



# FUNDING VIOLENCE

**SOS**  
MEDITERRANEE

**IRPI**  
MEDIA

**THE HIDDEN COST OF  
EUROPEAN POLICIES  
IN LIBYA**

**March 2026**

**IRPI MEDIA REPORT  
FOR SOS MEDITERRANEE**

**Funding violence:** the hidden cost of European policies in Libya  
Report by IrpiMedia for SOS MEDITERRANEE

**Edited by:** Lorenzo Bagnoli, Fabio Papetti, Paolo Riva, Greta Veresani, di IrpiMedia  
**Supervision:** SOS MEDITERRANEE

---

**Investigative Reporting Project Italy (Irpi)** is the first nonprofit investigative journalism center founded in Italy. For more than a decade it has produced transnational journalistic investigations of public interest — initially published by Italian and international outlets — and since 2020 on the IrpiMedia outlet, the online magazine published by Irpi. IrpiMedia has a thematic newsroom that deals with migration, and in particular with the policies of externalization of the Italian and European borders. For more information, see <https://irpimedia.irpi.eu/>

# CONTENTS

- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... 4
- LIBYA: A TESTING GROUND FOR EXTERNALIZATION ..... 6
- THE “SUCCESS” OF THE SIBMMIL PROGRAMME ..... 9
- THE RICHEST AND MOST CONTROVERSIAL SUPPLIER ..... 15
- MORE BOATS, MORE INTERCEPTIONS ..... 18
- AN UNPRECEDENTED ATTACK ..... 21
- THE ITALIAN-DONATED, EU-FUNDED PATROL VESSEL ..... 22
- AL-ZOUBI'S VERSION ..... 29
- THE EUROPEAN RESPONSE: COOPERATION CONTINUES ..... 32
- MONITORING WITH UNKNOWN OUTCOMES ..... 34
- “NO ALTERNATIVE” ..... 36
- CONCLUSIONS AND ASKS ..... 38

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the era of the Berlusconi government, with the Friendship Treaty signed in 2008,<sup>1</sup> Italy has collaborated with Libya to prevent migrants from crossing the Central Mediterranean. The 2017 Memorandum signed by former Interior Minister Marco Minniti revived the agreement with the support of the EU.

The centrepiece of this cooperation is **SIBMMIL – Support to Integrated Border and Migration Management in Libya**. Launched in 2017 and concluded at the end of 2025, the programme was implemented by the Italian Ministry of the Interior together with the International Organization for Migration (IOM). **Of the €61.2 million allocated to SIBMMIL, IrpiMedia traced just over €34 million. No publicly accessible information exists for the remaining €27.1 million – around 44% of the budget.**



*There is a risk that finances and equipment provided to Libya may not reach the intended targets, or may be misused in some way.”*

EU Irini mission internal document,  
January 2024

The largest supplier under SIBMMIL was the Cantiere Navale Vittoria shipyard in Adria, Italy, awarded contracts worth €77 million. The shipyard is currently at the centre of four separate Italian and European investigations into illegal possession of weapons, international arms trafficking, money laundering and corruption.

**Various Tripoli authorities were financed through SIBMMIL, among them the Libyan Coast Guard – the same force that attacked SOS MEDITERRANEE’s rescue ship Ocean Viking on 24 August 2025.** The warning signs were already visible: as early as January 2024, an internal EU Irini mission document flagged the risk that equipment and finances provided to Libya could be misused.

The attack on the *Ocean Viking* was carried out by the Libyan Coast Guard patrol boat *Houn 664*, **donated by Italy in June 2023 under a SIBMMIL tender worth €3.3 million covering this vessel and a second patrol boat.** The *Houn* operates between Tripoli, Al Khoms – a port east of the Libyan capital with a strong Turkish presence – and Misrata. In this area the patrol boat intercepted at least 321 migrants between July 2023 and June 2024, and its crew has been responsible for

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.iaai.it/sites/default/files/pi\\_a\\_c\\_108.pdf](https://www.iaai.it/sites/default/files/pi_a_c_108.pdf)

other violent episodes. This attack is not an isolated incident: at least 24 attacks against NGOs were recorded between 2021 and September 2025.

The area in which the *Houn* operates is controlled by forces loyal to Prime Minister Abdel Hamid Dbeibah, head of the Government of National Unity (GNU) based in Tripoli, where the influence of Abdulsalam AL-Zoubi — militia leader and now Under-Secretary of Defense — has grown considerably in recent years. On 31 August 2025, the European Union ambassador in Libya, Nicola Orlando, raised the attack against the *Ocean Viking* with AL-Zoubi directly; AL-Zoubi subsequently met with Italian Ministers of Defense and Interior, Guido Crosetto and Matteo Piantedosi, a few days later in Rome.

The violence of the Libyan Coast Guard was raised again during a visit by Libyan officials to Frontex and the European Commission in October 2025. **Internal communications between EU officials speak of a “growing concern” about the use of firearms among both EEAS diplomats and Italian representatives.** These internal communications also report that, according to a representative of the Libyan Coast Guard of Tripoli, the standard operating procedures

had been fully respected during the attack against the *Ocean Viking*. Despite this, the internal communications go on to state that the visit took place in a “*constructive atmosphere*”.

At the end of November, the last steering committee of SIBMMIL was held in Rome. Internal EU documents record that “*the initiative was successful*” and that “*the need for a follow-up project is consensual*”. The new programme could be called HARBOUR and has already been discussed by Italy, Libya and the European Commission's Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf (DG MENA).

**In January 2026, at least 430<sup>2</sup> people died or went missing trying to cross the Central Mediterranean — a figure that may be a significantly undercount given the devastation caused by Cyclone Harry.** That same month, Libyan authorities intercepted 537 people at sea, forcibly returning them to Libya.

For the UN, human rights violations against migrants in Libya are a “brutal and normalized reality.”<sup>3</sup> A moratorium on interceptions and returns to the country is therefore urgently needed until human rights are guaranteed.

<sup>2</sup> <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/report/business-as-usual-human-rights-violations-and-abuses-against-migrants-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-in-libya/unsmil-ohchr-business-usual-en.pdf?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/report/business-as-usual-human-rights-violations-and-abuses-against-migrants-asylum-seekers-and-refugees-in-libya/unsmil-ohchr-business-usual-en.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com), p.4

# LIBYA: A TESTING GROUND FOR EXTERNALIZATION

Since the early 2000s, irregular arrivals of migrants from Libya have been considered a security threat by the European Union, which has responded by funding and legitimising the forces that control the country's land and sea borders.

*In all these years, the diplomatic scheme has always been the same. Italy acts as the trailblazer, the EU follows – and finances.*

Silvio Berlusconi was the first to pursue this approach, through the Italy-Libya Friendship Treaty of 2008.<sup>4</sup> The agreement provided for up to five billion dollars in investments in the North African country over twenty years, the final tranche of which — just under €90,000 — is due to be disbursed within the next three years.<sup>5</sup> The agreement was signed by Interior Minister Roberto Maroni, who also introduced the practice of pushing back migrants at

sea, an approach later condemned by the European Court of Human Rights<sup>6</sup> and subsequently suspended.

**In 2010, Amnesty International submitted reports denouncing human rights violations in Libya to the United Nations,<sup>7</sup> while the European Union was financing the first projects to control migration flows.** An EU Action Fiche document for the project *Support to the Libyan Authorities to Enhance the Management of Borders and Migration Flows*, funded with €10 million that year, noted: *“There is lack of data on the number of migrants who are present in the country; however the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that there are between 1.5 and 2 million migrants living in Libya without authorisation. Libyan authorities say that the number is closer to 3 million.”*<sup>8</sup> The following year, Gaddafi fell. The civil war that followed left Libya a divided country by 2014; in the west, the

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.rgs.mef.gov.it/\\_Documenti/VERSIONI/attivita\\_istituzionali/formazione\\_e\\_gestione\\_del\\_bilancio/bilancio\\_di\\_previsione/bilancio\\_finanziario/2025-2027/DLB/DLB\\_2025\\_DLB-04-AT-060-Esteri.pdf](https://www.rgs.mef.gov.it/_Documenti/VERSIONI/attivita_istituzionali/formazione_e_gestione_del_bilancio/bilancio_di_previsione/bilancio_finanziario/2025-2027/DLB/DLB_2025_DLB-04-AT-060-Esteri.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://unipd-centrodirittiumani.it/it/temi/hirsi-jamaa-e-altri-c-italia-illegali-i-respingimenti-verso-la-libia-del-2009>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session9/LY/AL\\_AmnestyInternational.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session9/LY/AL_AmnestyInternational.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2017-04/c20109276\\_sm\\_2\\_libye\\_2\\_2010\\_ad1\\_022808.pdf](https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2017-04/c20109276_sm_2_libye_2_2010_ad1_022808.pdf)

Tripoli government holds international recognition; in the east, Marshal Khalifa Haftar rules from his operational base in Benghazi.<sup>9</sup>

It was in this new context that Paolo Gentiloni, then Prime Minister of Italy, had to confront the Libya question in 2017. **His Interior Minister, Marco Minniti, signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Tripoli government “to address the problems arising from the continuous and high flows of clandestine migrants.”**<sup>10</sup> Today, Minniti is president of the *Med-Or Foundation*, a think tank dedicated to promoting cooperation initiatives and geopolitical analysis established on the initiative of Leonardo Spa.<sup>11</sup> **“If we want to stop human trafficking,” he said in an interview in October 2017, “we must stabilise Libya.”**<sup>12</sup>

The economic pillar behind the Italian and European initiatives in Libya was the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), which ceased activities in December 2025. This trust fund, created in November 2015 during the so-called refugee crisis to combat irregular immigration from the

African continent, channelled more than 400 million euro across over 30 projects in Libya. It was the primary mechanism through which border externalisation was financed and the coastguard and border forces were legitimised.

*The EU has always supported this cooperative approach with Libya, despite the continuing accusations of human rights violations carried out by Libyan authorities, warnings from the UN,<sup>13</sup> the opinion of the European Ombudsman<sup>14</sup> and reports from the EU Court of Auditors.<sup>15</sup>*

Internal sources have also raised concerns. In a confidential document obtained by IrpiMedia, European military forces operating under Eunavfor Med Irini expressed reservations. Irini is the military maritime security operation launched by the European Union in the Central Mediterranean in 2020 to enforce the UN arms embargo on Libya; training the Libyan authorities that operate at sea is among its secondary tasks.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> <https://aresdifesa.it/nel-2026-esercitazione-congiunta-tra-forze-di-tripoli-e-bengasi-con-africom/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Libia.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.med-or.org/la-fondazione>

<sup>12</sup> <https://partitodemocratico.it/minniti-paese-unito-terrorismo-migrazioni/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2024/07/95164/arbitrary-detentions-and-impunity-widespread-libya-warns-uns-turk>

<sup>14</sup> <https://euobserver.com/migration/argea1a145>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?ref=SR-2024-17>

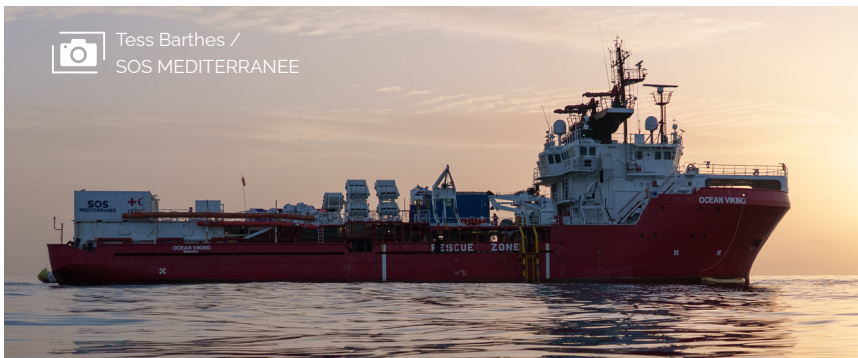
<sup>16</sup> <https://www.operationirini.eu/about-us/>

*In a document that military units operating under Irini sent to officials of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in January 2024, they stated they were “almost certain” that local authorities in northern Libya control or tolerate different kinds of illegal trafficking on their territories. “There is a risk that finances and equipment provided to Libya may not reach the intended targets, or may be misused in some way”, the document warned.*

And yet, funds continue to be disbursed. In fact, **under the new EU budget cycle for 2021–2027, Libya has secured at least a further €210 million through NDICI, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument.**<sup>17</sup>

Dialogue between Brussels and Tripoli has also intensified: following a five-year hiatus, a European Commission delegation visited Libya in February 2023.<sup>18</sup> A further five technical missions to Libya were carried out between 2024 and 2025.<sup>19</sup>

In 2025, the number of people arriving in Italy by sea remained at a similar level to the previous year — just over 66,000. Yet according to UNHCR data, Libya was both the main country of departure and the one from which departures increased most sharply: over 58,000 persons, a 40% rise compared to the previous year.<sup>20</sup> Not to mention the opening of the new route running from the eastern coast of the country to the Greek island of Crete.<sup>21</sup>



<sup>17</sup> <https://www.statewatch.org/media/4852/eu-eubam-strategic-assessment-12008s-24.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.statewatch.org/media/4852/eu-eubam-strategic-assessment-12008s-24.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2024-002089-ASW\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2024-002089-ASW_EN.html)

<sup>20</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/120377>

<sup>21</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/europe-sea-arrivals/location/24489>

# THE “SUCCESS” OF THE SIBMMIL PROGRAMME

Five months after the signing of the Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding in 2017, the European Commission presented an action plan for the Central Mediterranean,<sup>22</sup> which also included several initiatives funded by the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa.



A programme launched in July 2017 with EUTF funding was completed in 2025<sup>23</sup> — a year the EU Ambassador to Libya, Nicola Orlando, described as one of the most productive in terms of bilateral cooperation. The programme was called SIBMMIL: *Support to integrated border and migration management in Libya*.

A motion proposed by the parliamentary majority — aimed at securing renewal of the Memorandum with Libya and expressing support for its plan to establish „70 repatriation centres“ — approved on 15 October 2025, emphasised that at operational level, „almost all technical assistance initiatives“ for Libya were at that time linked to SIBMMIL.<sup>24</sup>

**SIBMMIL was divided into two phases. The scope of the first phase was to “strengthen the capacity of relevant Libyan authorities in the areas of border and migration management, including border control and surveillance, addressing smuggling and trafficking of human beings, search**

<sup>22</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_17\\_1882](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_17_1882)

<sup>23</sup> [https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmes/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-first-phase\\_en](https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmes/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-first-phase_en)

<sup>24</sup> <https://aic.camera.it/aic/scheda.html?numero=1-00505&ramo=C&leg=19> and Irpimedia: <https://irpimedia.irpi.eu/centri-rimpatri-libia/>

*and rescue at sea and in the desert.*<sup>25</sup> The second, formally launched in December 2018 (with financing approved by the Italian Ministry of the Interior in 2020),<sup>26</sup> had very similar objectives, with the stated goal of **“contributing to a human response to the migration crises in respect of international and human right laws.”**<sup>27</sup>

The two phases differed primarily in which Libyan forces were involved.<sup>28</sup> The first phase focused on the development of the General Administration for Coastal Security (GACS), an organisation under the Libyan Ministry of the Interior. **The second phase saw the development of the Libyan Coast Guard and Port Security (LCGPS), which operates under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defense** (and which, from here on, we will simply call the Libyan Coast Guard).

SIBMMIL had a total budget of €61.2 million, made up of European and Italian funds. The European Union contributed €42.2

million to the first phase and €16.8 million to the second.<sup>29</sup> The Ministry of the Interior and the EU Commission state that Italian co-financing totaled €2.2 million, although several Italian documents (including some published in the Official Gazette) report a figure of €5.9 million.<sup>30</sup>

The project was implemented by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, supported during the first phase<sup>31</sup> by the International Organization for Migration, which is part of the United Nations system.<sup>32</sup> It was formally concluded on 31 December 2025.

In February 2026, IrpiMedia traced the expenses of the Italian Ministry of the Interior and the IOM in relation to the two phases of SIBMMIL, continuing the work previously carried out with ActionAid Italia for [The Big Wall](#) project.

The research was carried out by analysing the documentation relating to tenders of several Italian entities, including the

<sup>25</sup> [https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmemes/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-first-phase\\_en](https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmemes/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-first-phase_en)

<sup>26</sup> [https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmemes/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-second-phase\\_en](https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmemes/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-second-phase_en)

<sup>27</sup> [https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmemes/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-second-phase\\_en](https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmemes/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-second-phase_en)

<sup>28</sup> [https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/document/download/6f72cd67-ff9f-482a-a346-171427a8a966\\_en?filename=t05-utf-noa-ly-07.pdf](https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/document/download/6f72cd67-ff9f-482a-a346-171427a8a966_en?filename=t05-utf-noa-ly-07.pdf), p.3

<sup>29</sup> [https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmemes/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-second-phase\\_en](https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/our-programmemes/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-second-phase_en)

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie\\_generale/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario?atto\\_dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=2018-05-26&atto.codiceRedazionale=18A03671&elenco30giorni=false](https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/atto/serie_generale/caricaDettaglioAtto/originario?atto_dataPubblicazioneGazzetta=2018-05-26&atto.codiceRedazionale=18A03671&elenco30giorni=false)

<sup>31</sup> [https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/document/download/0a045dcb-9f18-4276-b8a2-1f3a4e863c2d\\_en?filename=t05-utf-noa-ly-04\\_modified.pdf](https://trust-fund-for-africa.europa.eu/document/download/0a045dcb-9f18-4276-b8a2-1f3a4e863c2d_en?filename=t05-utf-noa-ly-04_modified.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.iom.int/who-we-are>

Guardia di Finanza,<sup>33</sup> the State Police,<sup>34</sup> the Navy,<sup>35</sup> the Agenzia Industrie Difesa (AID),<sup>36</sup> the Official Gazette of the Italian Republic, the websites of the National Anti-Corruption Authority, Invitalia (an Italian government agency for investment attraction and business development), the General State Accounting Office and the European Union's Tenders Electronic Daily (TED) portal.<sup>37</sup> Tenders were screened using keywords such as "Libya" (and Libia in Italian), "SIBMMIL" or "EUTF" or by entering the specific codes of phases one and two of SIBMMIL under the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa ("T05-EUTF-NOA-LY-04" and "T05-EUTF-NOA-LY-07") and the single project code (CUP F9gH17000020006) assigned to the programme. To trace IOM funds, the organisation's website was searched using the identifying code of phase 1 of SIBMMIL, "IB.0233".<sup>38</sup>

**For the Italian Ministry of the Interior, IrpiMedia was able to trace expenditures**

**for a total of €30.4 million**, which were used for:

- » supply and maintenance of boats for the Libyan authorities;
- » training of the crews of these boats in Libyan and Italian territories;
- » technical equipment for Libyan naval units;
- » creation of the maritime rescue coordination center (MRCC) in Tripoli, operational by the end of 2024;<sup>39</sup>
- » provision of land vehicles for the patrol of land borders.

**The International Organization for Migration, on the other hand, received around €12.6 million, of which IrpiMedia traced the spending of €3.6 million**, which funded:

- » further humanitarian training of border guards;
- » a border station in southern Libya;
- » a training center for the Libyan border guards;
- » a training center for the Libyan Coast Guard;
- » medical supplies and an ambulance.

<sup>33</sup> [https://www.gdf.gov.it/search?path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Fbandi-di-gara&path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Ftitolari-di-incarichi-di-collaborazione-o-consulenza&path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Fprogrammazione-biennale&path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Fprogrammazione-triennale&path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Ftrasparenza-appalti&path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Fresponsabile-anagrafe-stazione-appaltante&path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Funita-organizzative&b\\_start=96](https://www.gdf.gov.it/search?path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Fbandi-di-gara&path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Ftitolari-di-incarichi-di-collaborazione-o-consulenza&path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Fprogrammazione-biennale&path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Fprogrammazione-triennale&path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Ftrasparenza-appalti&path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Fresponsabile-anagrafe-stazione-appaltante&path.query=%2Fit%2Fstazioni-appaltanti%2Funita-organizzative&b_start=96) and <https://amministrazionetrasparente.gdf.gov.it/stazioni-appaltanti/bandi-di-gara>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.poliziadistato.it/articolo/407581ae40cbbfc6787206310>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.marina.difesa.it/documentazione/gare/Pagine/BDGlist.aspx>

<sup>36</sup> Agenzia Industrie Difesa is a public law entity with legal personality and administrative, financial, and accounting autonomy. It is the Ministry of Defense's in-house agency and ensures the coordinated and unified management of Defense production facilities. <https://www.difesa.it/aid/trasparenza/informazioni-sulle-singole-procedure/42572.html>

<sup>37</sup> <https://ted.europa.eu/en/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.iom.int/awarded-contracts-grants-recipients-and-selected-implementing-partners>

<sup>39</sup> <https://irpimedia.irpi.eu/libia-coordinamento-salvataggi-in-mare/>

Overall, IrpiMedia traced just over €34 million spent out of a total of €61.2 million allocated, which is approximately 56%. This means that there is no publicly available information on how the remaining 44% of SIBMMIL's total budget was spent. This amounts to €27.1 million in European funds for which citizens cannot rely on any transparency.

internal document obtained by IrpiMedia from a European official present at the meeting.

The opacity of the funding is compounded by questions over who actually benefited.

**A March 2024 document by the European External Action Service states that Libyan institutions are still criticized by Member States and international organisations for a lack of clarity on "the respect of human rights and transparency on the conditions of people recovered at sea and how they are handled ashore".**

Nevertheless, the same document credits SIBMMIL with progressively increasing the autonomy of Libya's maritime forces.

At the last steering committee meeting of the programme, held in Rome in November 2025 with European, Libyan, Italian and other EU country officials, "it was made clear that the initiative was successful" and "the need for a follow-up project is consensual" — so reads an

## LESS AND LESS TRANSPARENCY

In order to track the funds spent under the SIBMMIL programme, IrpiMedia also submitted numerous requests for disclosure of documents to the Italian authorities.

All of them were unsuccessful, even after appeals were filed following initial rejections. The responses state that "*the documents requested contain information that cannot be disclosed as it directly affects Italy's international relations with third countries*", therefore, making them public "*could cause concrete harm to the protection of the public interest in security and public order, as well as to Italy's international relations with Libya*".<sup>40</sup>

Very similar requests for access to documents had already been made

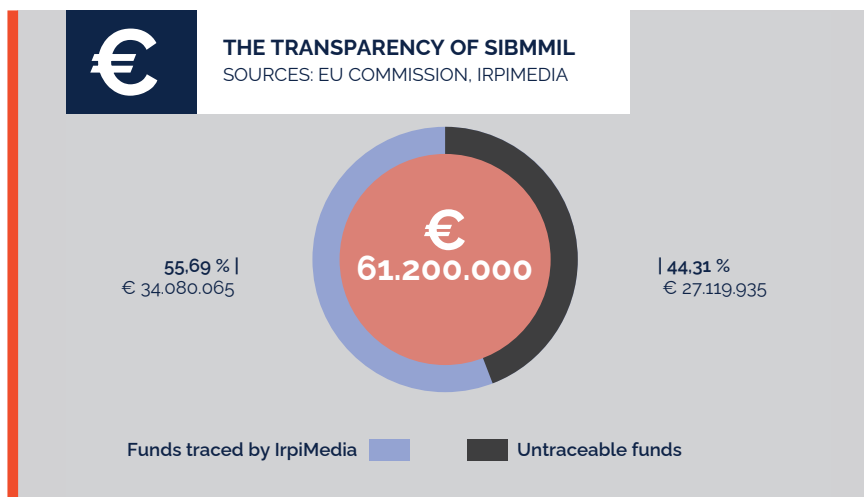
<sup>40</sup> Response dated 9 December 2025, ref. no. 400.A/12.378/2025 (070), to the request for access to documents submitted by Lorenzo Bagnoli

in 2021–2022, as part of [The Big Wall](#) project, carried out in collaboration with [ActionAid Italia](#). At that time, however, IrpiMedia and ActionAid had been able to obtain numerous documents relating to SIBMMIL and other border management operations in third countries, such as Tunisia. In the intervening four years, the Italian authorities have changed their approach.

One of the reasons for this shift is a decree issued by the Ministry of the Interior in March 2022,<sup>41</sup> which was cited as the basis for the negative responses received by IrpiMedia in recent months.

**The measure, signed by then minister Luciana Lamorgese, expanded the categories of documents excluded from the right of access to include “those relating to technical-operational understandings for international police cooperation including border and immigration management” and those “relating to cooperation with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex)”.**

**At the time of the decree’s approval, Giulia Crescini of the Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration (ASGI) spoke of an attempt to “render the citizen’s right of access null and void”.**<sup>42</sup>



<sup>41</sup> <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/amministrazione-trasparente/disposizioni-general/atti-general/atti-amministrativi-general/decreti-direttive-e-altri-documenti/decreto-16-marzo-2022-disciplina-categorie-documenti-sottratti-diritto-accesso>

<sup>42</sup> <https://altreconomia.it/il-decreto-del-ministero-dellinterno-che-azzer-la-trasparenza-sulle-frontiere/>

"The categories of documents deemed inaccessible have been so broadly defined in the decree as to thoroughly undermine the spirit of the Freedom of Information Act. This restriction has subsequently been interpreted in an absolute manner by the public administration, yet it should not apply to civic access,"<sup>43</sup> Crescini explained to *Altreconomia*, one of the first outlets to criticise the measure.

Even the questions sent to the press offices of the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation did not receive answers or received extremely vague and limited answers.

IrpiMedia also submitted access to document requests to European institutions. Only the European External Action Service provided a very limited number of documents. Frontex sent a negative reply; the European Commission's Directorate-General for Home Affairs replied that it had no documents corresponding to the request, whilst the MENA and INTPA Directorates did not respond within the 15-day deadline.

Only the EU Commission and IOM responded to IrpiMedia's questions. An EU spokesperson stated that "safeguarding

protection for those in need and ensuring respect for the human rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, including respect of the obligation of non-refoulement, are fundamental principles of our work. These principles need to be respected in all of the Commission's initiatives, including in EU-funded projects related to migration. The EU has established monitoring tools and mechanisms to ensure that its programmes and projects respect human rights. These mechanisms include initial assessments, regular reports, and on-the-spot verification missions. EU Delegations conduct annual exercises to assess risks in the country of operation. This includes an assessment of the risk of human rights abuses or violations. This assessment informs the operations of the EU in the country, including projects related to migration. The EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa allocated €59 million to the SIBMMIL programme, which undergoes comprehensive financial and operational checks, including third-party audits, to ensure compliance with EU funding requirements."

An IOM spokesperson stated that the organisation's engagement "was strictly humanitarian and focused on strengthening the capacity of national authorities in the South and it did not involve cooperation with the Libyan Coast Guard."

<sup>43</sup> <https://altreconomia.it/il-decreto-del-ministero-dellinterno-che-azzer-la-trasparenza-sulle-frontiere/>, own translation.

# THE RICHEST AND MOST CONTROVERSIAL SUPPLIER

An analysis of the tender notices relating to the SIBMMIL programme that IrpiMedia was able to trace reveals that the successful bidder that secured the largest share of the funds was the Italian shipyard Cantiere Navale Vittoria. **The company won five contracts for a total of more than €7.7 million, of which more than €6 million was for the supply of three vessels destined for the Libyan Coast Guard.**<sup>44</sup>

Cantiere Navale Vittoria is a historic company based in Adria, in the province of Rovigo,<sup>45</sup> founded in 1927 by the Duò family, which led it until February 2025. It describes itself as "one of Italy's leading companies

*and an increasingly recognised international authority in the design and construction of dual-use vessels, intended for both the military and paramilitary markets as well as the commercial sector, with lengths of up to 100 metres".* Throughout its history, the company explains, "it has developed important international orders, with deliveries mainly to Europe and Africa."

The shipyard's commissions for Libya began well before SIBMMIL. As stated in 2023 by former board member Luigi Duò, the company delivered eight series-800 patrol boats to the Gaddafi regime before its fall.<sup>46</sup> Then, in 2013, within the framework



<sup>44</sup> <https://www.poliziadistato.it/statics/15/determina-a-contrarre-conv-con-cp.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.cantierenavalevittoria.it/>

<sup>46</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtGD8F\\_rPM&t=3s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtGD8F_rPM&t=3s)

of the European Sahara-Med project implemented by the Italian Ministry of the Interior, Cantiere Navale Vittoria overhauled another six boats — three 14-metre patrol boats (P106, P107 and P111), one 22-metre boat (P200) and two 34-metre boats (P300 and P301).<sup>47</sup> These could not be delivered due to the extreme instability in Libya and were left in custody at the Tunisian port of Bizerte, in a shipyard that collaborates with the one in Adria. The vessels were subsequently transferred to the Libyan authorities in Tripoli, but required further work, which between 2017 and 2021 continued to be carried out by Cantiere Navale Vittoria and funded by the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, albeit as part of projects managed under SIBMMIL.

This means that, in addition to the €7.7 million obtained under the SIBMMIL programme, in recent years Cantiere Navale Vittoria won contracts linked to Libya for at least another €7.4 million.<sup>48</sup>

**On 7 February 2023, a handover ceremony for the first of the three vessels commissioned under SIBMMIL was held at the shipyard's premises,** attended by Italian Foreign Affairs Minister Antonio Tajani, his Libyan counterpart Najla Al Mangoush, and then European

Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi."



Since then, however, there have been no further ceremonies in Adria. Cantiere Navale Vittoria has entered a crisis and is now in liquidation. Its 2024 financial statements show a loss of more than €26 million following a restructuring plan; the previous year the deficit stood at €80 million. In February 2025, entrepreneur Roberto Cavazzana bought the shipyard from the Duò family for €8.2 million.<sup>49</sup>

*These financial difficulties are compounded by legal issues. Cantiere Navale Vittoria is currently at the centre of four separate investigations.*

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.poliziadistato.it/statics/17/determina-rimessa-in-efficienza.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> There are two sources of funding that Cantiere Navale Vittoria drew upon prior to SIBMMIL. The first is European funding (the Sahara-MED project, amounting to approximately €6.6 million, from 2013), whilst the second is Italian funding (the Africa Fund, amounting to approximately €835,000).

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/cnv-rileva-cantiere-navale-vittoria-AGKhNWtC>

In September 2025, **two Browning M2.50 caliber machine guns of Belgian manufacture**, sold to the shipyard by Italian defence and security multinational Leonardo, **were found in its warehouse**.

The weapons were undeclared in the documentation for two high-speed patrol boats being built for the Royal Oman Police — a violation of legal requirements. The discovery was made as cameras from *Report*, the Italian investigative television programme, were visiting the shipyard to cover its crisis. The Rovigo Public Prosecutor's Office subsequently launched an investigation into illegal possession of weapons.

According to Cantiere Navale Vittoria, as reconstructed by *Report*, the machine guns were intended for the Omani patrol boats. However, by the time of the discovery the contract with Oman had been suspended, and it was not until December 2024 — two months later — that the Omani buyer finalised the purchase under a more financially advantageous agreement.

The documents signed by Oman made no mention of machine guns on board, according to sources close to the investigation — raising the question of whether they were intended elsewhere. The shipyard attributed the matter to a simple oversight. **The Anti-Mafia District Directorate of Venice nonetheless opened a file on the hypothesis of international arms trafficking.**

Another investigation concerns financial irregularities related to the transfer of ownership and the management of EU-backed funds, with money laundering as the alleged offence. A further case was launched by the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) in Croatia, on the allegation that the shipyard bribed a public official to win a tender for the supply of police vessels. The 2023 financial statements record a debt of €7.4 million relating to the Croatian contract — compact coastal vessels for the Croatian Coast Guard that have yet to be delivered.

# MORE BOATS, MORE INTERCEPTIONS

In order to “*strengthen the capacity of the Libyan authorities*”, as SIBMMIL proposed, the question of vessels was fundamental — and the Libyan authorities themselves made this clear.

A document entitled “*Libyan requirement from 2018*” with the logo of the Libyan Coast Guard, and attached to Irini operation files, lists a table of requests from the Tripoli authorities to European — or possibly Italian — partners (it is not clear to whom the document is addressed). Among these are: five offshore patrol vessels, five large patrol vessels, ten smaller, more general-purpose patrol vessels and 40 rigid inflatable boats, commonly known as zodiacs.

These wishes would only be partly fulfilled. **As of June 2022, the Libyan Coast Guard had just six 35-meter vessels, donated by Italy between 2017 and 2018. “Despite the fact that these vessels have not been constructed to specific standards for SAR, they are employed in performing 100% of the rescue activity,”** noted an Irini operation document.

Two years later, the results of cooperation

with the European Union began to take shape.

*A July 2024 EU Council document revealed that the Libyan Coast Guard had 15 vessels, 11 of them donated and/or refurbished with EU or Member State funds, such as Italy, but also the Netherlands.*

These new assets, the document explains, “have enhanced the LGC’s maritime presence and effectiveness in intercepting migrant vessels.”

The data on interceptions of boats in distress by the Libyan authorities seem to confirm this reading, at least in the most recent period. **In 2019, around 9,200 people were intercepted at sea and forcibly returned to Libya; by 2021 that figure had risen to nearly 32,500, the highest ever recorded.**<sup>50</sup> A two-year decline followed, before numbers began rising again from 2024, reaching more than 27,000 in 2025 — the second-highest figure on record. The supply of boats has therefore been a fundamental step in improving Libya’s capacity to stop migrants at sea. At the same time,

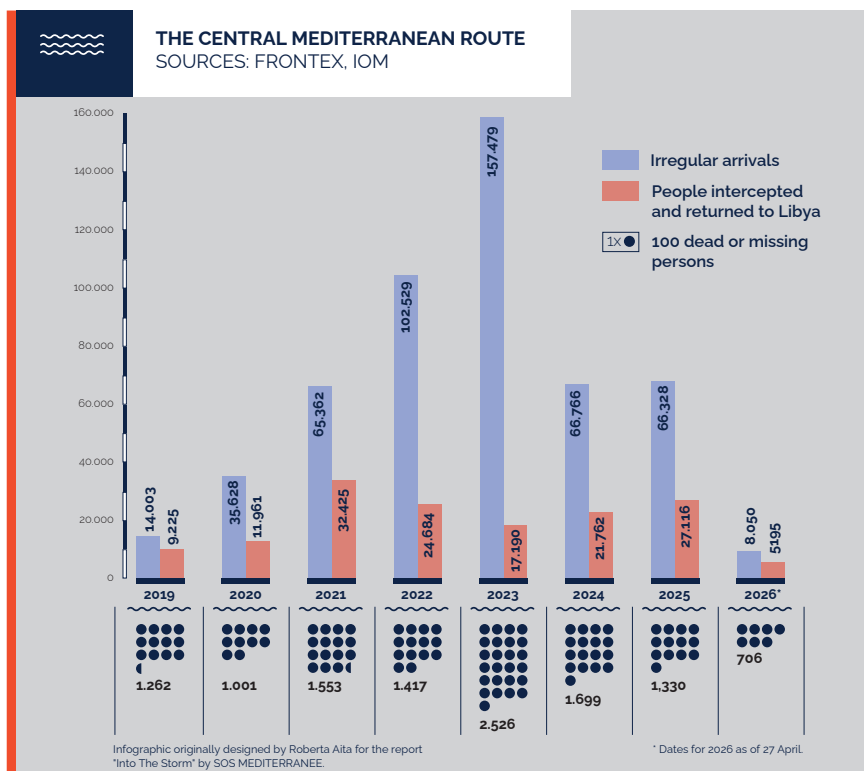
<sup>50</sup> Data on interceptions from IOM Libya.

however, interception trends reveal that other factors also play a role, such as the rapidly shifting power dynamics within Libya, which are examined in the following chapter.

As the operational capacity of the Libyan authorities at sea has grown, so too has the frequency of intimidation and violence against NGOs conducting search and rescue operations in the Central

Mediterranean. Between 2021 and the end of September 2025, at least 24 incidents were recorded involving Libyan actors – including the Libyan Coast Guard – and NGO vessels. The majority (21) occurred within the Libyan SAR zone, particularly in zone 1, west of Tripoli.

In many cases, incidents coincide with or closely follow peaks in arrivals in Italy, and tend to occur in the stretches of sea off

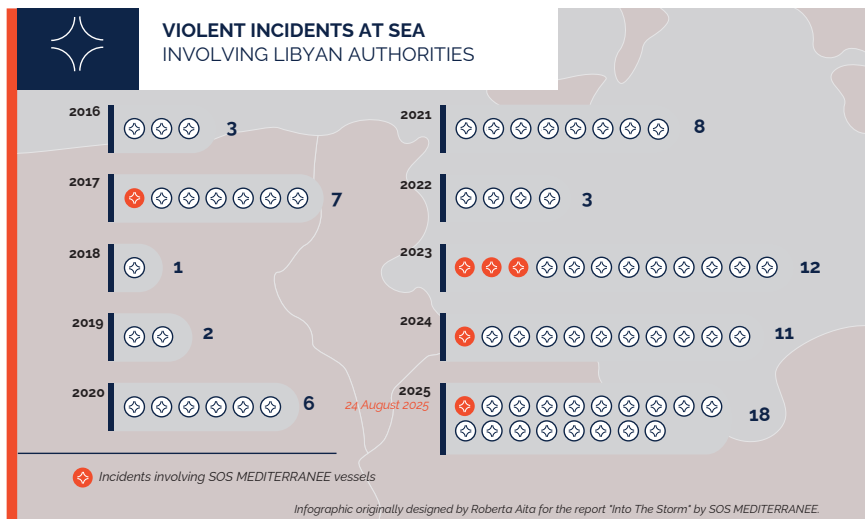


the coasts from which most departures originate. **The figures are rising: seven incidents were recorded between 2021 and 2023, ten in 2024 alone, and at least seven in just the first nine months of 2025.**

A Sea-Watch report<sup>51</sup> published in November 2025 confirms this trend, documenting 72 incidents of violence by the Libyan authorities at sea (against both NGOs and migrants) since 2016 with a marked increase from 2023 onwards. With 18 known incidents, 2025 was the

most violent year on record. *Interference and attacks by the Libyan authorities are becoming increasingly frequent and serious. In 8 of the cases analysed, Tripoli's forces opened fire.*

One of those cases was in August 2025, when the Libyan Coast Guard fired directly at SOS MEDITERRANEE's vessel *Ocean Viking* — the first deliberate attack on an NGO vessel by Libyan authorities since 2016. A month later, a Libyan Coast Guard patrol boat fired on the rescue vessel *Sea-Watch 5*.<sup>52</sup>



<sup>51</sup> <https://sea-watch.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/SeaWatchReportViolenzeLibiche.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> <https://sea-watch.org/it/motovedetta-italia-spari-sea-watch/>

# AN UNPRECEDENTED ATTACK

On 24 August 2025, SOS MEDITERRANEE's humanitarian search and rescue vessel, the *Ocean Viking*, came under sustained gunfire from a Libyan Coast Guard patrol boat.



**At the time of the attack, the *Ocean Viking* had 87 survivors on board from two previous rescue operations and, with authorisation from the Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre, had temporarily diverted from its route to the assigned port of disembarkation to search for a third vessel in distress in international waters.**

The masked individuals on board the Libyan patrol boat, with very limited ability to communicate in English, approached the *Ocean Viking* aggressively, issuing illegal orders to leave the area. **Without any warning, they opened fire, even though the *Ocean Viking* was already changing course.** The masked men continued shooting, insulting the crew and threatening to kill them, while an Arabic-speaking team member on board the *Ocean Viking* pleaded with the attackers to let the ship leave the area.

The attack shattered four bridge windows, destroyed several communication and navigation antennas, and caused severe damage to all four rigid-hulled inflatable boats (RHIBs) and other SAR equipment. **More than 100 bullet holes were left across the vessel, some at head height inside the bridge.** Although no injuries were reported, both survivors and crew were exposed to immediate mortal danger and suffered significant psychological trauma.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> <https://sosmediterranea.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Sopravvissuti-e-equipaggio-umanitario-sotto-il-fuoco-nemico.pdf>

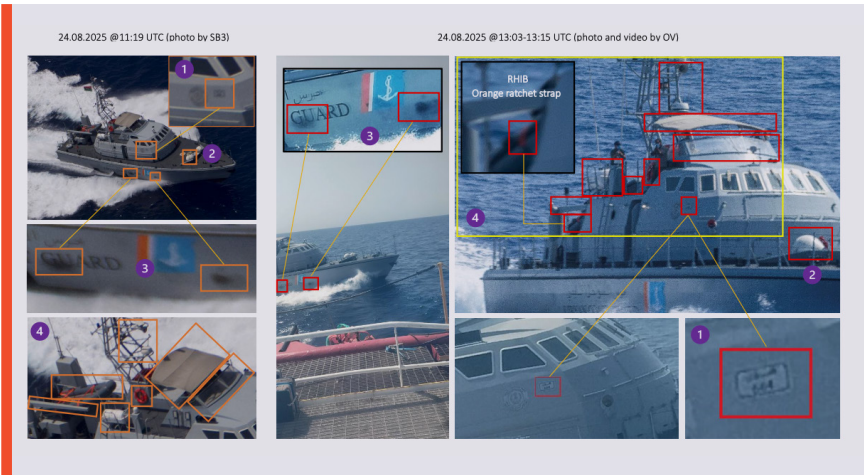
# THE ITALIAN-DONATED, EU-FUNDED PATROL VESSEL

*The Libyan vessel responsible for the attack on the Ocean Viking was the Houn 664, donated to the Libyan Coast Guard by Italy under the EU-funded SIBMMIL programme.*

This was confirmed through images taken on the day of the incident by the *Ocean Viking* and, a few hours earlier, by Sea-Watch's SeaBird 3 aircraft. These were compared with online images<sup>54</sup> of the four Corrubia vessels at the disposal of the Libyan Coast Guard: *Fezzan 658*, *Ubari 660*, *Murzuq 662* and, indeed, *Houn 664*. Minor differences between the vessels, in particular the

number of water outlets on the port side, allowed the *Houn* to be positively identified.

The vessel's journey to the Libyan Coast Guard began in 2021. In August of that year, the Italian Directorate-General for Migration and Border Police requested additional financial support from the European Commission's DG



<sup>54</sup> <https://aresdifesa.it/due-pattugliatori-classe-corrubia-consegnati-alla-guardia-costiera-libica/>  
<https://en.alwasat.ly/news/libya/403072>  
[https://x.com/scandura/status/1678045751480393728?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://x.com/scandura/status/1678045751480393728?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)

NEAR under the SIBMMIL programme to refurbish two naval vessels for the Libyan Coast Guard. Approval from Brussels arrived in September, for a total amount of €3.3 million.<sup>55</sup>

The contracting authority managing the funding was the Defence Industries Agency (AID), a public-law body supervised by the Minister of Defence and established in 2001. In October 2021, AID signed a cooperation agreement with the Italian Police directorate responsible for border control, which subsequently became a technical agreement for the conduct of the tendering procedures.

Between 2020 and 2023, the Director-General of AID was Nicola Latorre, who had previously served as a senator between 2005 and 2018. Regarded as belonging to the same faction as Marco Minniti,<sup>56</sup> Latorre served as chairman of the Senate Defence Committee during the years leading up to the signing of the 2017 Italy-Libya Memorandum.

The €3.3 million of European funding was allocated to refurbish two Corrubia-class vessels of the Italian Coast Guard, the G108 *Conversano* and

the G113 *Partipilo*,<sup>57</sup> which would then become the *Murzuq 662* and *Houn 664* of the Libyan Coast Guard respectively. This was confirmed by the EU Commissioner for the Mediterranean, Dubravka Šuica, in a written reply to the European Parliament following the attack on the *Ocean Viking* in August 2025. “The P664 Houn Corrubia-class vessel has been refurbished under the EU-funded *Support to Integrated Border and Migration Management in Libya* (SIBMMIL) programme and donated to the Libyan Coast Guard in June 2023, which is still operating it,” she wrote in December 2025.<sup>58</sup>

However, in this case too, Italian spending remains unclear. IrpiMedia identified tenders relating to the two vessels, the *Murzuq 662* and the *Houn 664*, for a total amount of €2.6 million. It is therefore unclear whether the €3.3 million allocated by the EU Commission has been spent in full and, if so, what the funds that are unaccounted for were used on. The largest contract, worth almost €1.2 million, concerns the overhaul of the engines of the two vessels and was awarded to MTU (ROLLS ROYCE).

<sup>55</sup> [https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/AID/trasparenza/Documents/DAC/dac\\_anno\\_2022/DAC\\_48\\_2022.pdf](https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/AID/trasparenza/Documents/DAC/dac_anno_2022/DAC_48_2022.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.iltempo.it/politica/2025/02/03/news/nicola-latorre-almasri-pd-fatto-stesso-schifezze-governo-ragione-stato-minniti-41519083/>

<sup>57</sup> [https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/AID/trasparenza/Documents/DAC/dac\\_anno\\_2022/DAC\\_48\\_2022.pdf](https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/AID/trasparenza/Documents/DAC/dac_anno_2022/DAC_48_2022.pdf)

<sup>58</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-003295-ASW\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-003295-ASW_EN.html)

The two vessels were finally handed over to the authorities in Tripoli in 2023, the year in which more than 157,000 migrants arrived on Italian shores<sup>59</sup> and Libyan authorities intercepted just over 17,000 people – the highest and lowest figures, respectively, of the past five years. The handover ceremony took place in Messina on 23 June 2023, following completion of the “refitting and refurbishment operations,”

according to a press release from the Defence Industries Agency itself, which noted the “presence of representatives from the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), the Central Directorate of Immigration and Border Police, the Libyan technical commission, the Defence Industries Agency and the Guardia di Finanza.”<sup>60</sup>



The arrival of the Houn and Murzuq at the port of Tripoli was captured in a video posted on [Facebook](#) by Abdulrahman Milad, known as Bija, commander of the Libyan Naval Academy. Milad was under investigation by the Agrigento Public Prosecutor’s Office and the International Criminal Court for human trafficking and the smuggling of petroleum products; he was killed on 1 September 2024 in Zawiya, where he had previously served as head of the local Coast Guard unit.<sup>61</sup> The video was identified and made public by the [Sarita Libre](#) blog and the [JL Project](#).

Local newspaper *La Sicilia* reported on the

<sup>59</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/europe-sea-arrivals/location/24521>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.agenziaindustriedifesa.it/comunicati-stampa/support-to-integrated-border-and-migration-management-in-libya-consegnate-a-messina-due-unita-navali/>

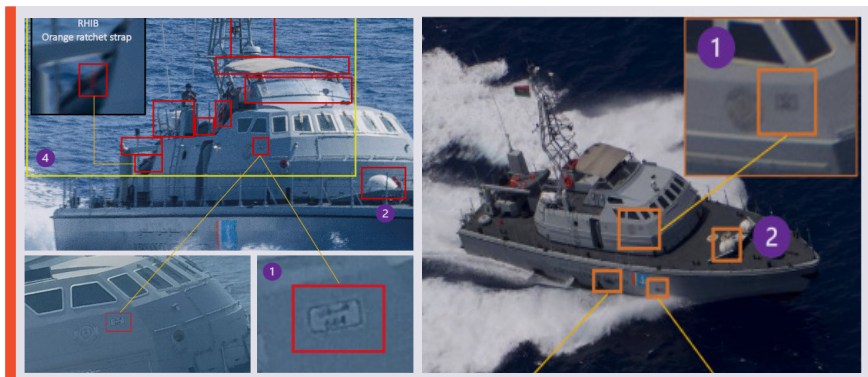
<sup>61</sup> <https://www.nigrizia.it/notizia/libia-bija-scavo-guardia-costiera-minniti-motovedette>

vessel handover,<sup>62</sup> expressing concern that the two new Libyan patrol boats might attack fishermen operating in the Strait of Sicily, as had happened in the past.<sup>63</sup> Radio Radicale journalist Sergio Scandura, observing footage of the two vessels' arrival in Tripoli, expressed concern on X<sup>64</sup> regarding the absence of an “*identification number above the bridge*” on the two Corrubia vessels. “As long as these patrol boats remain without an identification number, it will be impossible to know which of the two vessels will be responsible for illegal actions in international waters,” he wrote in July 2023.<sup>65</sup>

**Video and photo evidence from the attack on the *Ocean Viking* shows a plate on the upper section of the *Houn* bearing the identification number 664, which**

**was evidently affixed by the Libyans in the period between the ship's delivery and the attack. The number is, however, significantly smaller and less visible than those on other Libyan Coast Guard vessels, making it harder to read with certainty.**

From the moment of handover, the *Houn* immediately began operations in the area stretching from Tripoli to AL-Khoms, a port town some 120 kilometres east of the Libyan capital. On 7 July 2023, a SOSMEDITERRANEE Rhib was carrying out a rescue when it was approached by a Corrubia-class vessel belonging to the Libyan Coast Guard. The patrol boat performed dangerous manoeuvres and fired shots in the direction of the Rhib in order to interrupt the rescue operation.<sup>66</sup> The vessel involved in the attack



<sup>62</sup> <https://www.lasicilia.it/news/cronaca/1826671/L-italia-da-due-motovedette-ai-libici-e-da-mazara-crescono-i-dubbi-servono-per-i-migranti-o-per-i-nostr-pescherecci.html>

<sup>63</sup> <https://ilmanifesto.it/gli-spari-contro-i-pescatori-siciliani-sono-partiti-dalla-motovedetta-ubari>

<sup>64</sup> [https://x.com/scandura/status/1678055583302205441?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://x.com/scandura/status/1678055583302205441?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)

<sup>65</sup> <https://x.com/scandura/status/1678062931643187200?s=20>

<sup>66</sup> <https://x.com/SOSMedIntl/status/1678034926287962115>

is believed to have been the *Houn*. According to the JL Project's reconstruction,<sup>67</sup> the most similar-looking Corrubia-class patrol vessel, the *Murzuq*, was not deployed that day. The incident took place in a stretch of sea just north of Al-Khoms, a short distance from the area where the subsequent attack on the *Ocean Viking* occurred in August 2025.

**A July 2024 EU Council document confirms that the *Houn* was at that time “active in SAR operations” and had been based at the port of Al-Khoms “since at least 12 August 2023”, following an initial period in Tripoli.** Analysis of satellite imagery of both

ports suggests that **the four Corrubia-class vessels were operated almost exclusively between Tripoli and Al-Khoms, with the Abu Sittah naval base in the capital serving as the command centre and Al-Khoms as a secondary base.**

This hypothesis is also supported by data from Operation Eunavfor Med Irini obtained by IrpiMedia. Between July 2023 and June 2024, the *Houn* intercepted at least nine migrant boats, returning at least 321 people to Libya. Most of these interceptions took place in a stretch of sea north of the coastal strip running from Tripoli to Misrata via



<sup>67</sup> <https://saritalibre.it/timeline/una-motovedetta-appena-regalate-dal-gov-meloni-spara-sulla-ocean-viking/>

Al-Khoms. According to the UN Panel of Experts' 2024 report, the Corrubia vessels are operated by the Libyan Coast Guard rather than criminal militias.<sup>68</sup> The Coast Guard units in Tripoli, Al-Khoms and Misrata are those that cooperate most closely with one another — the three cities with the closest ties to Prime Minister Abdel Hamid Dbeibah, who was an entrepreneur in Misrata before entering politics.

**Al-Khoms is of secondary importance compared to the other two ports in terms of intercepting migrants and vessels carrying contraband, but in recent years it has become a significant hub for Turkish military vessels — a presence that is growing increasingly permanent.** Turkey has been one of the principal powers arming western Libya in recent years.<sup>69</sup>

- **ABU SITTAH NAVAL BASE – TRIPOLI (24.01.2025) 32°54'27.66"N, 013°13'09.89"E – Resolution: 50cm/pixel**



- **AL KHOMS NAVAL BASE 32°41'07.21"N, 014°14'27.18"E – Resolution: 50cm/pixel**

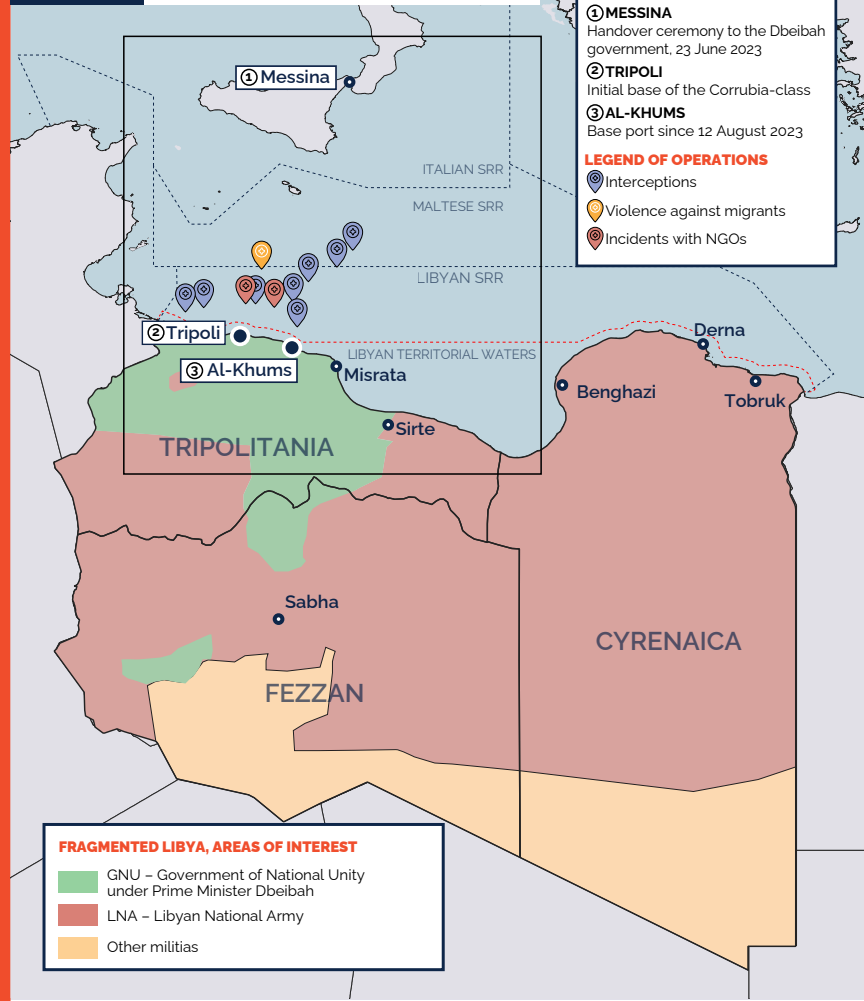


<sup>68</sup> Annex 33 - Page 182 <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2024/914>

<sup>69</sup> Annex 49 <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2024/914>



## FRAGMENTED LIBYA HOUN 664 OPERATIONS



## AL-ZOUBI'S VERSION

The first reactions to the attack on the *Ocean Viking* came from Brussels, following questions from journalists at the EU Commission's daily press briefing on 26 August.<sup>70</sup>

"We have reached out to the relevant Libyan authorities regarding this reported incident to clarify the facts. ***It is for the relevant Libyan authorities to now urgently shed light on what happened.***" was the initial response from a spokesperson, who added a general reference to the "*full respect of international law and international maritime law*" in all search and rescue operations. When pressed on whether the EU trusted the Libyan authorities, the spokesperson first attempted to evade the question, then failed to give a clear answer: "*We have to check with everyone involved*"

The following day, Tripoli's Undersecretary of Defence, Abdul-salam Al-Zoubi, made further statements to *The Brussels Times*. "*The vessel involved, operated by a non-governmental organisation, entered the Libyan search and rescue area without authorization from the Libyan authorities, who bear the sole responsibility for coordination in this zone*" he stated. This,

Al-Zoubi continued, represented "*a clear violation of international agreements and procedures, and created unnecessary risks to both migrants and maritime operations*."<sup>71</sup>

According to documentation gathered by SOS MEDITERRANEE, **the *Ocean Viking* was in international waters within the Libyan SAR region, and had been authorised by the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre in Rome (MRCC) to deviate from its designated port of safety in order to head towards a reported vessel in distress.** Al-Zoubi's argument rests on a Libyan decree of September 2019 requiring NGOs to obtain prior authorisation to operate within the Libyan SAR region — but an internal regulation, however, does not alter the framework of international maritime law, and the recognition of a SAR region does not confer sovereignty over international waters nor the power to exclude civilian vessels engaged in rescue operations. **Under the relevant search and rescue conventions, the state responsible for a SAR region must ensure coordination of operations; but in the absence of effective coordination, other States must intervene and cooperate to ensure that rescue takes place.**

<sup>70</sup> <https://audiovisual.ec.europa.eu/en/media/video/1-275934>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.brusselstimes.com/world/1717675/libyan-coastguards-fire-on-ocean-viking-rescue-ship>

The designation of a SAR region does not equal sovereignty over international waters nor operational exclusivity. It should also be noted that, under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), vessels of any state retain the right to navigate freely in international waters.

*"The Libyan Coast Guard has confirmed that it issued multiple warnings which were not heeded, and that the shots fired were warning shots only, consistent with international maritime practice. At no point was the vessel itself targeted,"* Al-Zoubi added, directly contradicting the evidence gathered by the *Ocean Viking's* crew through eyewitness accounts, videos, photographs and the bullets recovered from the vessel itself.

On 31 August, Al-Zoubi met EU Ambassador to Libya Nicola Orlando in Tripoli. *"Urged responsible authorities to ascertain facts and responsibilities on recent search and rescue incident at sea. We agreed to continue joint efforts to uphold human rights and international standards in migration and border management,"* Orlando wrote on X, alongside a photo of the two.<sup>72</sup>

It is no coincidence that the first person Orlando publicly claimed to have

discussed the attack with was Al-Zoubi himself. In Libya's shifting and delicate balance of power, he has become an increasingly influential figure over the past two years.

Born in Misrata in 1990, Al-Zoubi worked as a refuse collection lorry driver before taking up arms during the revolution that led to the fall of Gaddafi.<sup>73</sup> He rose through the ranks as a militiaman and, after taking part in the defence of Tripoli against General Haftar's forces in 2019, became commander of the militia known as the 301st Infantry Battalion in the early 2020s, composed mainly of men from Misrata.

In 2022, at Dbeibah's behest, this battalion was formalised and became the 111th Armoured Brigade, which Al-Zoubi continues to lead to this day in the area stretching from Tripoli to Misrata, via Al-Khoms. In July 2024 he was appointed colonel and Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Defence — still led by Dbeibah — and from that position he has continued to consolidate his power.

In May 2025, western Libya was gripped by intense military and political tension, with fierce clashes between militias aligned for and against Prime Minister Dbeibah. Among the hardest hit was the Security Support Apparatus (SSA),

<sup>72</sup> <https://x.com/nicolaorlando/status/1962185210138669386?s=20>

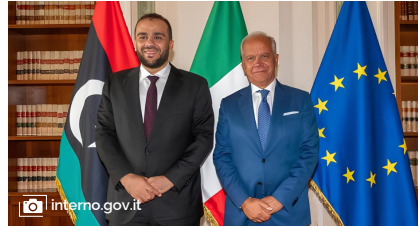
<sup>73</sup> <https://jamestown.org/abdulsalam-al-zoubis-defense-of-dbeibahs-militant-network-in-libya/>

founded by Abdel Ghani al-Kikli, known as Gheniwa, until then considered one of the most powerful militias in the Tripoli area. Gheniwa was killed on 12 May 2025; according to Libyan authorities and media, the operation was carried out by a coalition of forces close to the Tripoli government, including the 444th Brigade and Al-Zoubi's 111th Brigade.<sup>74</sup>

With the end of the SSA, Al-Zoubi gained control of significant public assets, among them the Public Procurement Authority and the General Electric Company of Libya — an entity that UN analysts have identified as a major hub for petroleum product smuggling in Libya.

*Al-Zoubi, therefore, is increasingly emerging as the strongman of the Ministry of Defence, to which the Libyan Coast Guard also reports. Over the years, he has moved from the arms trade to business, politics and even diplomacy, undertaking trips to the US,<sup>75</sup> Turkey,<sup>76</sup> and Europe.*

On 4 September 2025, four days after his meeting with Ambassador Orlando



in Tripoli, he arrived in Rome, where he first met with Defence Minister Guido Crosetto<sup>77</sup> and then with Interior Ministry Matteo Piantedosi. Also present at the latter meeting were Chief of Police Vittorio Pisani and AISE intelligence director Giovanni Caravelli — a significant figure, having served as deputy to Alberto Manenti when Manenti headed AISE under Marco Minniti. Manenti, originally from Tarhuna in Libya and a fluent Arabic speaker, has been directly involved in managing the Libyan dossier since the signing of the 2017 Memorandum.<sup>78</sup>

The attack on the *Ocean Viking* went unmentioned in the press release issued following Al-Zoubi's visit to the Ministry of the Interior. Piantedosi stated only that "our cooperation on managing migration and security challenges continues."<sup>79</sup>

<sup>74</sup> <https://irpimedia.irpi.eu/ci-vogliono-delle-milizie-per-combattere-delle-milizie/>

<sup>75</sup> <https://lana.gov.ly/post.php?lang=en&id=331900>

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2607656/middle-east>

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.difesa.it/primopiano/il-ministro-crosetto-riceve-il-generale-abd-alsalam-al-zoubi-sottosegretario-alla-difesa-della-libia/78419.html>

<sup>78</sup> <https://lespresso.it/c/-/2018/9/17/conte-must-choose-the-heads-of-the-secret-services-and-with-libya-in-chaos-the-matter-is-urgent/22173>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/piantedosi-incontra-viminale-sottosegretario-alla-difesa-libico-zoubi>

# THE EUROPEAN RESPONSE: COOPERATION CONTINUES

Cooperation with Libya intensified at European level in 2025, particularly towards the end of the year. In late September, a visit by a Libyan delegation to Warsaw and Brussels was organised to bring together Frontex and European Commission officials with representatives of Libyan authorities from both east and west of the country.<sup>80</sup>

Internal EU documents exchanged in the run-up to the meetings reference the attack on the *Ocean Viking* and discuss the need for “a functional Libyan mechanism to address incidents (at sea, in DCs, in the desert, etc.).” Three issues were identified: the management of critical incidents such as the *Ocean Viking* shooting, the identification of those responsible, and the subsequent communication of the facts and any developments. Over the previous decade, the EU and its partners had attempted to establish precisely this kind of procedure with the Libyan Coast Guard — without success. “They become defensive and avoid constructive incident management and investigation, while they lack capacity for strategic communication,” the confidential documents note.

Rather than engaging the Libyan Coast Guard

directly — which falls under the Ministry of Defence — Ambassador Orlando proposed working through the **Supreme Committee for Monitoring on Illegal Immigration and Borders**, a body comprising all entities dealing with migration and operating under the Ministry of the Interior. Established in January 2024, the Committee was reportedly created in response to “a reiterated EU request to identify a single interlocutor on migration and border management issues,” as explained in a document from the European External Action Service published by Statewatch.<sup>81</sup> EU officials suggested that the IOM and UNODC (the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) could support the process of establishing an effective incident response procedure; the Libyan side reportedly requested that it be led by the ICMPTD, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development.

A further task proposed for the Supreme Committee was to meet with non-governmental organisations carrying out search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean. EU officials suggested “attempt[ing] a discreet dialogue”, though without much optimism. “The Libyans are reluctant to engage with INGOs that refuse

<sup>80</sup> <https://irpimedia.irpi.eu/-confidential-mission-in-europe-frontex-welcomes-libyan-officials-from-haftar-for-the-first-time/>

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.statewatch.org/media/4852/eu-eubam-strategic-assessment-12008-24.pdf>

*to recognise their legitimacy („the so-called Libyan Coast Guard“) and are perceived as coordinating with smugglers. It is unrealistic to expect that Libyan authorities and INGOs share even minimal goals regarding the management of SAR incidents”*, reads a passage from one of the internal documents reviewed by IrpiMedia.

Other internal documents, issued subsequently, revisit the issue of the use of firearms by the Libyan authorities during operations at sea. The problem, which has also affected forces in eastern Libya on *“more and more occasions”*, had become a **“growing concern” both for officials at the European External Action Service and for Italian representatives**. Throughout, it is repeatedly emphasised that the issue should be handled *“in a diplomatic way to avoid that authorities from West and authorities from East Libya start an endless argumentation during the meeting.”*

The Libyan delegation’s visit took place in Warsaw on 14 October and in Brussels the following day, in what EU officials described as a *“constructive atmosphere”*. According to an internal report on the Brussels meeting, **“the Commission reaffirmed its commitment to continue supporting Libya, while emphasizing the importance of addressing several critical issues.”** These include *“guaranteeing full respect of human rights in return activities*

*and SAR operations;”* and *“strengthening communication and investigation procedures related to incidents during SAR operations”*. In this context, reference was made to two recent incidents involving firearms — presumably the attack on the *Ocean Viking* and that on *Sea-Watch 5* on 26 September — regarding which a representative of the Libyan Coast Guard in Tripoli stated that standard operating procedures had been fully respected on both occasions.

On the same day, the Commissioner for the Mediterranean, Dubravka Šuica, responded to a question tabled six weeks earlier by MEP Erik Marquardt, stating that *“the Libyan authorities have confirmed that an investigation has been launched”*<sup>82</sup> into the attack on the *Ocean Viking*. In another response to MEP Özlem Demirel in December, Šuica described the proceedings as ‘ongoing’ and stated that *“the Commission will assess the outcome of this investigation thoroughly in order to determine any further measures”*<sup>83</sup> She added that **“the Commission is reinforcing its monitoring and dialogue mechanisms to ensure that human rights standards are upheld in all EU-supported activities.”**<sup>84</sup>

Monitoring of EU initiatives in Libya however, remains hampered – and incomplete – by the same lack of transparency documented throughout this report.

<sup>82</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-10-2025-003341-ASW\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-10-2025-003341-ASW_EN.html)

<sup>83</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-003295-ASW\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-003295-ASW_EN.html)

<sup>84</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-003295-ASW\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-003295-ASW_EN.html)

# MONITORING WITH UNKNOWN OUTCOMES

At a hearing before the European Parliament in April 2022, a European Commission official announced that an external body had been engaged to monitor EU programmes in Libya. The aim was to ensure that they did not cause harm, “with particular attention to ensuring the respect of the do-no-harm policy”<sup>85</sup> according to which cooperation with third countries must not cause unacceptable harm or human rights violations.<sup>86</sup>

*Almost four years later, very little is known about this monitoring: neither the name of the third-party body tasked with carrying it out, nor, more importantly, what the results of this monitoring are.*

This issue lies at the heart of a series of requests for access to documents made by EU Observer journalist Nikolaj Nielsen,<sup>87</sup> who sought to verify a Commission statement that no do-no-harm violations had been reported in EU-funded projects in Libya. When the Commission refused access, Nielsen brought the case to the European

Ombudsman, who ruled in March 2024 that the refusals and redactions constituted maladministration<sup>88</sup> — yet the most important documents for understanding the consequences of EU policies in Libya remain unpublished to this day.

In September of the same year, the European Court of Auditors published a special report on the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF). “The Commission has taken the first steps in monitoring the impact of EUTF activities on human rights. Third-party monitoring reports are a new and potentially useful source of information on human rights risks, but follow-up of these was not demonstrated. Furthermore, the Commission has not yet defined either formal procedures for reporting and following up allegations of human rights violations, or practical guidance to clarify in which situations EU support may be suspended,” the report stated.<sup>89</sup>

On the basis of this evidence, the Court issued a series of recommendations which the European Commission undertook to

<sup>85</sup> [https://euobserver.com/12221/eu-makes-bogus-claims-on-libya-coast-guard-safety/?euobservercom\\_lock=0](https://euobserver.com/12221/eu-makes-bogus-claims-on-libya-coast-guard-safety/?euobservercom_lock=0)

<sup>86</sup> <https://euobserver.com/13991/shadow-cast-over-eu-commissions-do-no-harm-principle-in-libya/>

<sup>87</sup> <https://www.eca.europa.eu/it/publications?ref=sr-2024-17>

<sup>87</sup> <https://euobserver.com/11496/eu-watchdog-faults-european-commission-over-libya/>

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/recommendation/en/182956>

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?ref=sr-2024-17>

implement. In particular, the recommendations to "strengthen the identification of human rights risks and take mitigating action" should have been implemented by the end of 2025.

**When questioned by IrpiMedia, the Commission explained that it had "produced a detailed guidance document for staff on applying a human rights-based approach (HRBA) in EU-funded migration and forced displacement projects."** The document emphasises the need to conduct a human rights-informed context analysis, to correctly identify, assess and mitigate risks, and to continue applying the HRBA throughout the entire project lifecycle. The guidelines were prepared following extensive consultations involving various Commission services and the European External Action Service (EEAS), as well as EU delegations. The document has been shared with EU delegations; face-to-face training sessions are underway and e-learning modules are being developed.

In January 2025, the Commission also strengthened the language requiring respect for human rights in its standard contractual templates used by partners, **introducing an explicit obligation on partners to report cases of human rights abuse to the Commission within 30 days and requiring commitments on adherence to human rights when assets procured with EU funding are passed on to local beneficiaries at the end of implementation.**

*Lastly, "the Commission formalised an internal procedure for EU staff when handling complaints related to human rights violations in EU-funded projects. It is based on pre-existing rules and provides staff with a clear, five-step process to follow when complaints are received. It also provides clear guidance on the link between complaints and provisions in EU funding agreements on suspension and termination where human rights are not respected."*

By mid-February, the procedure had been used in at least one case. Whether this relates to Libya is currently unknown. What is known is that the agenda of the final SIBMMIL steering committee meeting, held in Rome last November, included a session entitled "Monitoring mechanisms for project implementation and potential issues regarding the use of vessels". This session was to be led by Italian and European officials and was scheduled to last 15 minutes.

The precedents, however, are not encouraging. As the Court of Auditors noted in its EUTF report: "The Commission has described to us examples of situations that would result in the suspension of certain activities in Libya. While we found clear indications that one of these situations had occurred, the Commission has so far not suspended any EUTF activities in Libya."<sup>90</sup>

<sup>90</sup> [https://www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/SR-2024-17/SR-2024-17\\_en.pdf](https://www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/SR-2024-17/SR-2024-17_en.pdf), p.34

## “NO ALTERNATIVE”

Despite the incidents, Italian and European cooperation with Libya is continuing. The EU Commission's position was made clear just months after the attack on the *Ocean Viking*. “The Commission considers that, to improve the situation on the ground, it is necessary to continue engaging with the Libyan authorities to improve the humanitarian conditions of migrants and to avoid deaths at sea and in the desert”, Commissioner Šuica wrote in December.<sup>91</sup>

*In an interview with the Times of Malta at the end of November, Migration Commissioner Magnus Brunner was even more direct. Europe “doesn't have an alternative” but to cooperate with the Libyan authorities, despite the numerous allegations levelled against them.<sup>92</sup>*

“We have to look into all these accusations and that's what we do, while stressing the importance of sticking to the rules. But not getting engaged is not an option,” he added.<sup>93</sup>

During that same period, representatives

from Italy, Libya and the European Commission's DG MENA met in Rome to discuss the future of the SIBMMIL programme. The new initiative could be called HARBOUR. It was likely also discussed in Tripoli during a technical mission by European officials that took place in early February.<sup>94</sup>

A few days after that mission, Italian Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi arrived in Libya. On his sixth visit to Libya since his appointment in late 2022, Piantedosi met in Tripoli with Prime Minister Abdel Hamid Dbeibah and Interior Minister Imad Trabelsi, before travelling east to Benghazi, where he was received by Libyan National Army Commander-in-Chief Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar.<sup>95</sup>

It is in eastern Libya that **Italy is reportedly preparing to launch a new project to establish a Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) in Benghazi** — modelled on the creation of the Tripoli MRCC under SIBMMIL and again funded by the EU, according to reporting by German journalist Matthias Monroy.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>91</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-003295-ASW\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2025-003295-ASW_EN.html)

<sup>92</sup> <https://timesofmalta.com/article/malta-key-eu-libya-migration-strategy-commissioner-brunner-med5.1120376>

<sup>93</sup> <https://timesofmalta.com/article/malta-key-eu-libya-migration-strategy-commissioner-brunner-med5.1120376>

<sup>94</sup> <https://x.com/nicolaorlando/status/2018732482053513353?s=20>

<sup>95</sup> <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/piantedosi-incontra-haftar-a-bengasi-dopo-la-missione-a-tripoli/>

<sup>96</sup> <https://digit.site36.net/2026/01/06/eu-doubles-pullback-system-in-libya-renegade-benghazi-also-to-receive-control-centre-and-coastguard-equipment/>

Against this backdrop, at the end of February, **the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) published a [report](#) with the telling title “Business as Usual: Human Rights Violations and Abuses against Migrants, Asylum-Seekers, and Refugees in Libya”.** Covering the period from January 2024 to December 2025, **the report documents “an exploitative model that preys on migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in situations of heightened vulnerability and has become “business as usual” – a brutal and normalized reality.”**

*“Interceptions by Libyan actors were frequently dangerous and involved threats, hazardous manoeuvres, and excessive use of force, putting people’s lives at risk,” the report states.*

The OHCHR and UNSMIL call on the international community and the European Union to “rigorously apply human-rights due diligence to all funding, training, equipment, technology, and cooperation involving Libyan entities credibly implicated in gross human rights violations and abuses” – and for “a moratorium on all interceptions and returns to Libya until adequate human rights safeguards are ensured”.



# CONCLUSIONS AND ASKS

The armed attack on the Ocean Viking on 24 August 2025 marks a turning point. This is not an isolated incident, but the dangerous outcome of a form of cooperation which, over the years, has emboldened those responsible for forced interceptions, the use of violence at sea and systematic human rights violations. The fact that the vessel involved, the Houn 664, was donated as part of a programme funded by the European Union and implemented by Italy makes a thorough review of the policies adopted in the Central Mediterranean all the more urgent.

In light of the findings documented in this report, **SOS MEDITERRANEE calls upon the Italian authorities and demands:**

## **1. TRUTH AND ACCOUNTABILITY REGARDING THE ARMED ATTACK**

That a full, independent and transparent investigation into the attack against the Ocean Viking be carried out, to establish the facts and ensure that those directly responsible for the shooting and the relevant chain of command are held to account under national and international law. The lack of accountability has already created a climate of impunity that encourages the recurrence of violence against rescued people and humanitarian workers.

## **2. REVIEW AND SUSPENSION OF COOPERATION WITH THE LIBYAN COAST GUARD**

That the Italian Government suspend all financial, material and operational support to the Libyan Coast Guard, including naval supplies, training programmes and technical assistance, and abolishes the 2017 Italy-Libya Memorandum of Understanding. Italy cannot continue to support and fund operational units implicated in illegal interceptions, forced pushbacks and serious human rights violations.

### **3. STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC OVERSIGHT AND MONITORING MECHANISMS**

That Parliament exercise full and effective oversight of cooperation agreements on migration and border management concluded with third countries, with particular reference to Italy-Libya cooperation, ensuring access to relevant documentation and a periodic assessment of their impact on fundamental rights. To this end, we propose the establishment of a parliamentary committee tasked with exercising ongoing oversight of Italy-Libya cooperation, examining the implementation of agreements, the use of public resources and their impact on human rights, including through hearings and the acquisition of documentation. The Government should periodically report to this Commission, which in turn would report to Parliament on the outcomes of its monitoring activities and on any critical issues that have emerged.

### **4. RESTORATION OF A RESCUE SYSTEM IN LINE WITH INTERNATIONAL LAW**

That Italy reaffirms the primacy of international maritime law and human rights in its policies in the Central Mediterranean, ensuring that the coordination of rescue operations takes place in good faith and that no person is intercepted or returned to a country where they risk arbitrary detention, violence or inhumane treatment. Italy must take an active and responsible role in sea rescues, based on the obligation to protect life and ensure a swift disembarkation in a genuinely safe place.

### **5. TRANSPARENCY, TRACEABILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY REGARDING THE USE OF PUBLIC FUNDS**

The Italian Government must guarantee full traceability and transparency of the resources allocated to cooperation with Libya and, more generally, to the externalised management of borders, ensuring the systematic publication of documents, contracts, supplies, beneficiaries and the progress of expenditure. Restrictions on access to documents on grounds of "security" or "international relations" must not result in a blanket exclusion of public scrutiny over programmes funded by state and European resources. Detailed and verifiable reporting obligations must be established, including through annual public reports on the implementation status of programmes and the actual use of funds.



# SOS MEDITERRANEE

**#TogetherForRescue**

## **SAVE, PROTECT, BEAR WITNESS**

**SOS MEDITERRANEE** is an international civil rescue organization made up of citizens determined to take action in the face of repeated shipwrecks in the Central Mediterranean. Its teams pursue three missions: to save lives at sea, to protect and care for those rescued aboard the Ocean Viking, and to bear witness to the situation at sea by amplifying the voices of those rescued. The Humanitarian Organization is present in France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland.

**[www.sosmediterranee.org](http://www.sosmediterranee.org)**



Max Cavallari/  
SOS MEDITERRANEE