that emerged to champion the 2011 revolution refused to give up their arms after Gaddafi's fall. They quickly devolved into competing militias, setting up various parallel security apparatus in the aftermath. With control of the security forces comes control of the increasingly fractured economy.

The militia-controlled trafficking of diesel and gasoline, worth ten million euros per month, is relatively safe – the European military forces deployed at sea within the EUNAVFOR Med (the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean) are largely turning a blind eye.

The business of human smuggling is much riskier for those involved, but remains highly attractive to entrepreneurial militia leaders such as Al Bija. It doesn't require major investment, and the profit margins are still very high.

"In the past two years, the militias have been infiltrating the administration of the refinery here, and of the coastal guard as well," the source says.

The human trafficking kingpin

Abdurahman Al Milad Aka Bija, who goes by Al Bija, is the new commander of the coast guard in Zawiya. At just 28 years old, he is also the kingpin of the local trade in human beings.

"Al Bija is the undisputed leader of the human traffic trade," the source says.

Al Bija works under the protection of Al Qasseb, *nom de guerre* of Mohamed Khushlaf, who is head of the security department of Zawiya's refinery. Backed by his cousin and lawyer Walid Khushlaf, Al Qasseb exercises total control over the refinery and the port of Zawiya. The Khushlaf cousins are part of the mighty Abu Hamyra tribe, as is Al Bija. Only in the last few months, militias from another local tribe, Ulad Saqqar, have started to challenge Al Bija and Al Qasseb for control of the port.

An amateur video published last week by the British daily *The Times* [shows him and other members of the Libyan Coast Guard beating up refugees](#) packed onto a rubber boat during a "rescue operation" at sea. The second man appearing in the video, a source in Zawiya confirmed to *TRT World* by phone, Al Bija is shown kneeling as they lash the cowering refugees with a rope, just a few kilometres away from the Libyan shore.

A man working at the local oil refinery confirmed to *TRT World* the leading role Al Bija and Al Qasseb play inside the human smuggling business. Our second source also did not want to disclose his identity, fearing retaliation.

"Al Bija's people store [sic] migrants in a camp somewhere inside the town," he says. "The [migrants] are forced to work and clean."

An open secret

Al Bija's stranglehold over human trafficking here is an open secret that international actors are almost certainly aware of, multiple sources confirm.

"The Europeans should have all these details after they have been gathering for months information at sea as part of Operation Sophia," the man explains, referring to EUNAVFOR Med's training programme for the Libyan Coast Guard and Navy.

Launched in 2015, EUNAVFOR Med was initially designed to dismantle the smuggling network in the central Mediterranean, but soon included search and rescue activities (SAR) for refugees at sea too. It is being run in coordination with Fayeza Mustafa al-Sarraj, who heads the UN-backed government in Tripoli.

Despite the deployment of scores of EU military boats, however, the flow of refugees' boats hailing from Libyan shores has continued unabated. Last year alone, 181,436 refugees made their way to Italy via the Mediterranean Sea. Some 5,096 others drowned a few kilometres off the Libyan shore, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).



The waves of refugees attempting to reach Europe from Libya show no sign of ending soon. Photo: Aboard the boat "Astral" sent to rescue migrants off the coast of Libya by the Barcelona-based NGO Proactiva Open Arms. (Ricardo Garcia/TRT World)

The majority of them left from the area surrounding Zawiya and the nearby port town of Sabratha, which is controlled by the same coastal guard network. A large proportion of the thousands of men, women and children who drowned came from western Libya too.

Most recently, the Libyan Red Crescent reported 74 bodies had washed ashore at Zawiya on Monday morning. Joel Millman, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration (IOM), told Reuters that local staff had reported that "traffickers came and removed the engine from the boat and left the craft adrift." Millman described the incident as appearing to have been "either deliberate punishment or murder of migrants."

In early February, the EU approved a plan to add \$2.1 million to the \$1.9 billion "Trust Fund for Africa," which will be dedicated to financing the Libyan maritime forces; again, in coordination with Serraj's government.

Last September, the Italian and Dutch navies also started to train the Libyan coast guard for SAR missions as part of Operation Sophia. The training and equipment will likely enable Tripoli-allied Libyan forces to patrol the sea up to 130 kilometres offshore, and to bring refugees back to Libya.

Engines ripped off boats

Although this is coordinated with Tripoli, not Al Bija's rogue Zawiya coast guard, the nature of the growing EU-Libyan collaboration is nonetheless raising some eyebrows in Libya.

"This agreement between the European Union and the Libyan Coast Guard is ridiculous. They are calling for the smugglers themselves to stem the trafficking," *TRT World's* source says. "All smugglers [west of Tripoli] pay Al Bija his stake."

Smugglers who don't pay a cut of their earnings to Al Bija find their boats intercepted by his "coast guard," who either take their engines and leave the refugee-laden boats stranded at sea, or bring them back to the Al Nasser Detention Centre in Zawiya, which belongs to Al Bija's Abu Hamyra tribe.

"For anyone jailed at Al Nasser, the forced labour is the only way for the refugees to pay off their freedom," the source explains.

Smugglers often try to resist or to challenge Al Bija to protect their business.

Ahmed Dabbashi, who goes by the alias of *Al Ammu*, "The Uncle" in Arabic, is a 35-year-old man from the city of Sabrata. He became very popular for his heroic deeds during the fighting against Gaddafi forces in 2011, and is a competing human trafficking kingpin.

"A few weeks ago Al Ammu fired on Al Bija's men" says Mohamed, who volunteers for the government-run humanitarian organisation the Libyan Red Crescent to recover refugees' bodies which have washed ashore after shipwrecks off Sabrata, 40 kilometres to the west of Zawiya.

Dabbashi later made a fortune out of smuggling refugees and built up the strongest militia, *Anas Dabbashi*, named after one of his cousins who died during the Revolution, in the town that once was famous for its Roman ruins.

"Anas Dabbashi militia runs even the external security of the Italian oil giant Eni's Mellitah Oil & Gas compound," explains Mohamed, while walking on the beach and pointing out trousers and shoes and coats left behind from refugees before the sea crossing.

Caught in the brutal power struggles are the refugees. Some are paying for it with their lives.

With sea salt marking his face, and wet clothes stuck to his body, Mohamed, a 22-year-old from Ghana, took shelter in the shadow of the port's wall in the town of Surman, 30 kilometres to the west of Zawiya.

"We left from Sabratha and four miles [6.5 kilometres] offshore, an armed group attacked us and ripped off our rubber boat's engine," said Mohamed, squeezing his drenched pants in the burning sun when TRT World encountered him at the port last September. "We [only] survived thanks to a fisherman who fetched us."

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