

INSIDE JOB

Libya's
Fuel
Smuggling
Escalation

November 2025



THE SENTRY

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Executive Summary

Fuel smuggling in Libya has escalated into a major national crisis, costing the country about \$6.7 billion per year.¹ Although fuel smuggling has long been one of the North African nation's most persistent illicit activities, a few key Libyan actors—with foreign assistance—have significantly intensified the exploitation of Libya's bloated fuel subsidy program, whose dollar size surged to unprecedented levels from 2022 to 2024. The consequences both within and outside Libya have been numerous, including inflation and the further consolidation of power by the Haftar family in Benghazi and, to a lesser extent, the Dabaiba family in Tripoli, as well as the fact that foreign players—including Russian armed units and Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—have benefited from the country's fuel crisis.

Despite steady oil production and favorable market conditions throughout 2023 and most of 2024,^{2,3} the Central Bank of Libya (CBL) reported a hard currency deficit two years in a row.^{4,5} The fiscal imbalance stems in large part from Libya's swapping of crude output for fuel imports, with more than half of the imported fuel siphoned off by criminal networks.⁶ Libya's outsized fuel subsidy program reduces the amount of crude that Libya can sell for dollars, depriving the CBL of the hard currency it needs for food, medicine, and other essential imports. By reducing the National Oil Corporation's (NOC) income, Libya's excessive fuel imports have also made paying government salaries more difficult.⁷ Thus, the rise in smuggling activities has contributed to the Libyan dinar's depreciation on the black market and added to consumer price inflation, hurting households across the country.⁸ Plus, as corrupt officials increasingly dominate the fuel subsidy program, legitimate consumers face fuel shortages, risks of electricity outages, and higher prices at the pump.^{9,10,11,12,13} As a result of the takeover by illicit networks, the fuel subsidy program has become less accessible to those it's meant to serve, exacerbating the economic strain on Libyan households.¹⁴

Smuggling not only deprives the CBL of crucial dollar revenues, it also undermines the integrity of the NOC, whose hydrocarbon exports account for virtually all of Libya's income.¹⁵ Years of gigantic illicit profits derived from the fuel scheme have enabled some corrupt networks not only to organize themselves better but also to expand their influence—across the NOC and other formal institutions alike—often causing lasting damage. Meanwhile, the surge in fuel smuggling means that a larger share of Libya's oil wealth is stolen, hurting the legitimate economy and worsening hardships for ordinary citizens.

Saddam Haftar, the primary force behind the surge in fuel smuggling, has reshaped the sector to be more coordinated. His influence over the NOC, particularly since 2022, as well as his increasingly integrated armed factions and expanded maritime capacity, has industrialized previously scattered activities. The Haftar coalition's armed dominance over most of eastern Libya and significant parts of the south has facilitated larger fuel flows into Mediterranean destinations by sea and sub-Saharan Africa by land, spurring even politically unaligned smuggling networks in Libya's northwest to adapt to the growth. Illicit operators in the northwestern cities Zawiyah and Misrata now channel increased fuel imports southward into Haftar-held areas, from which they are in turn funneled into Chad, Niger, and Sudan. Saddam Haftar's emergence as the sector's foremost leader has helped precipitate the professionalization of smuggling operations nationwide and the strengthening of illicit networks even in areas outside his direct control.



The effects of Libya's fuel crisis stretch beyond its borders. EU states such as Malta and Italy are affected by the infiltration of illegally diverted fuel from Libya into their economies.¹⁶ Russia benefits in several ways, with Libya's fuel smuggling enabling Moscow's military activities in sub-Saharan Africa. The illicit flow of fuel from southern Libya to Sudan's RSF also facilitates the genocidal war waged in Darfur, Sudan.^{17, 18}

Despite a series of pledges from Libyan leaders to lift or reform the fuel subsidies,^{19, 20, 21} the swift growth in smuggling volumes in 2022-2024 would not have been possible without their tacit acceptance. In fact, some of Libya's leaders personally profited from this expanding illicit trade, which has triggered wide-ranging macroeconomic and political implications.

All in all, the 2022-2024 surge in fuel smuggling has cost the Libyan population about \$20 billion—an alarming figure that demands decisive international action.²² Libyans need support in safeguarding their country's primary revenue source, the NOC, which has been instrumentalized and made fragile by powerful figures—based in Tripoli and Benghazi alike—who lack any legitimate authority over the NOC's internal affairs. These politicians and security leaders who claim to serve the public and fight organized crime have, in fact, acted as the chief architects of Libya's fuel smuggling industry, often with backing from foreign states. Still in office, the same rulers will now likely use their vast ill-gotten wealth to entrench themselves even further. Without robust international intervention to hold culprits responsible, actors within and outside the NOC will continue undermining Libya's economic viability.



Old Scheme, Boosted to Unprecedented Scale*

Initially set up by Colonel Muammar Qadhafi's regime in the early 1970s, Libya's fuel subsidy program was designed to reduce costs for all domestic energy users—from individual consumers to industrial facilities, public services, and commercial operations.²³ It guarantees a sale price of \$0.03 per liter of refined petroleum product, mainly diesel and gasoline, for all buyers.²⁴

Brega Petroleum Marketing Company, the distribution arm of the National Oil Corporation (NOC), supplies subsidized fuel to authorized entities whenever they issue a request.²⁵ Those recipients include the General Electricity Company of Libya (GECOL); security actors, such as the police and the armed forces, whose fuel consumption is not made public; and four special-status distribution companies—Rahla,²⁶ Highway Services,²⁷ OLA Energy,²⁸ and Golden Sharara.²⁹ Brega Petroleum's tanker trucks typically transport fuel from maritime ports or domestic refineries to the country's principal storage facilities, such as the one in Sabha.^{30, 31, 32} From these depots, tanker trucks belonging to the four major distribution companies deliver the fuel to petrol stations.^{33, 34} Brega Petroleum also sells fuel at low prices to some private oil services firms, such as Trust Group Oil Services and Black Gold Oil Services and Manufacturing.^{35, 36, 37}

This system is widely abused, as many recipients inflate their requisitions, with GECOL being among the worst offenders, even though most of its electricity plants burn natural gas rather than liquid fuel.^{38, 39, 40} GECOL did not respond to a request for comment. To meet the demand, the NOC supplies Brega Petroleum in two ways: by operating four modest-sized domestic refineries and by procuring large quantities of foreign-refined fuel from the global market.^{41, 42, 43, 44} Origins of those imports include Russia and, to a lesser extent, Italy, Greece, Cyprus, and Belgium.^{45, 46} Libya's six entry points for foreign product are Zawiyah,⁴⁷ Tripoli,⁴⁸ Misrata,⁴⁹ Ras Lanuf,⁵⁰ Benghazi,⁵¹ and Marsa al-Harriqa,⁵² near Tobruk.⁵³

For many years, the entity responsible for funding such imports was the Central Bank of Libya (CBL), which paid the foreign fuel suppliers in dollars.⁵⁴ This system came to an end in 2021, when the CBL, faced with a surge in fuel import demands that far outstripped earlier allocations, stopped providing dollar funding for all fuel imports. The interruption prompted the NOC to switch to a crude-for-fuel swap mechanism.^{55, 56, 57, 58}

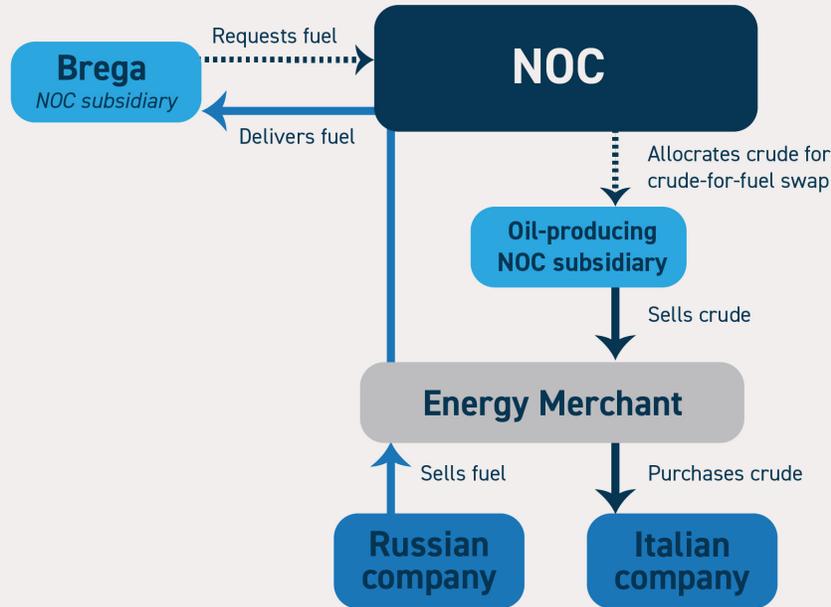
When it enters a swap, the NOC allocates premium-grade crude to a foreign energy merchant in exchange for payment in-kind via refined petroleum products.^{59, 60} To make this happen, the foreign energy merchant markets the Libyan crude internationally and, on behalf of the NOC, uses the dollar proceeds to source the refined fuel.⁶¹ While this practice ensures Libya's fuel supply, it also bypasses public reporting. From 2021 through 2024, the NOC kept most of these swaps off the balance sheet, thus eluding an accounting of the outright sale of crude and the outright purchase of fuel.^{62, 63}

* Reports by The Sentry are based on interviews, documentary research, and, where relevant, financial forensic analysis. In some cases, sources speak to The Sentry on the condition that their names not be revealed, out of concern for their safety or other potential retaliatory action. The Sentry establishes the authoritativeness and credibility of information derived from those interviews through independent sources, such as expert commentary, financial data, original documentation, and press reports. The Sentry endeavors to contact the persons and entities discussed in its reports and afford them an opportunity to comment and provide further information.



Crude for Fuel

From 2021 to 2024, the NOC bought billions of dollars in refined fuel from abroad through crude-for-fuel swaps. In early 2025, the NOC said it had ended the practice.



Adopting this approach rendered the NOC's fuel subsidy program independent from the CBL, which in turn stopped reporting the costs associated with it in public expense reports.⁶⁴ The net result was a further increase in fuel imports by the NOC, which was able to purchase ever-larger quantities without having to depend on any other authority's willingness to provide dollar funding. Thus, unencumbered by previous financial constraints, the fuel subsidy program's expansion intensified throughout 2022—the year Farhat Benq dara replaced Mustafa Sanallah as chairman of the NOC—ushering in a period of drastic expansion in fuel smuggling activities.^{65, 66, 67} Surging from about 20.4 million liters per day in early 2021 to a peak of more than 41 million liters per day by late 2024, the NOC's fuel imports more than doubled.⁶⁸

In response to a request for comment, the NOC indicated that it is not legally authorized to determine the quantities of imported fuel, pointing instead to the Committee of Major Consumers.⁶⁹ This Committee, it said, consists of GECOL, Misrata's Iron and Steel Company (LISCO), the country's cement factories, and the main fuel distribution companies.⁷⁰ The NOC added that it was committed to providing the quantities specified by all major consumers, a process supervised by the government.⁷¹ The NOC also defended the legitimacy of the fuel allocations going to GECOL, invoking signs of economic recovery and arguing that GECOL maintained uninterrupted services in recent years thanks to the availability of the necessary fuel to operate its electricity plants.⁷² The NOC asserted that declines in its own natural gas output led to increased fuel imports meant for electricity production.⁷³ The NOC provided no numerical data to support its claims. Regarding the NOC's failure to systematically report fuel import costs,



the NOC maintained that those costs do not fall outside the scope of regular public reporting and that all related administrative contracts are subject to oversight by the Libyan Audit Bureau.⁷⁴ The NOC did not share any such reports to support its assertion.

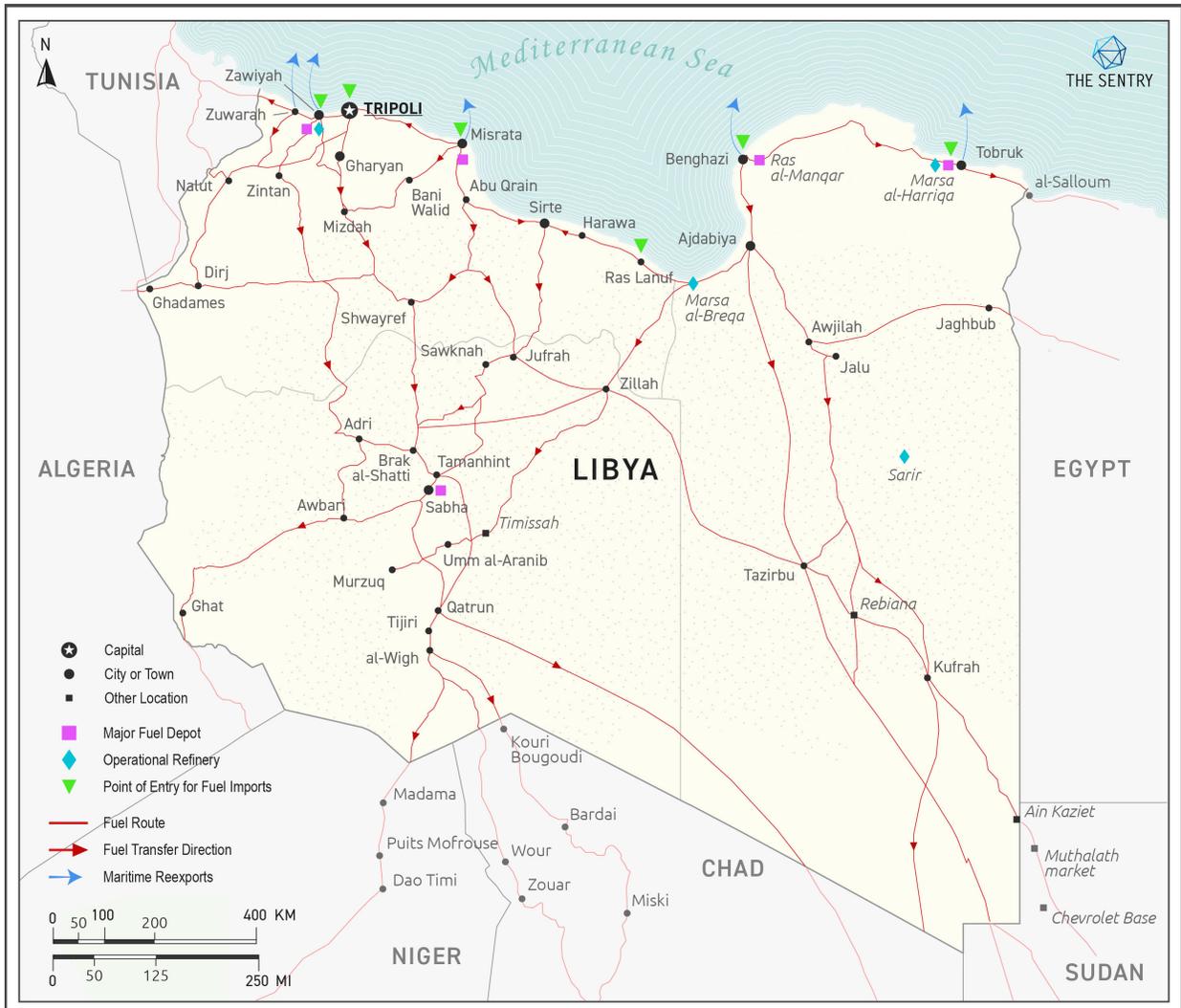
Former NOC Chairman Farhat Benqdara (July 2022 through January 2025), in response to a request for comment, noted that, under his tenure, the NOC remained transparent and proactive in its cooperation with both national institutions and international organizations.⁷⁵ He also indicated that he had submitted a number of proposals to the Council of Ministers and the Supreme Council for Energy Affairs advocating for a comprehensive set of measures to reduce reliance on subsidized diesel in electricity generation.⁷⁶ These suggestions, Benqdara added, included increasing natural gas production, promoting gas and renewable energy for electricity generation, and initiating the gradual removal of fuel subsidies.⁷⁷

Long before the 2021 switch to swaps, Libya's fuel subsidy program enabled smuggling.^{78, 79, 80, 81, 82} By the early 1980s, Libya's fuel was already being smuggled into neighboring countries like Tunisia and Chad.^{83, 84} Such illicit activity was often deliberately overlooked by Qadhafi's regime, which viewed toleration of the practice as a means of placating some peripheral communities engaged in it—such as the Amazigh communities who populate the border area near Tunisia.^{85, 86, 87, 88}

Since the overthrow of Qadhafi in 2011, fuel smuggling in Libya has evolved, undergoing several phases.⁸⁹ From 2012 to 2016, post-revolutionary anarchy and state profligacy yielded a spike in smuggling volumes, which then decreased.⁹⁰ Later, when the civil war ceased in June 2020, armed groups focused more on illicit activities writ large, including fuel smuggling.⁹¹ This pronounced, deliberate push was made possible through firmer control over strategic parcels of territory, deeper penetration of various public administrations, a stronger presence in the private sector, and more brazen backing from foreign actors. The pivotal moment was when the current Tripoli government took office in March 2021.^{92, 93} According to several Libyan officials knowledgeable about these negotiations, the current Tripoli government began its tenure with a firm intention to buy peace by channeling large amounts of public wealth to armed factions capable of disrupting stability—chief among them the Haftar family in eastern Libya.^{94, 95, 96, 97, 98}

Amid such arrangements, Libya's incumbent rulers deliberately laid the groundwork for the fuel smuggling surge seen between 2022 and 2024. Kleptocrats and organized crime networks—working alongside corrupt officials who wield influence over state bureaucracy, logistical hubs, distribution points, routes, and border crossings—orchestrated a drastic increase in illegal export of subsidized fuel.⁹⁹ Destinations include Sudan, Chad, Niger, Tunisia, Albania, Malta, Italy, and Turkey.^{100, 101, 102, 103} The transportation methods involve various categories of vessels, tanker trucks, and smaller vehicles—even rogue pipelines, depending on the geographical context and specific circumstances of the business model.^{104, 105, 106} This illegal fuel exportation causes domestic shortages, forcing citizens to pay much higher prices at unofficial outlets, especially in Libya's peripheral areas.¹⁰⁷





On land, Libya's fuel smuggling networks have grown more interconnected. The northwest sends fuel to Tunisia and to the southwest, which also receives fuel from Benghazi and distributes it to sub-Saharan Africa. The east supplies Egypt and Sudan.

While the NOC often claims to be a victim of fuel smuggling,¹⁰⁸ it bears immense responsibility. The NOC has inspection rights and managerial privileges over its subsidiary, Brega Petroleum, which itself should investigate the dramatic ballooning of its distribution volumes.¹⁰⁹ Yet there is no indication that the NOC's leadership scrutinized the inner workings of Brega Petroleum in 2022–2024.

While both Brega Petroleum and the NOC sometimes imply in public comments that legitimate and illegitimate demands are indistinguishable,^{110, 111} former NOC officials interviewed by The Sentry disagree. One of them pointed out that the Kufrah area's small population cannot justify the multimillion-liter daily fuel consumption associated with that geographic zone.^{112, 113, 114}



Brega Petroleum, the NOC's wholly owned subsidiary, did not respond to a request for comment. The NOC, in its response, denied The Sentry's findings and stated that it held documented and legally substantiated responses that refute such findings.¹¹⁵ The NOC did not provide any such documentation to The Sentry. The NOC asserted that Brega Petroleum has fulfilled its duties in accordance with its legal mandate.¹¹⁶ Brega Petroleum, according to the NOC, operates through a board of directors and sells the entire fuel quantities to the designated beneficiaries.¹¹⁷ Once the sale is completed, the NOC said, both ownership of the fuel and legal responsibility are transferred to the receiving parties, which include GECOL, the distribution companies, and strategic factories.¹¹⁸ Separately, former NOC chairman Farhat Benq dara told The Sentry that combating fuel smuggling did not fall within the NOC's jurisdiction, but rather within that of the government, security authorities, and military institutions. The determination of national fuel demand, Benq dara added, was a government responsibility.¹¹⁹

This and many other examples illustrate Libyan decision makers' evasiveness and refusal to take accountability. As early as March 2021, then-incoming Prime Minister Abdelhamid Dabaiba of the UN-recognized Government of National Unity vowed to reform Libya's fuel subsidy program—but he did nothing.¹²⁰ Dabaiba made similar empty promises in January 2024 about a profound overhaul of the country's fuel subsidy program.¹²¹ In August 2024, Dabaiba's government again appeared as though it might act decisively against fuel smuggling as he suspended Fuad Belrahim, the head of Brega Petroleum;^{122, 123, 124, 125} three weeks later, he backpedaled and reinstated Belrahim.^{126, 127} Throughout all of this, the Haftar coalition has been consolidating its power across eastern and southern Libya, acquiring greater control over the fuel economy. The Government of National Unity did not respond to a request for comment.

A \$6.7 Billion per Year Issue

Independent maritime data service Kpler indicates that in 2024, Libya imported an average of about 234,000 barrels of fuel per day, equating to roughly 37.2 million liters daily.¹²⁸ In addition to the imported fuel, another 13.8 million liters a day is produced domestically.^{129, 130}

Electricity generation in Libya, which relies on natural gas, crude oil, and fuel, requires about 5.8 million liters of fuel each day.^{131, 132, 133} Beyond electricity generation, heavy industry, and transport activities—such as manufacturing, steel plants, agriculture, maritime, and aviation—likely consume 2.4 million liters per day.^{134, 135}

Aside from these categories, Libya has about 3.5 million motor vehicles,^{136, 137} which consume roughly 15.7 million liters per day, assuming that each vehicle travels 20,000 kilometers per year on average.^{138, 139}

All in all, the combined fuel consumption for electricity generation (5.8 million liters), other industrial activities (2.4 million liters), and motor vehicles (15.7 million liters) stands at around 23.9 million liters per day. Given the availability of roughly 50.9 million liters per day, this leaves 27 million liters per day likely diverted.

The fuel imports of 37.2 million liters per day cost the NOC \$9.46 billion worth of crude oil per year, which works out to be \$0.70 per liter.¹⁴⁰ As for the fuel produced



domestically by the NOC, its fair valuation is \$0.62 per liter, based on average Mediterranean market prices in 2024.¹⁴¹ From these elements, one can deduce that approximately \$6.7 billion worth of fuel was smuggled out of the country in 2024.^{142, 143} This means that the national wealth presently lost to fuel smuggling would be sufficient for Libya to more than triple its spending on both healthcare and education.^{144, 145}

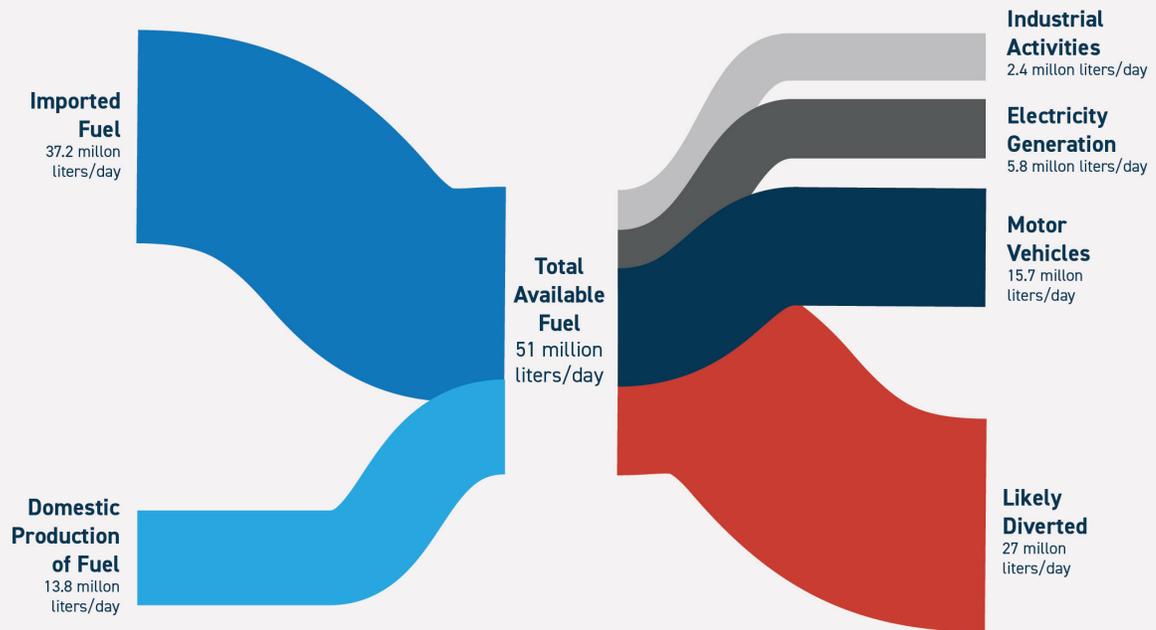
In fact, the cost to the Libyan population is even higher, given that many legitimate consumers in peripheral areas must pay inflated prices for what should be subsidized fuel—markups not reflected in any official statistics. Plus, even in cases where legitimate consumers do access the subsidized fuel and pay 0.15 dinars (\$0.03) per liter, most of the collected payments end up unaccounted for, leaving the state with virtually no revenue from fuel sales.^{146, 147}

In response to a request for comment, the NOC denied The Sentry's estimate of diverted fuel, adding that the NOC is not responsible for managing land or sea ports.¹⁴⁸

Fuel Diversion Outstrips Legitimate Use in Libya



Brega Petroleum's mandate is to supply fuel to legitimate buyers across Libya, but most of its deliveries are diverted, pushing total 2024 consumption to 51 million liters per day—far above the 13.8 million liters produced daily by Libya's refineries. To feed this dysfunctional system, the NOC must import large quantities of diesel and gasoline.



The Sentry analysis of Libyan fuel imports and domestic outputs, 2024.



Saddam Haftar Consolidates Illegal Fuel Trade in Eastern Libya

Saddam Haftar and other actors aligned with the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) utilize their territorial control to tax flows of fuel smuggled by others and to transport their own illicit cargo, thereby capturing revenue from the large-scale diversion of subsidized fuel. The Haftar coalition also cultivates select tribal groups, further solidifying control over smuggling networks in eastern Libya, which since 2021 has displaced western Libya as the country's epicenter of the illegal fuel trade.^{149, 150, 151, 152, 153}

Driving this shift is Saddam Haftar, operating through the LAAF, his father Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's armed coalition.¹⁵⁴ The young lieutenant general has reshaped parts of the NOC and other state organs to maximize his sway over fuel smuggling and other illicit activities.¹⁵⁵ This strategy has enabled the Haftar coalition to grow a fuel smuggling network within the NOC and other legitimate institutions, blurring the lines between legitimate and illicit activities. As Saddam Haftar's Ground Forces division has strengthened, it has prioritized illicit profits, reducing the availability of subsidized fuel outside major eastern cities.

For years, northwestern Libya had been the epicenter for fuel smuggling, where contending armed factions alternated between clashes and tense cohabitation.¹⁵⁶ This lack of unity resulted in smaller-scale, less efficient operations. After Libya's civil war ended in June 2020, the Haftar coalition concentrated on the eastern and southern regions, solidifying its hegemony there in ways unmatched in the more fragmented west.

The result: illicit fuel volumes in eastern Libya surged, hurting the country's economy. Beyond immediate profits, Saddam Haftar's big push in fuel smuggling since 2021 has yielded a self-reinforcing cycle that bolsters his sway on almost all fronts.

Guardians or Gangsters? The Inherent Duality of the Haftars' LAAF

Within the territories under its purview, the LAAF wields intimidation and brute force to suppress any form of dissent and intrude upon nearly every aspect of public life, frequently subjugating or overriding the authority of senior civilian decision-makers within state organs.^{157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169}

Though it portrays itself as a national military and invokes security, the LAAF is not a regular army.^{170, 171} From its inception, the LAAF has always defied Tripoli's authority — no matter which government claimed legitimacy — and has engaged in various illegal enterprises, including banking abuses.^{172, 173, 174, 175, 176} In 2014, this fledgling force began absorbing more militias from northeastern Libya and recruiting more remnants of Qadhafi's army, growing in size but only sporadically attempting to tighten command structures.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, since seizing key oilfields and terminals between 2016 and 2019,^{178, 179} the LAAF has repeatedly used the threat of oil blockades to pressure Tripoli.^{180, 181, 182, 183} Thanks to foreign support from Russia, the UAE, Belarus, and other states, the LAAF has persistently bolstered its military capabilities in violation of the UN arms embargo.^{184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189}

Personal loyalties often overshadow any clear chain of command.¹⁹⁰ This



ambivalence, combined with the Haftars' disregard for the law and their commitment to eliminating checks and balances, has prevented their armed coalition from becoming a transparent, accountable institution. While the LAAF undergoes periodic phases of partial consolidation, it does not evolve into a genuine national military. Instead, it restructures in ways that concentrate ultimate authority in the Haftar family's hands, with illicit activities remaining at the LAAF's core. The faction has imposed itself in eastern and southern Libya as an inescapable overseer — and tax collector — of organized crime, including various forms of smuggling, trafficking, and economic fraud.^{191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199} LAAF units themselves have also become major participants in some of these illicit activities, mainly through Saddam Haftar's growing political sway, armed deterrence, and territorial dominance.²⁰⁰

One telling example was the way the Haftar family disbanded a major component of its own coalition: Brigade 128. From 2016 until early 2025, Brigade 128 was a major unit in the LAAF, extending the Haftar family's influence into southwestern Libya.^{201, 202, 203} Under the leadership of Hassan Zadma and his brothers, Brigade 128 controlled illicit trade routes, cultivated tribal arrangements, and projected military power from Sirte in the north to the Ghat area in the southwest, as well as in Ajdabiya and Kufrah in the east.^{204, 205}

Despite operating for years under the LAAF banner, the Zadma brothers bypassed Saddam Haftar's official channels by maintaining direct connections with foreign states — mainly the UAE and Russia — and kept entire chunks of their illicit activities, including fuel smuggling profits, hidden from him.^{206, 207, 208, 209} Their reluctance to submit to Saddam Haftar seems to have prompted him to view them as a threat. In late 2024, he began dissolving Brigade 128, confiscating its heavy weapons, ousting its senior commanders, and placing some of its subunits under a new structure that answers directly to him.^{210, 211, 212} In February 2025, Saddam Haftar ordered Battalion 87 and other loyal units to conduct an attack on elements affiliated with Brigade 128 in the southern city of Qatrun.²¹³ The move, which caused the deaths of about 30 fighters in Qatrun in February 2025, further consolidated Saddam Haftar's stature within the LAAF, removed potential rivals, and enabled him to somewhat reduce the overall volume of illicit activities under the LAAF at a time when doing so was politically judicious.²¹⁴ Plus, for the sake of its law-and-order narrative, the Haftar family portrayed its dismantling of Brigade 128 in Qatrun as an anti-crime operation.^{215, 216, 217} A few weeks later, in April 2025, the flow of smuggled fuel into northern Chad resumed, returning to nearly the same levels as when Brigade 128 controlled the area.²¹⁸

To confront Brigade 128, Saddam had to deploy hundreds of armored vehicles and thousands of fighters from northeastern Libya into central and southwestern Libya.²¹⁹ Such a buildup, which required significant time and resources, would not have been feasible a few years earlier, when he relied on Brigade 128 to project power in the southwest and lacked the manpower and materiel to replace it in the deep south. This episode illustrates the ongoing process by which the LAAF, and particularly Saddam Haftar's Ground Forces division within it, continually seeks to consolidate its internal structure and increase the personal power of Haftar family members.²²⁰ It also shows how, over time, the Haftar family tightens its control over the illicit economy — including fuel smuggling — throughout eastern and southern Libya.

The LAAF did not respond to a request for comment.



Maritime smuggling operations

Saddam Haftar wields extensive authority over northeastern Libya, both on land and at sea. His sway encompasses ports, roads, storage facilities, customs, border police, key parts of the NOC and Brega Petroleum, and maritime operations ranging from authorizing ships to leave port to issuing official documents via administrators under his influence. As a result, Saddam Haftar controls almost all of eastern Libya's maritime smuggling, which forms a major component of the illicit fuel trade in the eastern province.²²¹

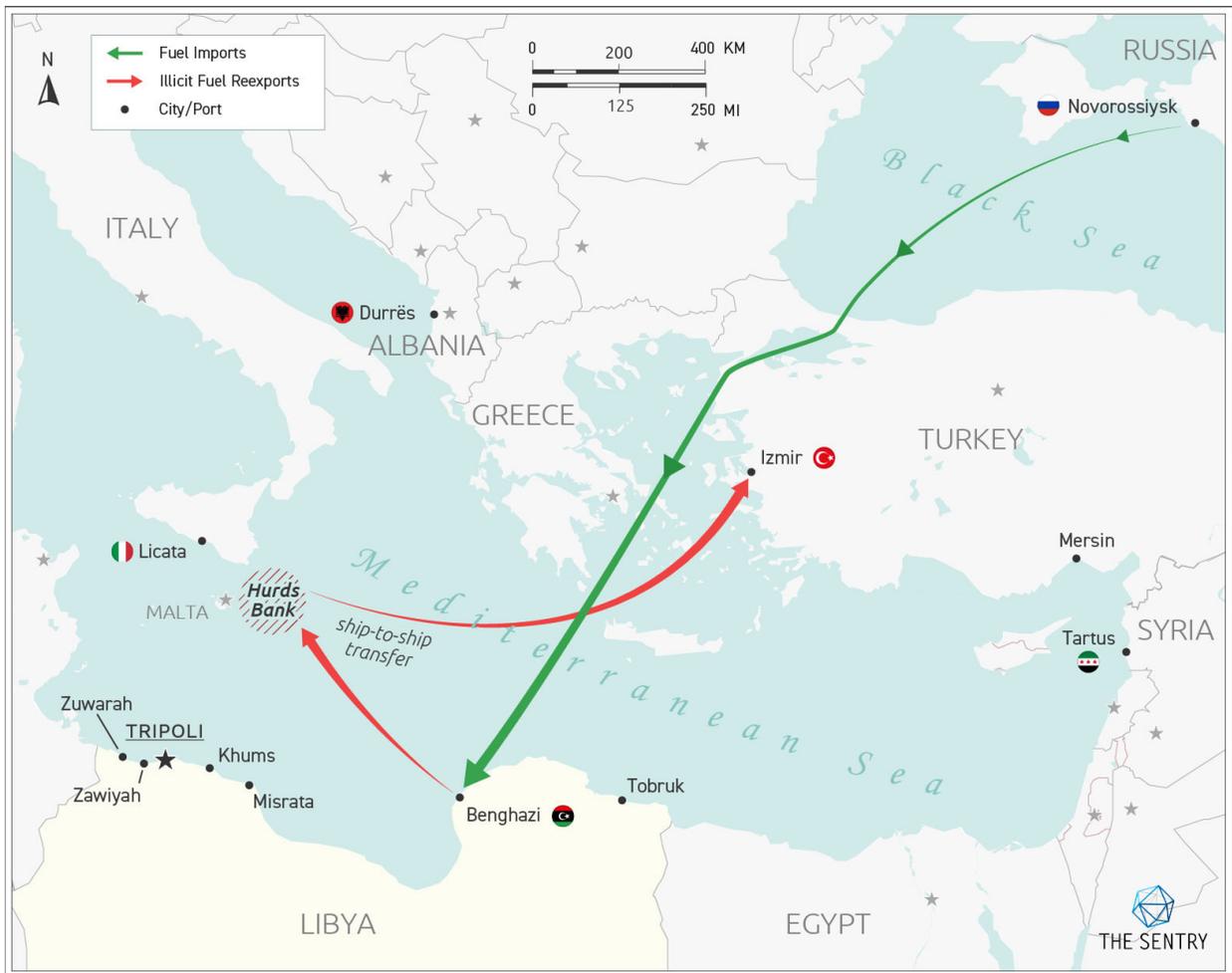
Unlike overland smuggling, which cannot easily move millions of liters at once, maritime smuggling involves entire vessels diverting massive shipments of subsidized fuel—often several million liters at a time.²²² It also involves processes designed to obscure the fuel's origin and destination to render detection and interception challenging for authorities abroad.²²³ These traits make maritime reexports the most efficient means of stealing fuel, responsible for an enormous chunk of the fuel diverted daily.^{224, 225}

Two main methods of diverting imported fuel by sea have flourished, especially since 2022: simple reexport and indirect reexport.

In simple reexport operations, fuel that was imported is subsequently loaded onto a separate vessel—often in Benghazi's old harbor or, more seldom, in Tobruk, about 440 kilometers further east—and then shipped directly to its final destination, such as Turkey.^{226, 227} The Queen Majeda incident is a prime example. Local authorities in Albania intercepted this ship in September 2022, just days after it had departed from Benghazi's old harbor carrying more than \$2 million in foreign-refined heavy marine fuel that was diverted to Albania.²²⁸

In indirect reexport, a vessel carrying the imported fuel departs from a Libyan port and sails to a location in the Mediterranean Sea, such as Hurds Bank just outside Maltese territorial waters, where the fuel is transferred to another vessel in a ship-to-ship transfer. Although this extra step adds cost, it helps conceal the connection to Libya. Consequently, the receiving vessel can reach its final destination with no trace that the product originated in Libya's subsidized fuel program. One well-documented example is the *Aristo*. In November 2023, Italian authorities intercepted the vessel near Licata, Sicily, as it was about to perform a ship-to-ship transfer.²²⁹ The *Aristo*, which had sailed from eastern Libya, was carrying about 670,000 liters of diesel picked up at Benghazi's old harbor.²³⁰ If the ship-to-ship transfer had occurred, the product would likely have been passed off as legitimate through a broker-arranged sale to Italian oil services company Saipem.^{231, 232}





Every day, millions of liters of imported fuel are illegally reexported via maritime routes to Malta, Albania, Italy, Turkey, and beyond. While some of that activity takes place in western Libya, it is far more extensive in the east—particularly through ship-to-ship transfers. In a typical example, the NOC legally imports fuel into Benghazi’s modern port, but illicit actors load it onto a vessel at the city’s old harbor. At sea, the fuel is transferred to another ship, which then delivers it to its final destination.

In both methods, foreign-refined fuel is delivered at a commercial port, stored in Brega Petroleum’s local depot, and then moved by tanker trucks onto vessels for reexport. In the Benghazi area, Ali al-Mashay serves as Saddam Haftar’s most trusted subordinate when it comes to overseeing illicit fuel transfers, from the moment imported fuel arrives at Benghazi’s new commercial port until it is loaded onto a different vessel at the old harbor nearby.^{233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238} In this context, the use of tankers that can carry up to 50 million liters of liquid fuel makes it easier to illegally export vast quantities of fuel from the Benghazi area.²³⁹ A Benghazi-based security official told The Sentry that no cargo—whether narcotics, migrants, fuel, or any other items—can pass through the ports of Benghazi without Ali al-Mashay’s personal approval.²⁴⁰



An even more brazen practice involves diverting the imported fuel at sea before it even reaches Libyan shores, transferring cargo from one ship to another, either within Libyan territorial waters or in international waters.^{241, 242}

Outside Libya's territorial waters, maritime smugglers often use fraudulent paperwork for two reasons. Fraudulent paperwork helps deceive local authorities at the final destination, and carrying ostensibly valid documents helps evade international scrutiny under UN Security Council resolutions, which condemn unauthorized hydrocarbon exports.²⁴³ In this context, international actors such as the EU's Operation IRINI—tasked with upholding UN Security Council resolutions on Libya—can inspect fuel cargos.²⁴⁴ In addition to using fraudulent documentation, ships involved in smuggling often disable their automatic identification system (AIS) transponder, which allows public location tracking, to avoid maritime surveillance.²⁴⁵

Although these maritime methods are employed along Libya's western shores, corrupt actors on the country's eastern shores operate at a far larger scale. The stark disparity in volumes stolen arises from western Libya's more fractured security landscape, which makes it difficult for networks to secure the complicity and acquiescence of all other factions and bureaucrats—and thus keeps volumes much lower.^{246, 247}

On the administrative front, the active involvement and complicity of senior officials within Brega Petroleum, as well as the NOC's top leadership, is crucial for the large-scale diversion of fuel.^{248, 249} It ensures that the NOC remains publicly silent while its multimillion-dollar fuel cargos disappear at sea, representing a steady flow of fuel into illicit operations.

Such a level of coordination and corruption underscores the entrenched nature of the fuel smuggling sector and the significant obstacles in combating diversion schemes. In May 2022, the NOC chairman at the time alerted Libya's attorney general about an unprecedented surge in abnormal fuel exports from Benghazi. He lost his job two months after issuing this alert.^{250, 251} Another stark example is that of Faraj al-Jaedi who, in June 2023, was promoted by the NOC chairman from the operations and human resources director of Brega Petroleum to its board member responsible for finance.^{252, 253, 254, 255} According to a senior Libyan technocrat familiar with Brega Petroleum's inner workings, Jaedi is close to Saddam Haftar.²⁵⁶ Jaedi was Brega Petroleum's operations director when the Queen Majeda shipment to Albania occurred in September 2022, and the UN-recognized Libyan government vouched for the legality of the shipping documents that Brega Petroleum had issued.^{257, 258} These facts strongly suggest that Jaedi actively helped divert the cargo.

Brega Petroleum, the NOC's wholly owned subsidiary, did not respond to a request for comment. The NOC, in its response to The Sentry's request for comment, denied that Jaedi played any role in the Queen Majeda incident and added that he has no relationship with Saddam Haftar.²⁵⁹ The NOC also asserted that none of its employees nor those of Brega Petroleum had been summoned by the attorney general in the context of fuel smuggling.²⁶⁰ Furthermore, the NOC said it provided relevant authorities with official reports pertaining to fuel smuggling cases and it cooperated with the United Nations Panel of Experts.²⁶¹

On the issue of large-scale fuel smuggling via maritime routes, the NOC told The Sentry that no smuggling incidents have been recorded from oil ports under its authority.²⁶² It added that the NOC controls



only oil ports and that the old Benghazi harbor is not an oil port and is therefore not under the control of the NOC or any of its subsidiaries.²⁶³ Reached separately by The Sentry, former NOC Chairman Farhat Benqdara noted that maritime smuggling of fuel in Libya occurred not at oil terminals but at commercial ports, where the NOC and its subsidiaries had no authority.²⁶⁴

Land-based smuggling operations

While maritime smuggling constitutes a major profit center for the Haftar camp, the coalition also oversees land-based routes for the transport of fuel, encompassing both legitimate fuel deliveries and fuel funneled into the parallel market, whether domestic or foreign.

Fuel exiting northeastern Libya departs from the Ras al-Manqar depot, a strategic storage facility east of Benghazi.²⁶⁵ From there, official tanker trucks travel south through Ajdabiya—a critical choke-point—before branching onto three main roads.²⁶⁶ The first leads to Sirte, then continues to Jufrah and into the southwestern province.²⁶⁷ The second, the Ajdabiya–Kufrah corridor, is the primary artery for southeast Libya.^{268, 269} The third follows makeshift tracks via Zillah and Umm al-Aranib, eventually reaching further south. The bulk of the fuel heading for the southwestern province passes through Zillah, with Umm al-Aranib serving as a major hub.²⁷⁰



A large portion of the foreign-refined fuel delivered to Benghazi's port is kept at a storage facility located in the northern outskirts of the city.

Photo: Maxar Technologies.

While all of these passages are under the control of Saddam Haftar-aligned brigades, tribal affiliations underpin fuel smuggling operations in logistically crucial areas. The Zway tribe, for example, dominates much of the Ajdabiya-Kufrah corridor through its ownership and operation of numerous petrol stations, the primary points of sale and diversion.^{271, 272} In leveraging its connections with the Haftar family, the Zway tribe has expanded its market control since 2016, creating a profitable environment for smuggling, with residents in Kufrah often paying over 6 dinars (\$1.20) per liter—40 times the official subsidized rate.^{273, 274}

Shepherding Tanks: Haftar's Double-Dip in Libya's Fuel Game

The LAAF's military might—which guarantees territorial dominance across eastern and southern Libya, including over ports and major roads, and the suppression of socio-political dissent—combined with its



covert influence over the NOC and its subsidiary Brega Petroleum has enabled the Haftar coalition to build a comprehensive system of control over the itinerary of subsidized fuel. Through this multi-faceted approach, rooted in force and bureaucracy, the Haftar family exploits the state's imprimatur to divert large volumes of fuel from the subsidy program.

On the surface, LAAF brigades act as legitimate authorities, supervising official fuel trucks operated by Brega Petroleum and the country's four authorized distributors.²⁷⁵ However, beneath this legal function, the LAAF operates a profitable scheme in two ways. First, rather than preventing fuel smuggling, it profits by allowing small-scale smugglers to operate and imposing levies on them at LAAF checkpoints.^{276, 277, 278} This taxation by the LAAF forces smugglers to raise their prices as they move fuel away from urban areas like Benghazi to peripheral territories in central and southern Libya.

Second, LAAF brigades manipulate the official fuel distribution by restricting how much subsidized fuel legitimate petrol stations can sell.^{279, 280} Thanks to these restrictions, the LAAF can divert official fuel trucks southward, selling the product at much higher prices to non-Libyan networks south of the border. This system, while appearing sound and legitimate on paper, creates chronic shortages in reality. When official petrol stations run low on fuel, local dealers can charge higher prices for their supplies.

Corrupt Libyan officials profit from large-scale fuel smuggling into sub-Saharan Africa; for that reason, they maximize transfers from northern to southern Libya for export. To justify these massive shipments, they inflate reported deliveries at southern petrol stations, creating the illusion of normal domestic demand. In reality, measures taken by the LAAF to ration fuel purchases by citizens and restrict petrol station opening hours severely limit the local population's ability to buy subsidized fuel. This curtailment of legitimate sales generates surpluses, which are easily diverted into illicit channels, going primarily to neighboring countries. As a result, southern Libya endures chronic shortages, which create an opportunity for small-scale operators who transport additional fuel from north to south outside official channels, pay informal taxes at checkpoints, and sell at higher prices to cover costs.^{281, 282, 283} As the LAAF and LAAF-affiliated officials oversee bulk exports, they also divert some of the fuel to rogue petrol stations at home, where ordinary Libyans pay an outsized premium in the absence of alternatives.^{284, 285} In southwestern Libya, much of this management of the fuel economy is performed by the LAAF's military police.^{286, 287}

The LAAF profits from this corrupt fuel trade in two ways: by taxing small-scale smugglers and through its own large-scale smuggling operations. In this way, the Haftar coalition exploits Libya's fuel subsidy program while maintaining the appearance of legal authority. It even keeps the option of periodically dismantling small-scale smuggling networks for the sake of its anti-crime image.²⁸⁸



Haftar's Southwest Grab: A Hub of Convergence

Armed groups affiliated with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, mainly Saddam Haftar's forces, exploit their control over strategic checkpoints and petrol stations across southwest Libya. They oversee the diversion of subsidized fuel into a parallel market that extends into the neighboring countries of Niger, Chad, and Sudan.

Imperfect rule over greater Sabha

Since 2021, Saddam Haftar has been increasing his control over the security sector in the Sabha area and, with it, the fuel smuggling operations in southwestern Libya.

Prior to that time, Sabha, a city of 130,000 and southwestern Libya's largest,²⁸⁹ harbored a disparate array of armed actors: some nominally pro-Haftar yet operating with autonomy from Benghazi's general command, others openly hostile to the Haftar family's dominance.²⁹⁰ This fractured makeup, rife with tension and petty criminality, made Sabha difficult to govern.²⁹¹ Various armed groups stubbornly guarded their illicit revenues and resisted the Haftar family's attempts to assert supremacy in the city.²⁹²

Following the seizure by rival forces of a large cannabis shipment in spring 2021,²⁹³ Saddam Haftar stepped up his military assertiveness, dispatching personnel, armed vehicles, and equipment to the Sabha area from Benghazi and Ajdabiya.^{294, 295, 296, 297} He used his main armed force, Brigade Tareq bin Ziyad, led by Brak al-Shatti native Omar Mrajae al-Maqarhi,^{298, 299, 300} to either subdue or co-opt local groups.³⁰¹ On the economic front, Saddam also used the National Development Apparatus, a reconstruction agency under his tacit control, to oversee infrastructure projects, agricultural initiatives, and other endeavors.^{302, 303} Until it was dismantled in early 2025, the LAAF's Brigade 128 also played a major role in projecting the Haftars' influence in the southwestern province, notably in Qatrun, Awbari, and Ghat.^{304, 305}

As the LAAF has strengthened its security presence in southwestern Libya, it has come to control almost all fuel flows entering Libya's southwest province, whether from the northwestern or northeastern coast. This consolidation has enabled the LAAF to dominate most fuel smuggling operations in the southwestern province.^{306, 307} To further capitalize on this control and increase the amount of fuel diverted into the parallel market, the LAAF issues QR codes, which limit each civilian's vehicle to one tank refill every five days, and it restricts petrol stations' opening hours.³⁰⁸ Thanks to this system, most tanker trucks appear to be delivering their cargo at genuine petrol stations, while legitimate buyers are indirectly prevented by the LAAF from accessing fuel from official outlets.³⁰⁹ As a result, most of the fuel intended for legal sale is in fact diverted to southwestern Libya's parallel market at inflated prices.³¹⁰





The 101st Infantry Battalion, a unit of the LAAF's Brigade Tareq bin Ziyad, suppresses popular activism and perceived opposition across southwestern Libya. Known in this region as the long arm of Saddam Haftar, the battalion enforced a QR code system that allowed each civilian car owner to buy subsidized fuel only once every five days—one of several mechanisms that the LAAF has used to control both the legal distribution and illicit diversion of fuel. As fuel shortages grew more acute and public complaints mounted across southwestern Libya, Saddam Haftar eliminated the QR code system in the southern region in October 2025, a decision likely motivated by a desire to restore his deteriorating popular standing.

Photos: The Sentry.

The Umm al-Aranib municipality serves as the main transit point for fuel heading south through the greater Sabha area.^{311, 312} In the town and its surroundings, checkpoints manned by LAAF units regulate the flow of millions of liters of fuel each day, fuel that travels along both official roads and sand tracks toward northern Niger and Kouri Bougoudi in northwestern Chad, a bustling gold-mining hub.³¹³ Once near the border, the fuel typically sells for \$1.20 to \$2.40 per liter, and sometimes for even more.³¹⁴ Most of the profit from this wide margin goes to the LAAF.

The Umm al-Aranib area, along with locations further south such as the strategic city of Qatrun near Chad's border, is dominated by the Tubu community.^{315, 316} In recent years — especially since 2020 — the Haftar family has shifted from an openly hostile stance to more pragmatic arrangements with this non-Arab community.^{317, 318, 319} Some of the Tubu's local armed units have joined Khaled Haftar's Security Units division within the LAAF,³²⁰ while others operate under a protection economy logic.³²¹ In exchange for allowing fuel convoys to pass safely through their territory, Tubu-majority militias capture a share of the sizable profits that the LAAF derives from facilitating the sale of Libya's subsidized fuel at much higher prices abroad.^{322, 323} Aside from Niger and Chad, some fuel leaving the greater Sabha area heads for Darfur via Chad's northeastern corner, traveling yet another corridor protected by local militias working closely with the LAAF.^{324, 325}





The LAAF network profits from moving Libya's subsidized fuel to the southern borders in two main ways. First, its brigades impose taxes at checkpoints along north-south routes, collecting fees from small-scale smugglers, including large makeshift trucks driven by Tubu actors. Second, the LAAF diverts officially distributed fuel; by restricting operating hours at legitimate stations, it ensures that surpluses are rerouted south for illicit gain. (Left) Tubu smugglers driving a non-official fuel truck across the southern border. (Right) Under Haftar coalition protection, official fuel trucks head south.

Photos: Ibrahim Brakos, TikTok (left); Mohamed Mahmoud, TikTok (right).



The Northwest's Disingenuous Efforts Against Smuggling

In addition to illicit maritime exports, northwestern Libya sends large volumes of fuel from the coast to the southwest, with a significant portion of fuel handled by Saddam Haftar's brigades in charge of the southwest province. Haftar's forces and other LAAF brigades then pass those deliveries of fuel into Niger, Chad, and Sudan, capturing a profit in the process. Some of the northwestern Libya actors engaging in the illegal trade, such as Brigade 111, are directly linked to Prime Minister Abdelhamid Dabaiba, who has taken no genuine action to curtail their activities.^{326, 327}

The northwestern quadrant of Libya, the most diverse province of Libya and home to more than two thirds of the country's population,^{328, 329} features a deeply ingrained web of smuggling routes linking it to Tunisia, southwestern Libya, and northern Mediterranean countries, including EU member states Malta and Italy. Faced with a reality in which distinct groups control their own territories and revenue streams through well-entrenched networks with deep social roots, Dabaiba and his government have been reluctant to engage in protracted confrontations in the northwestern cities of Zawiyah and Zuwarah. Along the coast west of Tripoli, Dabaiba has disrupted smuggling networks on several occasions but has consistently backed off before open conflict.^{330, 331} Along the coast east of Tripoli, an area that includes Zliten, Khums, Misrata, and Abu Qrain, where local Dabaiba allies are strong, ever fewer measures have been taken against smuggling. In fact, in Misrata and its surroundings, the attitude of the Tripoli government is best described as active complicity.

Northwestern Libya's fuel smuggling operations differ from those overseen by the LAAF in the east and south. In the northwest, no single faction possesses the capacity to impose itself as a near-hegemon—unlike in the east and south, where the Haftar family dominates. Leveraging their quasi-monopoly on the use of force, the Haftars devote substantial resources to protecting, regulating, and overseeing both legitimate and illicit fuel supply chains across the vast territories under their purview. In contrast, the area stretching from Tripoli's western outskirts to the Tunisian border is home to multiple rival armed factions.^{332, 333, 334, 335} Yet, despite the absence of a dominant party capable of policing the area, these actors essentially cooperate to maintain revenue streams from illicit activities. This seemingly paradoxical cohabitation among rival groups underlines a classic protection economy model in which smuggling thrives despite tribal differences and socio-political enmities.^{336, 337}

Zawiyah: No Cop on the Beat

When it comes to fuel, Zawiyah—a fractious tribal city of around 250,000 inhabitants located about 45 kilometers west of the capital—serves as the main distribution hub for both the surrounding area and more distant parts of the country.^{338, 339, 340} Inaugurated in 1974, the city's energy complex houses a large refinery and, more significantly, a maritime terminal that receives more than a billion dollars' worth of imported fuel each year.^{341, 342}

Since 2013, a local armed group leader named Mohammed Koshlaf has exercised de facto control over the Zawiyah energy complex, even obtaining official recognition as head of a Petroleum Facilities Guard unit under Libya's Defense Ministry.^{343, 344} Despite being under international sanctions since 2018 for human smuggling,³⁴⁵ Koshlaf has, without interruption, maintained a tight grip on the inner workings of this strategic site.³⁴⁶ Thanks to his position, Koshlaf maximizes the throughput of subsidized fuel by sell-



ing it at prices above the official rate, capturing a modest margin that is multiplied by large volumes.³⁴⁷ In practical terms, he delegates most of the distribution logistics and related security problems to an array of smaller smugglers, as well as to private distribution companies willing to participate in the illicit fuel market under rules largely established by Koshlaf and his associates.

Although official records list roughly 750 petrol stations between western Tripoli and the Tunisian border, only around 300 can be physically verified, and of those, fewer than 200 are operational.³⁴⁸ In other words, the vast majority of these stations exist solely on paper; they provide a veneer of legitimacy to justify much larger allocations of subsidized fuel by Brega Petroleum for so-called “local” consumption.³⁴⁹ From an accounting perspective, Brega Petroleum appears as though it is supplying legitimate outlets, when in reality, most of the fuel leaving Zawiyah’s energy complex is diverted to black markets rather than reaching bona fide pumps.

From Zawiyah’s refinery, some smugglers move fuel westward, primarily to the coastal city of Zuwarah, an Amazigh municipality near the Tunisian border.³⁵⁰ In Zuwarah, actors connected to the city’s military council export the diverted fuel by land or load it onto vessels, which typically carry between 400,000 and 750,000 liters, to be shipped toward the northern Mediterranean.^{351, 352}



In the mid-2010s, Zuwarah—a coastal city near the Tunisian border—served as a major hub for reexporting subsidized fuel by land and sea. In 2023, an incident involving a ship called *Serdar* revealed that the city’s seaport was still being used for illegal fuel exports. Despite security changes at the Ras Jdir border crossing in 2024, local sources told *The Sentry* that smuggling through Zuwarah continues, albeit at a lower rate than before.

Photo: *The Sentry*.



Other actors transport fuel from Zawiyah’s energy complex into southwestern Libya — an inland journey that is complicated by fragmented territories and communities that are socially or politically opposed to one another.³⁵³ As a result, truck drivers sometimes must hand off their cargo mid-route if they belong to the “wrong” community for a particular stretch of territory, entrusting it to another driver for the next section.³⁵⁴ Every checkpoint requires payment to the militia or authority dominating that pocket of land.³⁵⁵ These additional costs accumulate, pushing the final sale price higher by the time the fuel reaches southwestern Libya.^{356, 357} Plus, drivers receive an extra bonus when the requested itinerary involves a clear deviation from official channels.^{358, 359}

Compared to makeshift transporters, the four authorized distribution companies enjoy added protection for their trucks, making their official convoys somewhat less vulnerable to extortion and checkpoint fees as they pass through rival-held zones.³⁶⁰

Misrata Joint Force: The PM’s protégé

Misrata, a wealthy merchant city endowed with a major port, a free trade zone, and a vital fuel entry point, has long ensured the stable and sufficient distribution of fuel to itself and to neighboring cities such as Zliten and Khums.^{361, 362, 363} This stability has traditionally prevented major fuel shortages or disruptions, creating an environment relatively free from fuel smuggling networks.^{364, 365}

The situation worsened in 2021 when the Joint Force, a local brigade that had participated in Misrata’s 2016 war on the Islamic State in nearby Sirte, aligned itself with the newly appointed prime minister.^{366, 367, 368} When Dabaiba assumed office in March 2021, he struck a deal with Joint Force leader Omar Bughdada, providing the armed group with access to Defense Ministry funds, equipment, and recognition.³⁶⁹ Empowered by its new status, the Joint Force assumed key security responsibilities in Tripoli, including guarding significant state facilities.^{370, 371}

The alliance between Dabaiba and the Joint Force enabled the brigade to assert control over parts of Misrata’s airport and maritime port.^{372, 373} Under the implicit protection of Dabaiba, the brigade expanded its involvement in illicit activities, including fuel smuggling.^{374, 375, 376, 377}

Joint Force smuggling ops

The Joint Force and the smugglers that it protects acquire fuel from specific petrol stations near Misrata.³⁷⁸ The Joint Force network also purchases fuel from petrol stations in neighboring cities like Zliten, Khums, and Tawergha.^{379, 380} To move this fuel, Joint Force members, often serving as fuel truck drivers, use their military identification to bypass checkpoints.³⁸¹





Misrata's fuel depot, located just south of the commercial port and connected to the sea by an underground pipeline, is one of the largest in Libya. From there, the product is transported by trucks to municipalities in the immediate vicinity, as well as to towns and cities in southwestern Libya. Smuggling networks tap into this transport network to move fuel into sub-Saharan African markets, such as Chad and Niger.

Photo: The Sentry.

The Joint Force runs fuel smuggling operations through the Misrata Free Trade Zone and the port of Khums using several tactics: manipulating shipping documents, using hidden tank capacity, concealing fuel in regular cargo containers, and conducting nighttime offshore transfers between large and small vessels. Their control over the free trade zone enables them to manipulate documents to mask these activities.^{382, 383, 384, 385}

While fuel is officially documented for distribution to Zliten, Khums, and Tawergha, the Joint Force diverts much of it via tanker trucks to the Jufrah area through Abu Qrain and, to a lesser extent, to Shwayref via Bani Walid.^{386, 387} Once in these areas, the product is transferred further south by Haftar-aligned actors, including through official distribution networks.³⁸⁸

Collaboration with Haftar's armed coalition, particularly in the Shwayref area, is a critical element in the transfer of fuel from Misrata to the south. However, the fluctuating state of relations between actors affects the fluidity and volume of fuel smuggling operations. When relations are strained, coordination weakens, leading to disruptions in these illicit activities.

An aura of legitimacy

Separate from fuel, the Joint Force has been suspected of facilitating the transit of illicit gold from sub-Saharan Africa through Misrata to destinations abroad, mainly Turkey,³⁸⁹ as well as permitting Iranian vessels to access Misrata's port for various illicit activities, including arms trafficking.^{390, 391, 392} Because Misrata seeks a reputation for legitimate commerce, some of the city's business magnates resent the Dabaiba family.³⁹³ Yet Bughdada remains politically and technically shielded by Dabaiba, who pre-



serves a tight partnership with the Joint Force, lending it an aura of legitimacy despite scandals such as the May 2024 gold trafficking affair that pitted the Joint Force against the Attorney General's Office.³⁹⁴

The Joint Force is also present in Tripoli, where it has been securing the NOC's headquarters since July 2022, when Dabaiba ordered it to expel then-chairman Mustafa Sanallah and install Haftar ally Farhat Benqdara.^{395, 396} Though Benqdara was removed in January 2025,³⁹⁷ the Joint Force still controls the NOC's security, thus retaining leverage over the oil and gas sector.³⁹⁸

The End of NOC Bartering

In February 2025, shortly after taking office, incoming NOC chairman Masoud Suleiman announced the end of the oil barter system, effective March 1, 2025.³⁹⁹ The NOC had conducted billions of dollars in crude-for-fuel swaps annually between 2021 and 2024, apparently without transparent accounting. With his announcement, Suleiman committed the NOC to using public tenders to sell crude oil and purchase fuel through separate transactions — a policy he said aimed at achieving better governance.⁴⁰⁰

This decision was an acknowledgment that the barter system used between 2021 and 2024 under two successive NOC chairmen lacked both transparency and competitiveness.⁴⁰¹ The possibility that the NOC gave away excessive national wealth via these swaps underscores the need for a full investigation into the barter process used during that period.⁴⁰²

In fact, data from high-volume years like 2023 and 2024 suggests that the NOC paid far above prevailing market rates in its fuel-for-crude swaps, with economically unjustifiable overpayments potentially reaching nearly \$1 billion annually.^{403, 404} An inquiry must determine exactly why the NOC overpaid, and, crucially, it must identify the actors who profited from these overpayments.

Formally ending the oil barter system isn't enough to solve Libya's fuel smuggling problem, however. Although the NOC's fuel imports from January-September 2025 decreased by about 8% compared to the same period in 2024, their volume remains far above the country's legitimate needs.^{405, 406} These excessive fuel imports continue to feed a resilient smuggling sector. Efforts are required to reduce imports further and increase transparency, including regarding how fuel imports are funded.

In response to The Sentry's request for comment about the transparency of its barter transactions from 2021 through 2024, the NOC stated that pricing committees had overseen the process.⁴⁰⁷ The NOC added that these committees determined prices based on internationally recognized global bulletins and that the competition for the barter transactions was conducted transparently with major international companies submitting bids.⁴⁰⁸



Russian and Sudanese Forces Receive Haftar-Diverted Fuel

To maintain dominance over eastern and southern Libya, the Haftar family relies on Russia's military support and the UAE's political backing. Although other countries also assist, these two stand out. In return for their crucial assistance, the Haftars grant them numerous concrete advantages, including the systematic diversion of subsidized fuel to Russian personnel in Libya and to the Emirati-backed RSF in Sudan.^{409, 410}

Inside the Russian entrenchment in Libya

Since 2020, Russia has maintained a significant military presence at four air bases in Libya: al-Khadim, east of Benghazi; al-Jufrah, in central Libya; al-Qardabiyah, near Sirte; and Brak al-Shatti, in the southwestern province.⁴¹¹ There, hundreds of Russian personnel operate radar installations and air-defense systems.^{412, 413, 414, 415, 416} Such an arrangement enables Moscow to enjoy a degree of operational autonomy while helping the Haftar family reinforce a de facto demarcation line between Haftar-held territories and northwestern Libya, where Turkish troops remain entrenched.^{417, 418} Field Marshal Haftar and his family view these Russian-operated air defenses as indispensable in protecting their territory against any potential advance from northwestern Libya, officials from France, the US, and Egypt told The Sentry.^{419, 420, 421, 422} It is within this context that the Russians receive fuel supplies from the LAAF.⁴²³

In mid-2022, Saddam Haftar's Brigade Tareq bin Ziyad and Hassan Zagma's Brigade 128 ramped up fuel deliveries to Russian forces beyond what was needed for local operations.^{424, 425} This arrangement, which has benefited Russian-controlled air bases such as al-Jufrah and Brak al-Shatti, has included deliveries of jet fuel in volumes that align with the operational needs of Russian helicopters and aircraft stationed there.^{426, 427, 428} Distinct from that, the quantities of diesel and gasoline supplied surpass what might be used locally by the Russians.⁴²⁹

The surplus fuel is then directed toward two distinct activities. First, the Russians sell a portion of it to local traffickers for profit, which likely assists the Russians in covering their day-to-day expenses, such as food and other basic needs, in dinars.⁴³⁰ Second, there are regular cargo flights transporting fuel from al-Jufrah and al-Khadim to Gao Airport in Mali, a known Russian-controlled facility.⁴³¹ Moreover, in the past, fuel was also sent by truck from al-Jufrah to Wagner units, which were active in Darfur until their exit in autumn 2023.⁴³² These Russian-to-Russian transfers of fuel occurred through the greater al-Kufrah area under the protection of the LAAF.^{433, 434}

In 2023, the Russian Ministry of Defense asserted more direct control of the military mission in Libya previously implemented by the Wagner Group. Its intelligence directorate, the GRU, replaced the semi-private mercenary company and now coordinates operations directly with the Haftar family.^{435, 436, 437, 438} This shift saw Russian state forces take over and bolster existing Wagner-dominated bases and tighten up direct ties with select LAAF brigades, reflecting a more formal, Russian state-directed presence.^{439, 440, 441} Another such strengthening phase unfolded in Libya after the December 2024 collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria.^{442, 443, 444} Amid this expansion of the Russian presence in Libya, the LAAF has carried on delivering fuel for Russia's benefit. The Russian Federation did not respond to a request for comment.



The UAE, the Haftars, and the RSF

Since the start of Sudan's civil war, the Haftar camp has been a key fuel supplier to the RSF.⁴⁴⁵ This persistent flow of diesel and gasoline has enabled the RSF's mobility in Darfur and, therefore, its tactical operations there.⁴⁴⁶ By supplying fuel and other aid to the RSF amid the Sudanese war, the Haftar family has tightened its command structure and strategic control in southeastern Libya.

The transfer of fuel to the RSF reflects the Haftars' deep loyalty to the Emirati government, a crucial backer of the paramilitary force.⁴⁴⁷ Because of the UAE's extensive ideological, diplomatic, financial, and political support for the Haftar family since 2014, the Emirati government occupies a privileged position in the eyes of Haftar's forces, leaving them beholden to Abu Dhabi.⁴⁴⁸ Between 2014 and 2019, the UAE was the most consequential foreign actor in Libya, intervening heavily on Haftar's behalf.⁴⁴⁹ To this day, it remains vital to the Haftar family, continuing to offer political and diplomatic backing and providing a banking platform for illicit financial flows.^{450, 451} Because of this legacy, the UAE wields sway over the family. When the war in Sudan broke out in April 2023, the UAE used its influence over the Haftar family to ensure that they supplied RSF forces with support, including fuel.^{452, 453} Neither the UAE nor the RSF responded to requests for comment.

Soon after fighting erupted in Sudan on April 15, 2023, Saddam Haftar traveled to southeastern Libya's Kufrah district, a long-standing hub for illicit activity,^{454, 455} to oversee efforts to secure fuel supplies for the forces of RSF leader General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, or "Hemedti."⁴⁵⁶ In addition to reinforcing security, Saddam Haftar asserted personal command over the local LAAF-affiliated Battalion Subul al-Salam, even though it had previously shown a preference for business dealings with the RSF.⁴⁵⁷ The wartime context demanded more direct oversight by the LAAF leadership to transform existing commercial relationships into reliable wartime supply channels.

To maintain uninterrupted shipments of fuel and other goods across the border, Saddam's Brigade Tareq bin Ziyad increased its manpower and equipment in the Kufrah area by bringing in additional forces from Benghazi and Ajdabiya.^{458, 459} This buildup enabled tighter control over key assets, most notably Kufrah airport, which served as a critical ground hub.^{460, 461} Beyond supervising the flow of fuel, Saddam Haftar's forces also coordinated occasional arms transfers to the RSF in Darfur as part of a broader support policy that included regular deliveries of ammunition.^{462, 463, 464} Due to concerns about potential ground incursions or air strikes from the Sudanese Armed Forces and its allies—and the treacherous conditions along the sand routes from Kufrah to Sudan—the LAAF required RSF-linked drivers to handle the final leg of fuel transportation.⁴⁶⁵

Distinct from Subul al-Salam, other LAAF units play a role in the transfer of fuel to the RSF. They include Battalion 129 and other Tubu armed groups spearheaded by senior commander Mohammed Ali Sida, who is based in Rebiana, a Tubu-majority municipality near Kufrah.^{466, 467} Formally reporting to Khaled Haftar since 2022, these Tubu forces are responsible for the Sarir refinery, located near the oilfield of the same name in the middle of eastern Libya. The Sarir refinery operates almost exclusively for southward smuggling purposes, with a current capacity of about 8,000 barrels (1.3 million liters) per day.^{468, 469} Under the LAAF's increased control,⁴⁷⁰ part of the refinery's output is diverted to illicit channels, bypassing the NOC's regular circuit.⁴⁷¹ As part of its pro-Emirati policy of supporting the RSF, the LAAF also protects the passage of military resources supplied by the UAE via eastern Libya and provides training camps for Hemedti's men in the greater Kufrah area.^{472, 473, 474}



Libya's Untouchable Thieves: The Great Fuel Heist Must Not Escape Justice

Amid the sustained kleptocratic boom that Libya has experienced since the end of its civil war in 2020, fuel smuggling quickly rose to become the most lucrative scheme. Once pursued by scattered operators, fuel smuggling has become a multi-billion-dollar enterprise pursued by the country's incumbent rulers—with international backing—that can further derail the nation's legitimate economy.⁴⁷⁵

Given its sheer scale, fuel smuggling can no longer be portrayed merely as a byproduct of weak governance. In 2021, Libya's top rulers effectively embraced it as part of a broader, systematic strategy to siphon massive wealth from the population. Between 2022 and 2024, approximately \$20 billion was diverted in this manner—funds urgently needed for health services, household essentials, infrastructure, education, and other social programs. Much of the wealth was moved abroad, while another portion was used to import weapons and cement the grip of unelected incumbents through repression and armed force, ultimately blocking any path to free and credible elections.

Libya's fuel smuggling crisis also has a geopolitical dimension. It has buoyed non-state actors such as Sudan's RSF in a genocidal war and helped foreign powers like Russia and the UAE deepen their involvement in Libya—and, by extension, in sub-Saharan Africa.

Ultimately, the crisis transcends the fuel trade. It reveals a shattered system of governance wherein public institutions are increasingly subordinated to a small handful of illegitimate rulers reliant on coercion. The reach of Libya's rulers now goes well beyond the realm of security. They have learned to penetrate the heart of the legitimate economy by installing loyalists in key administrative positions. And because Libya's current calm hinges on these very same factions coexisting without open warfare, any sudden shakeup may precipitate a broad conflagration.

The January 2025 removal of NOC Chairman Farhat Benq dara and the appointment of Chairman Masoud Suleiman signal a push toward greater transparency, including efforts to roll back opaque crude-for-fuel swaps.^{476, 477} Yet entrenched profiteers will resist. While one notable player in the fuel smuggling sector—Brigade 128 within the LAAF—was forcibly dismantled in early 2025, more powerful brigades linked directly to Saddam Haftar, Dabaiba, and other leading figures remain active and continue to thrive.

Even if fuel smuggling recedes somewhat in 2025, its repercussions will persist. Armed group leaders and political figures, now accustomed to vast profits, can repurpose their accumulated wealth as seed capital for other ventures. A mere reduction in fuel imports is not enough. Fundamental questions must be answered: Where did the stolen billions go, and how can Libya deliver justice to those who stole from its population?



Recommendations

Fuel smuggling has become deeply entangled with Libya's security, political, and economic structures. Addressing this issue requires a carefully designed set of medium-term domestic policy initiatives, coupled with international targeted action against key perpetrators and facilitators.

Libya

Budget for all fuel-related expenses. The Presidency Council,⁴⁷⁸ the Government of National Unity (GNU), the House of Representatives, and the High Council for Energy Affairs,⁴⁷⁹ which includes the leaders of the National Oil Corporation (NOC), the General Electricity Company of Libya (GECOL), the Central Bank of Libya (CBL), and the Libyan Audit Bureau, should collaborate on a budget law that articulates an itemized breakdown of fuel consumption for the fiscal year. After three years of concealing its fuel-related expenditures from most official reports, Libya urgently needs a public, legislatively approved schedule that explicitly plans and accounts for all fuel-related spending.

Clarify and reduce GECOL's fuel consumption. The same actors should work closely with GECOL to establish a clear, public assessment of the legitimate fuel requirements for Libya's electricity plants. An accurate and transparent account of GECOL's true consumption is essential to end the misuse of electricity generation as a pretext for unjustifiably large fuel deliveries to armed groups and other participants in the fuel smuggling sector. Moreover, GECOL should reduce its reliance on fossil fuel.

Lift the fuel subsidy. The GNU should gradually phase out the fuel price subsidy and replace it with a cash stipend that is disbursed directly to households, thereby removing financial incentives to engage in fuel smuggling. Replacing the subsidy with direct cash payments would result in Brega Petroleum selling fuel domestically at prices in line with international market rates, eliminating the price gap that underpins Libya's fuel smuggling sector.

Forbid fuel exports until large-scale smuggling is eradicated. The NOC and associated companies should be formally prevented from exporting diesel, gasoline, and heavy marine fuel. Because Libya is a net importer of those refined petroleum products, their export should raise red flags.

Apply chemical marker on all fuel distributed. The NOC should initiate a program to mark both domestic and imported refined fuel with a unique chemical signature that would enable authorities to trace its origin, improving efforts to combat fuel smuggling.⁴⁸⁰

Increase transparency and competitiveness of all fuel imports. In February 2025, the NOC pledged to subject all foreign fuel purchases to open bidding and to buy only from energy merchants who own refineries, underscoring the importance of transparent reporting.^{481, 482} The measures announced by the NOC mark a step in the right direction and should be thoroughly implemented.

Remove top smuggling facilitators from the NOC's cadres. In April 2025, the Libyan Audit Bureau and the Administrative Control Authority established a committee to review certain contracts for irregularities in the oil and gas sector.⁴⁸³ The same committee—or one similar to it—should also recommend dismissing those NOC officials who have been significantly implicated in fuel-related abuses. Complicit



functionaries such as Brega Petroleum chief Fuad Belrahim should step down or be removed from their positions.

Regulate NOC dealings with traders. The Attorney General's Office, the Libyan Audit Bureau, and other relevant domestic institutions should regulate dealings with energy merchants and require rigorous financial reporting.

Enforce the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative standards. The NOC should adopt Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative standards for all fuel transactions and strengthen in-house trading capabilities to reduce reliance on external energy merchants who do not own oil refineries.⁴⁸⁴

Investigate past swaps. The Attorney General's Office, the Libyan Audit Bureau, and other relevant domestic institutions should investigate the reasons the NOC acquired foreign diesel and gasoline at prices far above market levels in 2024 and, potentially, in the preceding years.

Build an additional refinery. The Libyan government should fulfill the existing pledge to build a new refinery in southwestern Libya,⁴⁸⁵ as the oil-rich country needs to reduce its dependence on imported fuel.⁴⁸⁶

US, EU, and UK

Investigate Ali al-Mashay and, if appropriate, designate him for sanctions.⁴⁸⁷ The US, the UK, and Canada should investigate senior LAAF officer Ali al-Mashay and, if appropriate, designate him under their respective Global Magnitsky-style sanctions regimes for his pivotal role in Saddam Haftar's multibillion-dollar fuel smuggling enterprise and the misappropriation of Libyan state assets on a massive scale.^{488, 489} Demonstrated US concerns over high-level LAAF corruption will also position Washington to demand tangible reforms as part of its broader diplomacy toward the Haftar family. The EU and other jurisdictions should investigate and designate Ali al-Mashay for his illicit activities.

Issue targeted sanctions on other key figures. The US,⁴⁹⁰ the EU,⁴⁹¹ the UK,⁴⁹² and other like-minded jurisdictions should investigate and, if appropriate, impose targeted sanctions on the principal perpetrators and facilitators of fuel smuggling. Such individuals should also be excluded from any cooperation with the US, the EU, and the UK. They include:

- ▶ Brega Petroleum Finance Director Faraj al-Jaedi
- ▶ Joint Force leader Omar Bughdada
- ▶ Brigade Tareq bin Ziyad leader Omar Mrajae al-Maqarhi
- ▶ Battalion 87 officer Mohammed al-Mazughi
- ▶ Zawiyah Petroleum Facilities Guard leader Mohammed Koshlaf

Embrace a network approach to sanctions. US organs such as the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) should revisit the case of Koshlaf, who, despite being sanctioned in 2018 for human smuggling,⁴⁹³ has continued his organized crime activities, including fuel smug-



gling. The US and other like-minded jurisdictions should investigate the mechanisms that he has used to evade the 2018 sanctions, as this could inform stronger, more network-oriented measures against other top members of his group and family.

Help Libya investigate. Given the nexus linking Libya’s vast fuel smuggling industry to the US dollar,⁴⁹⁴ the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) should assist the Libyan Attorney General’s Office in investigating the swaps concluded from 2022 to 2024. This collaboration should be organized in the form of a task force that includes other jurisdictions, such as the UK and the EU.

Issue a business advisory. To inform and caution the American business community, the US Treasury Department and other relevant organs should issue a business advisory on the illicit networks exploiting Libya’s fuel subsidy program, including suspicious energy merchants, brokers, intermediaries, and transporters potentially involved in those schemes.

International Banks

Know your customers. Correspondent banks processing dollar transfers initiated by the NOC for fuel imports should exercise heightened caution and require comprehensive documentation when payments go to energy merchants lacking proven track records or refineries.⁴⁹⁵

UN and Member States

Make the fuel crisis a priority in the economic track. The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) should recognize the fuel crisis as one of its top agenda items in its political and economic discussions.⁴⁹⁶ When Libyan stakeholders or member states commit to measures, UNSMIL must act as the central coordinator to ensure these pledges are fulfilled, consistently reminding all parties of the urgency and importance of carrying out agreed-upon measures.

Issue sanctions. The 1970 Libya Sanctions Committee should utilize its authority to apply targeted UN sanctions under listing criteria including:

- ▶ Individuals or entities providing support for armed groups or criminal networks through the illicit exploitation of crude oil or other natural resources in Libya [Resolution 2174 (2014), para. 4(c) and Resolution 2213 (2015), para. 11(c)]^{497, 498}
- ▶ Individuals or entities threatening or coercing Libyan state financial institutions and the NOC or engaging in any action that may lead to or result in the misappropriation of Libyan state funds [Resolution 2213 (2015), para. 11(d)]⁴⁹⁹

Maritime forces deployed in the Mediterranean Sea, including but not limited to Operation EUNAVFOR MED IRINI, should prioritize enforcement of UN Security Council Resolution 2146 (2014)—most recently reauthorized with UN Security Council Resolution 2701 (2023)—regarding the maritime interdiction of vessels illicitly exporting refined petroleum products from Libya.^{500, 501} IRINI should make its fuel-related maritime inspections public.



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 Energy Capital & Power, "Refineries in Libya by Capacity," August 13, 2021, available at: <https://energycapitalpower.com/refineries-in-libya-by-capacity/>
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- 98 The Sentry interview with a former member of the Libyan attorney general's team involved in investigating corruption in state institutions, August 2024.
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- 107 As Libya's fuel smuggling networks grow richer and more powerful, they siphon ever larger volumes from the subsidized supply chain for illegal exports. The resulting shortfalls at formal petrol stations in parts of Libya compel citizens to turn to the local black market, where prices far exceed the official subsidized price. Recognizing the high domestic profit margins, smugglers sell some of their diverted fuel inside Libya rather than exporting all of it. See: The Sentry interview with a member of Qatrun's municipal council familiar with the trade traversing Libya's southern borders, July 2025.
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Although Battalion 302 serves under the LAAF and sides with the Haftar family during acute crises, it lacks the familial or tribal bonds that characterize Brigade 166 and Battalion 152. Apart from some smuggling interests it controls west of the city, Battalion 302 focuses on maintaining security in the greater Ajdabiya area and generally does not participate in the Haftar family's illicit activities. The third and most contentious circle was Brigade 128, led by Hassan Zadma and headquartered in Harawa, near Sirte. It had few tribal or social roots in Ajdabiya but still maintained a presence there, which enabled it to participate in smuggling flows of fuel and other items, connecting Ajdabiya, Kufrah, Sirte, and Zillah. Competition for profits intensified whenever fuel supplies diminished, such as during the diesel shortage of February 2024. Because units with familial ties to the LAAF leadership typically secure their own share first, Brigade 128 often resorted to coercion in a bid to protect its revenue streams, sparking friction with the other groups. Fuel smuggling is not the only illicit trade—human smuggling, narcotics, stolen vehicles, and additional goods also traverse the same routes—but diesel shortages were a major trigger. Following security tensions in October 2023, the LAAF announced the dissolution of Battalion 302. However, it was not disbanded; instead, it was folded more tightly into Saddam Haftar's Ground Forces division. Battalion 302's commander, Colonel Issa Dawud al-Qabsi, retained his position and continued to help the LAAF secure routes from Ajdabiya to Benghazi in the north and Qariyat Basher in the west. By contrast, between December 2024 and February 2025, the Haftar family dismantled Brigade 128. See:

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and June. This suggests that one single vessel lifted approximately 184 million liters during that six-month period, averaging more than one million liters per day.

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The Sentry, “Libya’s Kleptocratic Boom,” November 2023, p. 51, available at: <https://thesentry.org/reports/libyas-kleptocratic-boom/>

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HM Treasury Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation, “Financial Sanctions Notice: Libya,” November 30, 2023, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/656896c82ee693001360cb85/Notice_Libya_301123.pdf
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attempt to breach the inner gate, which has consistently remained under Koshlaf's control. See:

The Sentry interview with an employee of Zawiyah's refining company, December 2023.

The Sentry interview with a Zawiyah resident familiar with Koshlaf's fuel trade, March 2025.

Libya al-Ahrar, "Commander of Military Unit Guarding Zawiyah Refinery Jailed on Fuel-Smuggling Charges,"

August 13, 2023, available at: <https://libyaalahrar.tv/2023/08/13/%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%82-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D9%82%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86-%D8%A2%D9%85%D8%B1-%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A9/>

Alessandro Scipione, "Libya: The Riots in Zawiyah Risk Triggering the Hunt for Migrants," Agenzia Nova, April 28, 2023, available at: <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/libia-disordini-a-zawiya-la-52esima-brigata-di-fanteria-costretta-a-ritirarsi-dalla-citta/>

347 According to a Zawiyah resident familiar with Koshlaf's fuel trade, Koshlaf keeps his margins at current levels because he lacks local dominance. Attempts to grab a bigger slice would likely spark retaliation from rival armed groups near the refinery, who could attack if they deemed the new conditions unacceptable. By moving high volumes at a modest margin, Koshlaf preserves an equilibrium that keeps these rivals content. See:

The Sentry interview with a Zawiyah resident familiar with Koshlaf's fuel trade, March 2025.

348 The Sentry interview with an employee of Zawiyah's refining company, December 2023.

349 The Sentry interview with an employee of Zawiyah's refining company, December 2023.

350 The Sentry interview with a Zuwarah seaport worker, March 2025.

351 With regard to the illicit flow of fuel and other goods along the Tunisia-Libya coast, the city of Zuwarah has long dominated the Ras Jdir border crossing. But in March 2024, Dabaiba's forces disrupted that arrangement, resulting in a three-month closure. When the crossing reopened, Zuwarah's influence had diminished somewhat, which caused a reduction of land transfers of diesel and gasoline from Zawiyah to Zuwarah. Although smuggling into Tunisia became more difficult, it did not cease altogether. The volume of fuel passing through the Dehiba Wazin border crossing farther south has grown since the changes at Ras Jdir. This relatively modest shift is arguably the most significant action the Dabaiba government has taken against fuel smuggling thus far in northwestern Libya. See:

The Sentry interview with a Zuwarah seaport worker, March 2025.

The Sentry interview with a Zuwarah native familiar with the illicit trade traversing the Tunisia-Libya border, April 2025.

The Sentry interview with a Ben Gardane native familiar with the illicit trade traversing the Tunisia-Libya border, April 2025.

352 The Sentry interview with a Zuwarah seaport worker, March 2025.

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354 The Sentry interview with a Zawiyah resident familiar with Koshlaf's fuel trade, March 2025.

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356 The Sentry interview with a Zawiyah resident familiar with Koshlaf's fuel trade, March 2025.

357 The Sentry interview with a Zawiyah resident who lives near the city's refinery, January 2025.

358 The Sentry interview with a Zawiyah resident who lives near the city's refinery, January 2025.

359 The Sentry interview with a Brak al-Shatti resident familiar with the local airbase, August 2023.

360 The Sentry interview with a Misrata armed group member, July 2024.

361 The Sentry interview with a Misrata activist, November 2024.

362 Libya Observer, "Misrata Chamber of Commerce Lays Foundation Stone for the New Investment Building," February 21, 2021, available at: <https://ar.libyaobserver.ly/article/12191>

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- 364 The Sentry interview with a Misrata armed group member, July 2024.
- 365 The Sentry interview with a Misrata activist, November 2024.
- 366 In 2011, amid the uprising against the Qadhafi regime, many revolutionary militias formed in Misrata. After the regime's collapse, these groups remained active. To preserve impartial security in their city and its surroundings, Misrata's leaders kept the Joint Operations Room framework used in 2011 and drew personnel from each militia as part of a collective and balanced arrangement. This worked for several years. After a while, however, an armed group calling itself the Joint Force—led by Omar Bughdada—came out of the Joint Operations Room, turning into a conventional militia with its own agenda. In 2016, the Joint Force participated in the campaign against the Islamic State in Sirte, but after the extremist group was uprooted in December of that year, the Joint Force's relationship with the then-UN-recognized Government of National Accord in Tripoli proved mediocre. Nonetheless, Bughdada managed to secure formal recognition of the Joint Force from Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj in a 2020 decree. See:
The Sentry interview with a Misrata native who dealt with the Joint Force in 2015, July 2024.
Brian McQuinn, "History's Warriors: The Emergence of Revolutionary Battalions in Misrata," in Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn (eds.), *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 248.
Al-Marsad, "Al-Bunyan al-Marsous Operations: Artillery and Air Strikes, Fighting in Districts 3 and 1 in Sirte to Liberate Them From ISIS," August 29, 2016, available at: <https://almarsad.co/2016/08/29/%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B5%D9%82%D8%B5%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%B9%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%8A/>
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- 373 The Sentry interview with a Misrata activist, November 2024.
- 374 The Sentry interview with a Misrata armed group member, July 2024.
- 375 The Sentry interview with a member of the Khums municipal council, July 2024.
- 376 The Sentry interview with an Interior Ministry official based in Tripoli, July 2024.
- 377 The Sentry interview with a Misrata activist, November 2024.
- 378 The Sentry interview with a Misrata armed group member, July 2024.
- 379 The Sentry interview with a Misrata armed group member, July 2024.
- 380 The Sentry interview with a member of the Khums municipal council, July 2024.
- 381 The Sentry interview with a Misrata armed group member, July 2024.
- 382 The Sentry interview with a Misrata armed group member, July 2024.
- 383 Plastic tanks—each typically holding about 1,000 liters—are often placed inside standard steel shipping containers, concealing them amid ordinary cargo. See:
The Sentry interview with a Misrata native familiar with the activities related to the city's port, April 2025.
- 384 As part of illicit maritime activities off Misrata, some small vessels—including fishing boats—transport fuel to nearby Libyan coastal areas. They also transfer fuel to international buyers waiting offshore, often bound for Malta or Italy. See:
The Sentry interview with a Misrata native familiar with the activities related to the city's port, April 2025.
The Sentry interview with a Misrata armed group member, July 2024.
- 385 Two independent sources told The Sentry that a passenger ship known as the Kevalay Queen often buys more fuel than it needs for its journey between Misrata and Turkey. They suspect that the surplus is sold once the ferry arrives in Turkey, although there are no confirmed details as to where or how this extra fuel is offloaded in Turkish ports. See:



- The Sentry interview with a Misrata native familiar with the activities related to the city's port, April 2025.
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- Ibrahim Senusi, "The Kevalay Queen Ferry Inaugurates Tripoli-Istanbul Sealine," Libya Herald, May 12, 2023, available at: <https://libyaherald.com/2023/05/the-kevalay-queen-ferry-inaugurates-tripoli-istanbul-sealine/>
- 386 The Sentry interview with a Misrata armed group member, July 2024.
- 387 When it comes to official security provision in the Bani Awalid area and farther south, the Joint Force has a limited presence. Instead, Brigade 444, another formation affiliated with the Tripoli Defense Ministry, tends to control the Bani Walid area and its southern vicinities. Although Brigade 444 plays a relatively subdued role in the local fuel smuggling trade, some of its mid-level commanders engage in small-scale fuel smuggling. See:
- The Sentry interview with a Misrata native familiar with the activities related to the city's port, April 2025.
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- Attorney General Office – State of Libya, "Statement on Detention of Customs Officials in Misrata Over Gold Smuggling," Facebook post, May 12, 2024, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/attorneygeneral.ly/posts/909652984296170>
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- Salma El Wardany, "Libya Arrests Customs Officers for Smuggling \$2 Billion of Gold," Bloomberg, May 14, 2024, available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-05-14/libya-arrests-customs-officers-for-smuggling-2-billion-of-gold>
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- 391 The Sentry analysis of calls by Iranian-linked vessels at Misrata port since 2023: Arezoo (9165786), Azargoun (9283019), Daisy (9270684), Kashan (9270696), Shiba (9270646).
- 392 In March 2025, the US sent a diplomatic note urging the Foreign Affairs Ministry of the Government of National Unity to address the Office of the Minister of Transport. The Foreign Affairs Ministry's Muftah Abukhris then issued a memorandum requesting that all Libyan authorities refrain from providing any services through Libyan ports or maritime service providers to vessels associated with the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL). The note added that IRISL has been under US sanctions since 2020, and it highlighted recent port calls made by the IRISL vessel Shiba to Misrata, Tripoli, and Benghazi in February 2025. See:
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of National Unity, Libya, "Urgent Letter to the Office of the Minister of Transport Regarding US Embassy Request to Avoid Providing Services to Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL)," Facebook post, March 4, 2025, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/100068048598026/posts/969721908639420/?mibextid=rS40aB7S9Ucbxw6v>
- 393 Asharq al-Awsat, "Has Libya's Unity Government Head Lost Misrata's Support?," June 12, 2024, available at: <https://aawsat.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A7/5030245-%D9%87%D9%84-%D9%81%D9%82%D8%AF-%D8%B1%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%A9%D8%9F>



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- 397 Eva Levesque, “Exit of Libya’s Oil Chief Is a Sign Change Must Come, Say Analysts,” Arabian Gulf Business Insight, January 20, 2025, available at: <https://www.agbi.com/analysis/oil-and-gas/2025/01/libya-oil-chief-inoc-farhat-bengdara-exit-sign-change-must-come-say-analysts/>
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- 399 Office of the NOC’s Chairman, “Memorandum No. 687: Discontinuation of the Barter System for Fuel Supply,” February 5, 2025, reviewed by The Sentry.
- 400 Office of the NOC’s Chairman, “Memorandum No. 687: Discontinuation of the Barter System for Fuel Supply,” February 5, 2025, reviewed by The Sentry.
- 401 Office of the NOC’s Chairman, “Memorandum No. 687: Discontinuation of the Barter System for Fuel Supply,” February 5, 2025, reviewed by The Sentry.
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Tim Cocks and Joe Brock, “Special Report: Anatomy of Nigeria’s \$20 Billion ‘Leak,’” Reuters, February 6, 2015, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/us/special-report-anatomy-of-nigerias-20-billion-leak-idUSKBN0LA0X7/>
- 403 Throughout 2024, the NOC imported 234,000 barrels of fuel daily—mainly gasoline and diesel—spending \$9.46 billion for the year. This works out to roughly \$0.70 per liter. Yet the average fuel price in 2024 was only \$0.62 per liter. This means that the NOC paid about \$0.08 more per liter than it should have. The NOC therefore appears to have bartered away too much of its valuable crude oil in exchange for the fuel it received from abroad. Based on market prices, it overpaid by approximately \$1 billion. See:
The Sentry analysis of Libya’s 2024 fuel imports.
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Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), “Monthly Oil Market Report – December 2024,” December 13, 2024, p. 60, available at: <https://www.opec.org/assets/assetdb/momr-december-2024-1.pdf>
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Libyan Audit Bureau, “Libyan Audit Bureau Report 2023,” December 2024, pp. 81-82, available at: <https://www.audit.gov.ly/ar/reports/>



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The Sentry analysis of Kpler data on Libyan imports in 2025.
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- 407 The NOC response to The Sentry, October 15, 2025.
- 408 The NOC response to The Sentry, October 15, 2025.
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- 490 US Executive Orders 13566 and 13726, issued under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, block the property of persons undermining Libya’s security. Specifically, EO 13726 authorizes the freezing of assets of any foreign person determined to be “engaging in the illicit production, refining, brokering, sale, or export of Libyan oil” or financing armed groups through such activities. See:
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 United Kingdom, “The Libya (Sanctions) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020, No. 1665, December 29, 2020, Regulation 6, available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukSI/2020/1665/regulation/6>
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 The Sentry interview with a senior Libyan Foreign Bank official, December 2024.
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