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THE ROLE OF THE SOUTHERN LIBYAN SAHARAN CITIES IN BUILDING THEIR RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

Abstract: The southern Libyan cities (Ghat, Murzuq, and Al-Kufra) played their political, economic, and social role in Libyan relations with neighbouring countries during various historical phases. These cities paved the way for building economic relations, especially the exchange of goods between North and South Africa through Mediterranean ports to Europe. The main goal of the research is to stress the role of the Saharan towns and cities in building relations between Libya and neighbouring countries and to tracking the political, economic and social impacts on Saharan cities, but also their effects between the northern African region and southern Libya towards African Sub-Saharan region. Additionally, it is important to explain the role of southern cities geographically in the influx of illegal migration of temporary transit and settlement areas and crossing north to Europe and studying the impact of instability and insecurity after 2011 in the tribal and ethnic conflict in southern Libyan region. The importance of the study is based on identifying the political, economic, and social conditions of southern Libyan region and its important historical cities.

Key words: Libya, political conflicts, economic relations, social issues, migration

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Introduction

The southern Libyan cities (Ghat, Murzuq, and Al-Kufra) played significant political, economic, and social role in Libyan relations with neighbouring countries. Those cities had been significant to building and developing relations with the neighbouring countries in terms of life patterns in the Saharan regions during various historical phases.

The Saharan cities flourished after the Islamic conquests of the continent of Africa following the ancient caravan routes and the development of their economic importance. These cities paved the way for building economic relations, especially the exchange of goods between North and South Africa, through Mediterranean ports to Europe. Libya has been tied to Africa historically, politically, and demographically, and it is metaphorically described as “the gateway to Africa” (de Waal, 2013).

The demarcation of political borders in post-world wars played a significant role in dividing African reserves in the Sahara and intensifying political conflicts among colonists to seize Africa.

For instance, Libyan-Chad conflict over Aouzou strip was one of these internal conflicts (Shebli, 2017). Similarly, the case of Libya's borders with Algeria over Hassi Mas-soud region is another example (Entelis, 1999). As a result, many clans and tribes were divided between the two countries and such situation has caused many conflicts over decades. Consequently, the war broke out and ended up in a tragic scene with thousands of victims in both sides. Additionally, a huge number of displaced people within the region are trying to escape the war.

Colonists had deeply divided many ethnic groups between different countries such as Tuareg between Libya, Algeria, and Niger (Guichaoua, 2015). Also, the Tebu ethnic group is separated between Libya and Chad (van Waas, 2013). These cases have become the real threat and impacted the relations between Libya and its neighbours. All these situations have contributed to the disruption of Libyan relations with neighbouring countries.

Despite the fact that the three cities, Ghat, Murzuq, and Al- Kufra had been led by Arabs during the long period, currently they have become the core and centres of Tebu and Tuareg ethnic groups. The development path of these cities ultimately influenced the history of the country, as well as the contemporary Libya.

The State of Libya is a country in the Maghreb region in North Africa, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, Egypt to the east, Sudan to the southeast, Chad to the south, Niger to the southwest, Algeria to the west, and Tunisia to the northwest.

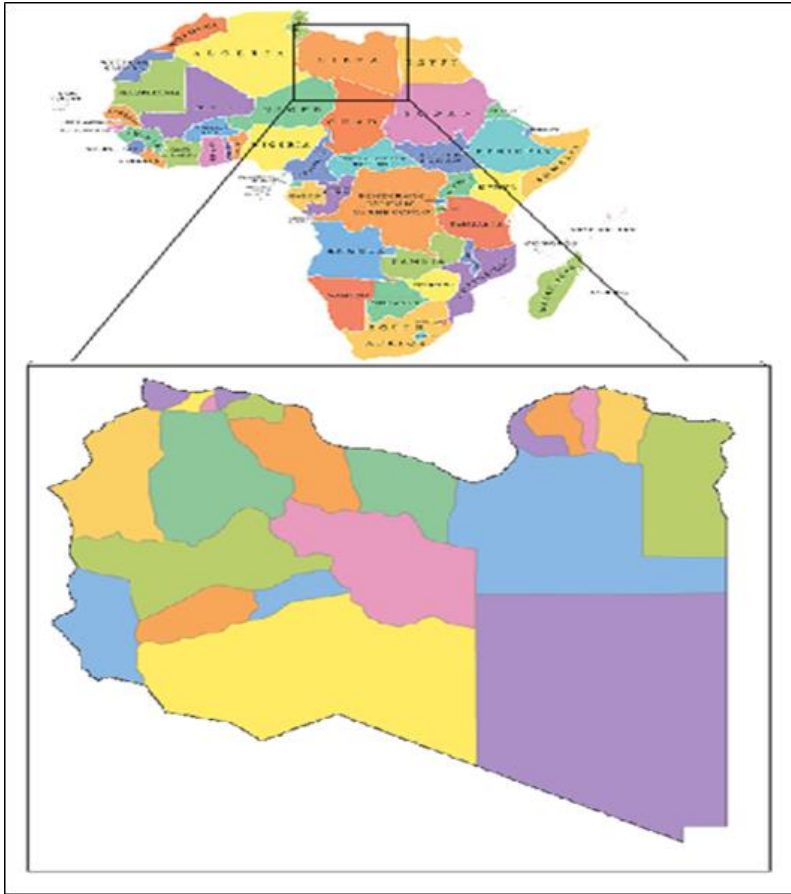


Fig. 1. Geographic Location of Libya (Source: Authors, 2022; based after the Atlas of Libya)

The sovereign state of Libya is made of three historical regions: Tripolitania, Fezzan and Cyrenaica with an area of almost 1.65 million square kilometres, Libya is the fourth largest country in Africa, and the 16th largest country in the world (United Nations, 2013).

Libya has the 10th largest proven oil reserves of any country in the world (U.S. Energy Information Agency, 2022). The largest city and capital, Tripoli, which located in western Libya and its population counts over six million people. The second-largest city is Benghazi, which is located in eastern Libya, with population of around 800,000.

Libya has been inhabited by Berbers since the late Bronze Age. The Phoenicians established trading ports in western Libya, and ancient Greek colonists established city-states in eastern Libya.

Ottoman rule continued until the Italian occupation. Italian occupation of Libya resulted in the establishment of two colonies, Italian Tripolitania and Italian Cyrenaica (1911-1934), until they were unified in the Italian Libya colony from 1934 to 1947. During the Second World War, Libya was an important area of warfare in the North African Campaign.

Methods

The main goal of the research is to stress the role of the Saharan towns and cities in building relations between Libya and neighbouring countries. This research aims to analyse the political, economic and social impacts on Saharan cities, but also their effects between the northern African region and southern Libya towards African Sub-Saharan region. Additionally, it is important to explain the role of southern Libyan cities geographically in the influx of illegal migration on the temporary transit and settlement areas, as well as their role on crossing north to Europe. Finally, this research examines the impact of instability and insecurity after 2011 in the tribal and ethnic conflict in southern Libyan region.

The importance of the study is based on identifying the political, economic, and social conditions of southern Libyan region and its important historical cities. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the role of neighbouring countries and international players in the Libyan tribal and ethnic conflicts in southern Libya, and proposing solutions of current conflicts in southern Libya.

Discussions and results - The important three cities in desert

Al-Kufra

The basin of Kufra includes a group of oases (Al-Kufra, Al-Jowf, Al-Hawari, Al-Huwairi, Talab, Tulaibil, Bawma, and Buimah) located southeast of the Libyan desert, around 1,000 km southern from the city of Benghazi, between the longitude 18.7 to 24.7 E and latitude of 19.8 to 28 N. It covers an area of 483,510 square kilometres, about 27% of the total area of Libya.

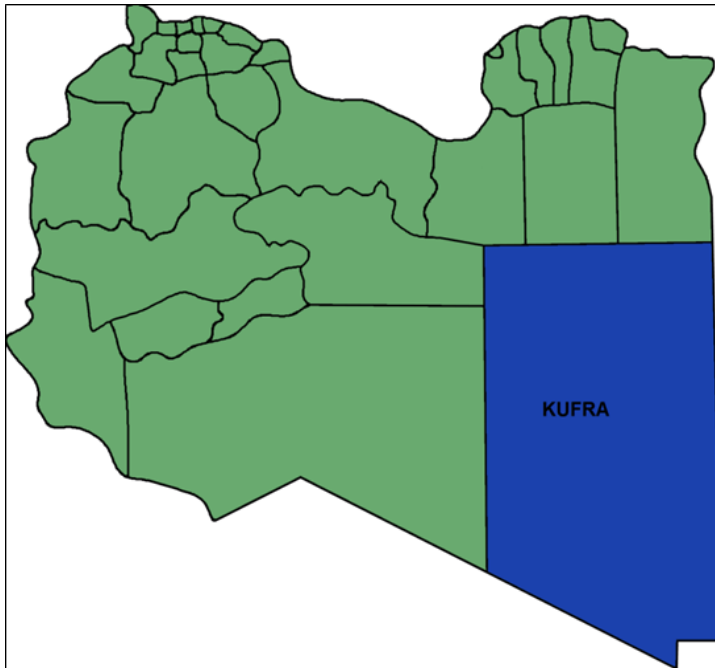


Fig. 2. Al-Kufra Municipality (Source: Authors, 2022; based after the Atlas of Libya)

Al-Kufra is located on the Libyan borders with three countries. To the south it is the border with Chad, to the southeast with Sudan, and to the east there is a border with Egypt. This region was considered as a crossroads of the caravan trade routes between the north and south in the past, which were heading from the Libyan cities and oases to the neighbouring countries.

The city has got a great attention from Arab and foreign travellers, and a large number of them visited the place. Particularly significant are German explorer Gerald Rolls in 1879 who wrote the book *Trip to the Al-Kufra* during this trip, the Tunisian traveller Muhammad Bin Othman Al Hashashi in 1886, the French officer Labier in 1916, the British John Holiday in the 1940s.

Al-Kufra have been the scene of many historical events since the Ottoman Turkish rule of Libya, as the Azzawya tribe refused to submit to the orders of the Ottomans. During the time of the Italian occupation, the city had an important role in leading and directing the Resistance movement since the beginning of the occupation.

The population of the city of Al-Kufra currently is about 62,000 thousand inhabitants. Most of them are from the Zawiya tribe, who constitute 80% of the population, and are of the descendants of the Bani Salim tribes from the Arabian Peninsula. The rest of population consists of Al-Mjabra, Al-Awjla, and Tebu, and some African communities.

The economic activities of the residents of the city are mostly concentrated in the agricultural sector. The most important are the cultivation of palm and mango. As there is fertile land for the cultivation of all types of vegetables, there are some important agricultural projects, for example the Kufra productive project. Additionally, there are two projects concerning cultivation of palm and olive, one in the west of Al-Kufra and the other in the north in the Hawari region, as well as a project to grow mango and desert apples. There are also projects including sheep and cows.

The city is also the important place for trade with Sudan and Chad. Here is located the largest camel market, which are transported from all Libyan regions. It is also a focal point for the transfer of international aid from the United Nations to Darfur.

Ghat

Ghat is one of the cities in the southern part of Libya, located within the Western Libyan desert. It faces the Algerian-Libyan border, from the south-west. It is located about 585 km from the city of Murzuq, about 600 km from the city of Sabha, about 1,360 km from Tripoli, about 580 km from Ghadames, and 80 km from an oasis Gantt Algeria. It covers an area of 72,700 km².

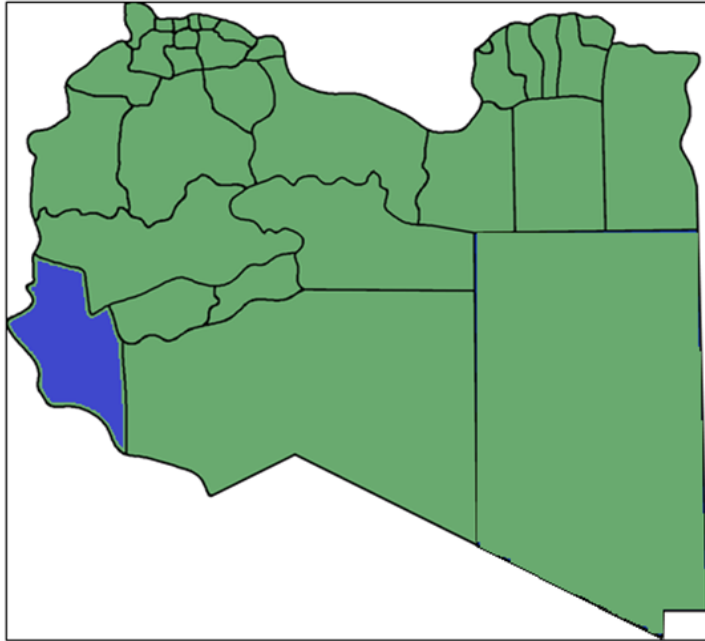


Fig. 3. Location of Ghat (Source: Authors, 2022; based after the Atlas of Libya)

It is located in the south-western sector of the Libyan desert. This region is characterized by high temperature, intensity of solar radiation, lack of humidity, scarcity of rain, and the severity of sandstorms. The city falls between a series of mountains and plateaus, and such position provides some warmth in winter. The population adopted innovative construction methods to control the extremes of the local climate.

A population consists of around 32,000 of Tuaregs and Arabs. Some speak Amazigh spoken and written by Tifinagh, the ancient Libyan language. The rest speak Arabic and minority speaks Hausa, because their origins originate from Nigeria and Niger. The municipality of Ghat composes of several villages and towns: Barkat, Owein-at, Tahala, Viout, and Essen.

There are many stories about the name of the city. Some of them say that the name came from the term Ghaith, because it helps travellers in the desert with water and food. There are also those which say that the city is named after the name of a good guardian Guth. According to the legends, he lived in the city, and his grave is still a witness of the ancient city of Ghat.

The Turkish castle is located in the old city. It is built by the Ottoman Turks during their rule of Tripoli and Fezzan and destroyed by the Italian colonists in 1913. It was rebuilt and became a distinctive tourist attraction in the city. The French used this castle as a command centre, when they controlled Fezzan (1943 - 1952) during and after the Second World War.

Ghat is characterized by unique geographic environment and nature. There are the valleys, golden sand areas and mountains. Such mountains are Mount Kokmen (667 meters high), and the Akakos Mountains in the form of a horse insole called Palace of Mad-

ness. There are also numerous villages around the mountain area of Asseili, which contains the oldest archaeological inscriptions in the region dating back to seven thousand years BC. In general, this area is one of the largest natural museums in this part of Africa.

Throughout the history, the city has got economic significance. It is a meeting place for commercial caravan routes. Because of its geostrategic position it is a link and a major trading centre for desert economic relations. Ghat's winter and summer markets have become a destination for caravan trade from all over North Africa, and especially from Sudan.

Ghat is a well-known collection and disposal market during winter and summer. Ghat is linked to a range of large commercial markets to which desert caravan routes are headed and grouped into three main areas:

- Markets of Western Sudan (the most important market is Timbuktu Mali).
- Central Sudan markets (the most important market is Kano Nigeri).
- Eastern Sudan markets (the most important market is Darfur Al Fasher).

The tourist town of Ghat is increasingly important as a major station for the discovery of rock inscriptions in the mountains of Akakos and Tassili. Akakos has a variety of landscapes and physical geographic phenomena, from colourful sandy winds, to rock arches and huge stones, to valleys. The most important sites in the region include the arch "Avazajar" and the arch "Ten Khaljah". UNESCO declared these sites World Heritage Sites in 1985 because of the importance of paintings and sculptures which have been found there. Some of them date back 21,000 years. This heritage reflects the cultural and natural changes in the region.

Murzuq

The city of Murzuq is one of the oldest cities in southern Libya. Murzuq is a historic city composing of the castle of Murzuq, which was built in 1310. From the establishment of the city Murzuq is the capital of the ancient Fezzan state, and the administrative, commercial, economic, and political centre (Al-Kikhia, 1995).

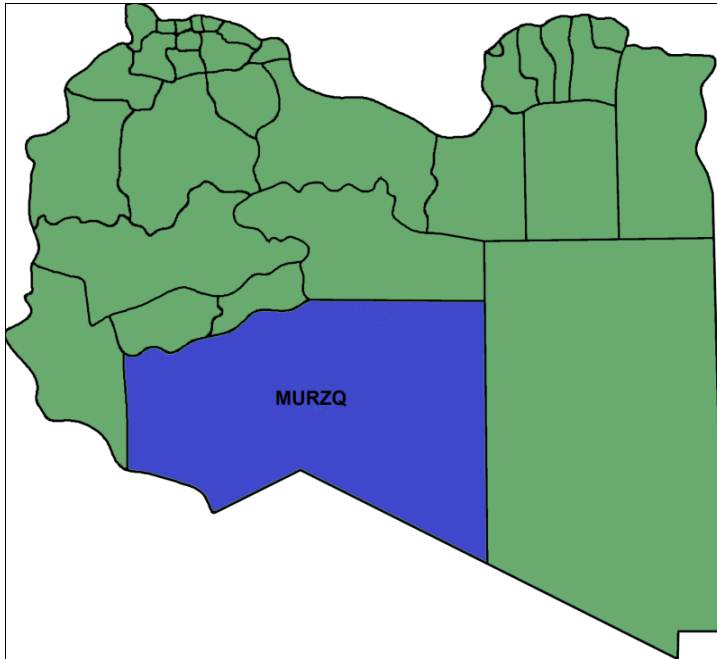


Fig. 4. Murzuq Municipality (Source: Authors, 2022; based after the Atlas of Libya)

The significance of the city originates from its location as a blessed basin in the middle of the desert caravans. “Fezzan is a transport station from Tripolitania and Egypt to the south, to Bornu and the bordering southern countries, as well as for products coming from Central Africa” (Rohlfs, 1867).

Murzuq was founded by the sons of Ahmad Al-Fassi. The city was designed following the Moroccan style. It has a unique fabric, structure and narrow streets. Some of the streets are roofed and walled in from all sides in an oval structure constructing three neighbourhoods and two mosques.

The castle is located at the western part of the city at the end of Al-Dandal Street. It is a solid, massive building of mud built by the Al-Fassi to defend the city from the attacks of the Bedouins and Tuaregs. This castle is about ninety feet high. In the castle is the hall of the Majlis, which contains the Sultan’s council accommodating approximately four hundred people.

The castle is surrounded by the wall, which separates it from the city and the residential area. The city has seven doors, three main doors, such as the Large door, the Mogamgum door, and the Freedom door. The city has four watchtowers and one main street dividing the city into two parts and two streets - the Bab Al-Shurqi Street, as well as Western Gate (Al-Dandal).

The city is administrated by Islamic rule in the era of Ahmad Al-Fassi. The Sultan was overseeing the agreements and diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries. The administration composed of two main positions - the minister position called Kima, and the second position called Kigumah, under the supreme rule of the crown prince known as Brymah.

The city of Murzuq played a significant role as the main city in its region and the capital of Fezzan during the Ottoman era. Additionally, it was the main centre for Caravan trade across the Sahara Desert and the main gateway to Borno and Central Africa. Its position was similar to the role of Ghat which was connecting northern region to Kano, Nigeria.

Hornman, a traveller who visited Murzuq in 1797, described it as “the capital of Fezzan”. It was a crowded and diverse in population, as well as the trade centre of the region, but no accurate population statistics existed. In the late nineteenth century, Murzuq’s role shrank due to the collapse of caravan trade. Since the Italian occupation, Murzuq became economically dependent on traditional and small handicraft products. After the oil discovery most population has left agriculture and migrated to northern urban centres.

According to 1954 population census, about 25% of Fezzan’s population worked in agriculture sector. The share of population working in agriculture sector decreased to only 1.5% of the workforce in the 1984 census. Central trade role shifted to the city of Sabha, which became the capital of southern Libya since then.

The discovery of oil has increased the country's national income significantly, and reflected in regional development. The Fezzan’s population has doubled reaching 22,185 inhabitants in 1973. In 1954, Murzuq had only 2,858 inhabitants. Population increased to 3,935 inhabitants in 1964. The city population doubled in 1973 with 6,151, in which the city witnessed significantly higher growth rate comparing to the Libyan national growth rate.

The population growth rate and population size in Murzuq was not only a result of the natural increase of population. It was also the result of the positive migration balance. The migration flow from neighbouring oases has been significant factor since then. Contrary, this high rate of population growth did not last long; the 1984 census showed that the growth rate was 4.3% annually, approaching the national growth rate of the Libyan population of 4.5%.

According to National Registry Authority of population statistics, Murzuq had 12,505 inhabitants in 2006, while this number increased to 17,470 in 2018. Since then, it was not possible to obtain population data due to the administrative changes in Libyan National Divisions. The authorities decided to count the whole region, which had around 79,000 inhabitants in 2010, including Murzuq and other towns and cities such as Al-Qatrun, Umm al-Rabnab, Zuweila, Wadi Ataba, and Tarragan. This tends to refer to the migration flow towards Fezzan region from the neighbouring countries (Abdulla & Al-Rubaie, 2018).

The city of Murzuq, like the rest of southern Libyan cities, has been suffering of insecurity, marginalization, and lack of basic services. Consequently, the city and its region has become a fragile and unsafe place that is controlled partially by smugglers, criminal gangs, foreign armed groups, and terrorists. All these circumstances resulted in new and controversial population structure between local population and Tebu tribe that is coming from Chad and Sudan.

Caravans in Libya

Thousands of camel caravans travelled for months from North Africa to the Sub-Saharan and Savannah region. Camels were introduced from Arabia in Egypt during the 9th century BC, then spread to North Africa later in the 5th century BC.

The value of the camel is not only confined to its high adaptation to severe desert conditions and its regulation of heat and water via its sweat glands. Its ability for long-distance travel of about 48 km per day and its high carrying capacity (240 kg) make it more efficient in comparison with the load capacity of horses, donkeys, and mules at roughly 60 kg. Camels are often metaphorically called “ships of the desert”. Indeed, the camel’s life span of 50 years surpasses that of the donkey (30-40 years) and the horse (25-30 years).

The journey was very long, dangerous, and adventurous. The route was not only used for transport of goods, but was also an alley for spreading religions, architecture, and arts to the Sub-Saharan region. The caravans’ trade carried many types of goods such as salt, gold, copper, luxury goods, and slaves at that time. The caravans’ trade routes had to stop many times in different towns and cities. Ghadames, Murzuq, Ghat, and Al-Kufra were the cities travellers had to pass on their journey to either Timbuktu, Kano, Sudan or Ghana Empire.

Caravan routes rose and fell either side of the Sahara depending on many conditions such as wars and economic activities. Typical caravan took between 40-60 days and could have up to 1000-1200 camels. The largest number of caravans would travel in the best season of the year. The journey often faces many challenges and dangers. Sandstorms and poor navigation could bring disaster. Many other dangers including bandits, venomous snakes, and scorpions, but the biggest issue was lack of water.

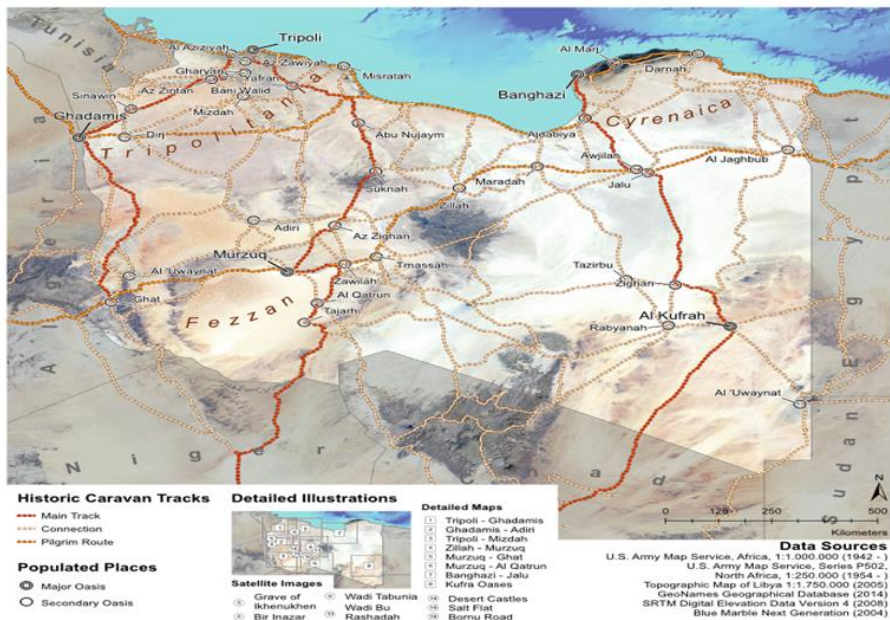
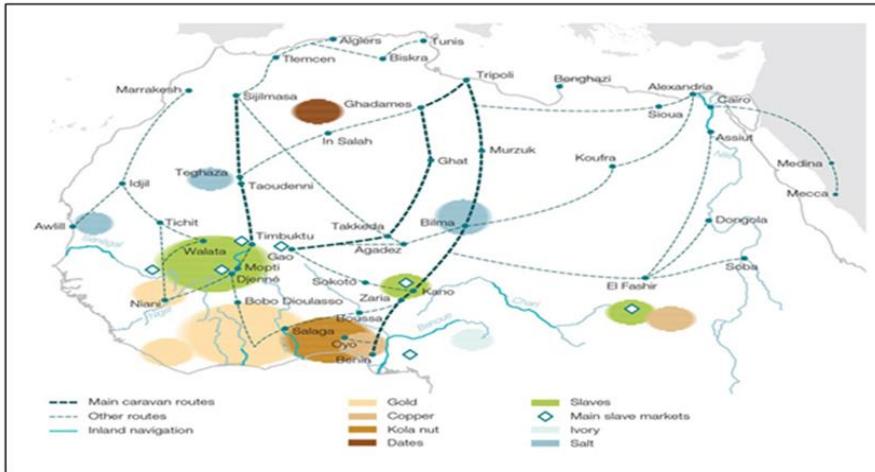


Fig. 5. Caravan Tracks and Oases in trans-Sahara (Source: Braun & Passon, 2020)



Extract: OECD (2014), *An Atlas of the Sahara-Sahel: Geography, Economics and Security*, OECD Publishing, Paris
 Source: le-cartographe.net © 2014, Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat (SWAC/OECD)

Fig. 6. Trans-Saharan Routes in the middle Ages (Source: OECD, 2014)

Southern Libyan region has suffered three main issues and crisis: social issues, political conflicts, and migration.

Social issues

Tebu-Azwiya battle (Al-Kufra)

In city of Kufra, which is located in the oasis around 2000 km far from Tripoli, 10% of its 44,000 inhabitants belong to the ethnic group of Tebu. Tebu has claimed that in 2007 the persecution began using the Arabization. This clash has been controversial since then. The Zawiya tribes claim that Tebu is not local ethnic group, and that they were brought by Gaddafi after 1969. They also claim that Tebu is trying to invade the southern region of Libya. The power of Tebu has come from the continues support of Chadian tribes and government, as well as the unlimited French support. Allegedly, this conflict should result in dividing Libya and taking over the control over Fezzan, the region with historical presence of France.

After 2011, two wars broke out around Al-Kufra and one in Fezzan in southern Sabha between Tebu and Arabs. Recently, Tebu almost controls Murzuq and Gatroon, and many other strategic towns and cities in the south, in addition to their presence in Sabha.

The Saharan cities have become a significant points of war battles and supply of mercenaries, as well as weapons transfer points that has ignited the conflicts since 2011. The latest conflict that has changed the social structure in the City of Murzuq. This has been a part of the Libyan political unrest and internal conflicts in eastern and southern areas. The tribal confrontations between Tebu and Arabs, with the support of Chadian forces, and the eastern forces on the other side. Arabs were deported and parts of their neighbourhoods had been destroyed as a result of the conflict. The political instability in Chad, in particular, has contributed to the worsening of the Libyan political situation through the intervention of Chadian and Sudanese opposition groups, who have been employed in Libyan division and internal political instability.

Migration

Migration has become one of the most effective factors in contemporary Libya for decades, especially in the time when the former regime allowed Africans to enter the country without restrictions. The flow of migrants has impacted the country deeply, in particular economically, politically, and in the terms of security.

Opening the door in that way caused some social issues in the south particularly. IOM estimated around 170,000 migrants passing through Nigerien city of Agadez to the Libyan borders in 2016 (Tinti & Wescott, 2016). This number represents only the crossings through Nigerien borders, excluding the Chadian and Sudanese borders with Libya. Demographical change has been an issue, hundreds of thousands have been passed through and resided in southern region and became centres of Sub-Saharan Africans and mostly camps of crimes and drug trafficking. Sub-Saharan migration composes of 56% of total migrants to Libya (International Organization for Migration, 2021). One face of the issue of migration is that, the huge crossing from southern borders has brought a flow of lower educated and vulnerable to ill-treatment African nationals from Sub-Saharan countries to Libya (United Nations Refugee Agency, 2017). These groups mostly, as officials express, cause spread of diseases as feared by Libyan citizens. In the main southern cities the number of migrants has increased to around 92,146 migrants (International Organization for Migration, 2020). This number represents the whole picture of migrations flows and the concentration of migrants in the southern region, which has gradually changed the demographical structure and will profoundly affect the social cohesion. The triangle between Chad, Sudan, and Libya receives migrants from African horn from the route of Darfur. This route is managed by some individuals from Tebu and Zawiya who are smuggling to certain points inside Libya. Similarly, migrants from the Sahel region enter Libya via Qartoon, Um-Alaranib, and Ubari in the far southwest where migrants work for months to save money to continue the journey to Europe.

The border insecurity and the migrations issues has been controversial as many Arabs, Berber, and Sub-Saharan groups have claimed that they have been marginalized by the central government in Tripoli, which has been resulted in a huge trafficking movement from southern borders to Libya (Cole, 2015).

Conclusion

The Libyan cities in its southern region have been significant through the history of the country. They have been the main gates that connected north and south regions, as well as the centres of trade in the continent connecting it with Europe through the Mediterranean ports.

These historical cities have shaped the relations between regions of the continent and its countries later after the colonial divisions, which shaped the current states after gaining independence.

It is notable that the southern Libyan cities have gained importance through the rise of different kingdoms and empires through their history, which continued to be centres of political dominance over surrounding counties. The Libyan political relations with Chadian people and their governments continued especially during Idris Assanusi and even in the Qaddafi's era.

The cities of southern Libya, Ghat, Al-Kufra and Murzuq, have been centres of migration and smuggling for decades, with different movements and intensity based on the Libyan local, regional, and international politics. This movement increased and swelled after weak control of the southern border, which created many border smuggling militias of various origins and interests. These militias have contributed significantly to the increase of illegal immigration flows to Libya and across it to Europe.

The presence of illegal immigrants has impacted the population concentration and structure as well.

Many towns such as Qatroon and Murzuq have been affected by the dominance of thousands of migrants from Chad and Niger and from many other African countries since 2011. Ultimately, these comers from Tebu tribes and other Africans have forced Arabs in Murzuq to leave their homes after ethnic clashes that have abolished those Arabs completely from their city.

These issues have shaped the perspective of Libyan citizens who are against illegal migration that have brought many problems and issues such as spreading of diseases, crimes, and directs economic crisis, as well as political issues as Libya has become a transitional destination for hundreds of thousands of migrants.

Furthermore, the influx of illegal immigration has caused an economic burden in the recent Libyan history, as well as instability in the southern region in which many towns and cities have been battlefields of conflicts especially between Tebu and Zawiya. Rising concentration of the Sub-Saharan communities is also noticeable as part of the movements of tribes from Chad and Niger towards Libyan southern region after 2011.

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