

WHAT IS EUROPE PAYING FOR IN LIBYA?

BY: SHIMAA SAMY

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Source: AI generated Picture

“Europe is paying Libya's security forces with no real oversight, and the money may end up in the hands of those who abuse migrants”, warns Tarek Lamloum, head of the Benghazi Center for Migration and Asylum Studies, in a statement to us.

On 13 October, Brussels added another 25 million Euros, this time for the east, the territory held by the military commander Khalifa Haftar. Ursula von der Leyen announced it in her letter to the leaders of the 27 member states ahead of their summit in Brussels. The money is for border management, search and rescue, and the fight against smugglers. The EU has already committed at least 60 million euros in migration funding for Libya since 2025.

Two weeks earlier, a different notice had gone out. On 26 September, the lawyer Thuraya al Tuwaibi, one of the loudest voices of the „No to Resettlement“ movement, wrote on Facebook that ‘public anger had fixed 1 October as the last day undocumented foreigners could stay in the country’. In Tripoli, people took her at her word. Nigerian migrants told Sahara Reporters that their landlords had asked them to leave before the first of the month. Many simply stopped going out. In the east, the authorities did not wait. In 48 hours at the end of September, the migration agency in Tobruk rounded up 3,061 migrants for deportation.

Since 1 October, Lamloum says, ‘Nothing real has changed in Tripoli, not the rules for foreign workers, not the status of migrants, not the way returns and deportations are carried out under the law. What has changed is the hate, the spread of false information, and the pressure on the most vulnerable: women, children and the sick’. His team has documented women in labour turned away from public hospitals in Tripoli and pushed towards private clinics that charge large sums. In some cases, his centre followed suit; clinics held patients' papers, and even newborn babies, until the bill was paid or a Libyan guarantor came forward. Families have been evicted from their homes, and simple rooms now rent at inflated prices. ‘This is not a reform of migration policy’, he says. ‘It is more pressure and more abuse, and women and children pay the highest price’.

Follow the money

The EU spent about 700 million Euros in Libya between 2014 and 2020, 455 million of it through the Trust Fund for Africa. On paper, protection leads, with 52 percent of that money, against 13 percent for borders. In practice, control keeps growing. Since 2017, the Trust Fund has paid 42.2 million Euros to Italy's Interior Ministry to build Libyan maritime surveillance and desert border control. The 2025 and 2026 money adds cooperation with Haftar's east, whose authorities the EU does not formally recognize.

A rumor that became policy

The „**No to Resettlement**“ movement began in late 2025 as a rumor on social media that international agencies were quietly settling African migrants in Libya for good. The UN says no such program exists. By summer 2026, the rumor had become state policy. The acting interior minister, Emad Trabelsi, named irregular migration a top priority, and in the East, Saddam Haftar, deputy commander of the eastern forces, ordered mass arrests and expulsions. Protesters sealed the UNHCR compound in Tripoli with earth banks and welded its gates shut. On 7 September, men stormed an IOM center in Siyahiya and assaulted migrants and staff, according to Libya Crimes Watch. Libya deported 7,303 foreigners by air in August and 6,130 in September, according to its Passport Investigation Department.

Lamloum believes the interior ministry in Tripoli has profited politically from the movement, even though it has never declared any link to it. Through months of sealed offices and assaults on IOM and other staff, he says, the ministry never clearly condemned the attacks or reminded anyone of the rules of peaceful protest and the duty to protect humanitarian workers.

In his view, the minister is among the main political winners, and uses the climate the movement created to press the EU for more money. He points to a telling detail. The movement wants international agencies shut in Tripoli, but says nothing of their offices in the East, and counts migrants in the capital, not in Misrata or Benghazi. Some of those taking part, he adds, have genuine concerns about how migration is managed and how migrants are registered. 'But the movement itself', he says, 'is being used to serve the minister'.

An ICE with the different name

Libya has no single agency that finds, holds and removes people. Yet the pieces EU money pays for, laid side by side, add up to something similar. EU and Italian funds have trained and equipped the Libyan coast guard and built a rescue coordination center in Tripoli. In May 2026, the EU naval mission Irini signed an arrangement with coastal authorities in the east that, according to Statewatch, expands a partnership accused of enabling abuses against people on the move. Between 2018 and September 2025, about 145,437 people were intercepted and returned to Libya, to at least 40 detention centers. The one in Tobruk was built for 150 people and holds about 900. The way out is EU-funded voluntary return through IOM, which the UN Human Rights Office found in 2022 could rarely be called voluntary, because migrants accepted it as the only way out of detention.

'We found no public evidence that EU money directly pays for the street raids or the deportation flights'. Lamloum shares the worry. The border guard who receives European support answers to the interior ministry, he notes, where the minister sets policy, and his brother holds wide influence in the General Security apparatus, which also receives European delegations. That, in his view, creates a real risk that support reaches forces involved in arresting and deporting migrants, or in abusing them. But he draws a line. Supporting institutions is one thing, he says. Proving that specific sums reached the units or people behind specific abuses is another, and that requires transparency and an independent investigation of where the money goes.

The paradox

For years, the EU has paid IOM to fly migrants home from Libya, and in her letter of 13 October, von der Leyen again said the EU and IOM support voluntary returns from Libya to countries of origin. The „No to Resettlement“ movement sees the same agency as the enemy. In September, IOM's center was stormed, and the next day it was blocked with cement. The agency Europe pays to take migrants out of Libya was closed by people who accuse it of keeping them in.

The head of Libya's National Institution for Human Rights, Ahmed Hamza, called the campaign against IOM reckless and degrading, Libya Review reported. He also accused the acting interior minister of using it for his own political ends, and of trying to take control of the money linked to voluntary return and deportation. If he and Lamloum are right, the fight over migrants in Tripoli is also a fight over Europe's money.

Who is watching what you pay for?

The EU's funding agreements allow it to suspend support when human rights are violated. In practice, it rarely materializes. In 2024, the European Court of Auditors found that most staff had received no guidance on how to report alleged violations, and that there was no practical guidance on when to suspend, and found that the Commission had overstated the results it reported. The Commission told MEPs its Libya projects had caused no harm, but refused to release the monitoring reports behind that claim, and the European Ombudsman found the refusal was maladministration. When a patrol boat donated by Italy under an EU-funded program opened fire on the rescue ship Sea-Watch 5 in May 2026, the Commission called it an unfortunate incident and said its support would continue. In March 2023, a UN fact-finding mission found that EU support had aided and abetted crimes against migrants in Libya. New funding has been signed since, with no new conditions.

If nothing changes, Lamloum expects a harder future for African migrants in Libya: more arrests, more people held in detention centers, more economic exploitation and extortion, and more people forced to turn to smugglers. Many never meant to stay in Libya and see it only as a country of transit, he says. Others, mostly asylum seekers, have waited years for UNHCR to resettle them in a third country.

He does not ask Europe to end all cooperation with Libya. He asks it to seriously rethink funding Libyan security bodies facing documented accusations of abuse, and to make any support conditional on real, verifiable safeguards, with independent oversight of the money and equipment. The wide influence of the Trabelsi family inside the interior ministry and its security bodies, he says, calls for closer scrutiny of who receives European funds, equipment and training. He also asks for more resources for health care, for the protection of women and children, for independent humanitarian groups, and for safe and legal routes for migrants and asylum seekers.

Migrants will only be pushed further into the hands of smugglers and traffickers. How long will Europe look away in exchange for fewer arrivals on its shores?