

# Illegal Immigrants and Housing: The Case of the Old City of Tripoli

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## **Abstract**

The Old City of Tripoli, famous for its long history and heritage architecture, was subject to great rapid urban growth. This growth happened beyond the old city walls, but it brought about fundamental changes within its physical environment and its residents' views towards living in traditional towns and in traditional houses. New urban developments sprung up almost everywhere around the old city, disturbed the socio and economic living pattern of the old city residents and caused most of them to move out.

The old city's residents who sought "better" living in suburbia and other areas outside the old city abandoned their houses to "illegal"\* immigrants who came to the country looking for work and better earnings. These immigrants found in the houses of the old city a cheap, if not free, accommodation. Few of them were paying rents or utilities. Moreover, they inhabited the old city houses in large households. Many dwellings housed more than one family. The old city is facing great challenges; overcrowding, deteriorating buildings, and lack of adequate infra-structures are some examples.

There is a need to review the current status of housing within the old city of Tripoli. The houses of the old city could have reduced the problem of housing shortage if government policy and housing programs included them in the planning phases. The paper aims at shedding some light on the problem of illegal immigrants and on the current condition of houses within the old city of Tripoli. The objective is to reach some recommendations that can be helpful for outlining a strategy for enhancing the quality of living environment within the old city to make it a nice place for living for both local residents and migrants.

## **1 Introduction**

The question of housing shortage and of the quality of living environment for contemporary life and their relationship to both local citizens and immigrant workers have been at the focus of interest of many studies [1-3].

During the past century, Libya in general, and its urban centers in particular, were subject to a very rapid urban growth. This growth brought about fundamental changes in the physical environment and people's views towards living in traditional towns and in traditional houses. Such views were marked by a belief that the old represented decay and poverty and that modern life required the provision of modern housing with modern amenities. In an unprecedented move, the building of new housing developments lured old city residents and caused most of them to move out.

Houses of the old city were abandoned by their residents who sought "better" living in suburbia and other areas outside the old city. At the beginning, no attempt was made to rehabilitate and integrate the old town into "modern" planning proposals. Nor any effort was made to use its housing stock to alleviate the problem of housing shortage. Instead, houses were left to "illegal" immigrants who came to the city looking for work and a better life. Only recently some efforts were made by some government agencies to restore few old houses and open them for public and cultural uses [4]. Big challenges are still facing the old city. To restore its role as a living organism, there is a need for integrating the old city with the rest of the city's daily life by restoring the role of traditional houses and other urban functions within the whole fabric of the city.

In this paper, an attempt will be made to discuss the impact of illegal immigrants on the old city of Tripoli housing. A large number of immigrant workers occupy many of the old city houses [5]. Migrants found in the houses of the old town an appropriate place for them to settle leading to a change in the demographic characteristics of the old city and in turn its traditional urban structure. The paper presents the major lines of the social and cultural implication of immigrant workers and foreign labors on the old city urban fabric. The ultimate objective is to reach some recommendations that will hopefully be useful for improving the quality of living environment within the old city to make it attractive and habitable for both locals and migrants.

## **2 Immigrant workers**

Immigrant workers began coming to Libya with the discovery of oil in the late 1950s. They settled in major urban cities like Tripoli and Benghazi. A large influx of immigrants, however, began arriving in Libya in the mid 1990s looking for jobs and a better life [6, 7]. Libya's small population made the country dependent on foreign workers and their experiences in many of its development projects. Immigrants were of two types; immigrants who came from rural areas and immigrants who came from foreign countries; Arab and non-Arab. Both types of immigrants shared certain characteristics; they were generally poor and looking for better life, different jobs, and different life style.

According to a UN report, International migrants, in Libya, numbered about 500000 persons or 10 percent of its national population [8]. In addition, it is estimated that a similar number of foreign workers reside in Libya on illegal terms. Those labor migrants who are illegal or undocumented are in continuous increase. As a result of poor governmental control, labor migrants do not benefit from any of the social security rights or other benefits that are guaranteed to legal non citizens. Due to the nature of their status, labor migrants are becoming an issue and are gaining increasing attention among both government officials and the general public on different levels [9]. On urban level, immigrants have a significant impact on housing. They added to the problem of providing adequate shelter. Within the context of the old city, immigrants have influenced its living environment a great deal. Taking place in an era of urban economic restructuring, the demographic compositional changes in the old city have the potential to produce major changes on the city's urban fabric. The major theoretical questions that will lead to the examination of these changes in the structure of the old city are:

1. To what extent had the arrival of the foreign workers in Tripoli affected the old city's urban fabric in general and the historical buildings in particular?
2. To what extent had the use of old houses by illegal workers affected the quality of the living environment within the old city in comparison to the rest of the country?
3. How does the new residents' structure affect the type and quality of services within the old city?

The discussion of these questions will be based on data obtained by a survey conducted in 2003 by the Project for Developing and Managing the Old City of Tripoli (PDMOCT).

### 3 The Old city of Tripoli

The old city constitutes the historical heart of Tripoli, and the node from which all subsequent development has extended. Today it forms part of the central business district although many business activities are in fact located in newer areas around the city. The old city of Tripoli housed different types of people throughout its history which span over two thousand years. Its long history, which dated back to the Phoenician era, has given her a unique architectural character among the rest of Mediterranean great cities. The city with its trading port served as a link between Africa and the rest of the Western World. The old city of Tripoli embodies, within its confines, a record of the cultural and urban heritage of several civilizations. As an Arab town, it developed a well defined urban fabric that conformed to Islam and the Arab way of life. Its urban morphology is determined by its dense and interconnected building structures and by its extended narrow winding streets (Fig. 1). The streets, designed mainly for pedestrians, are discontinued by small irregular squares and flanked by private courtyard houses, shops, and "monumental buildings" such as mosques. These urban elements were small homogenous elements with no special preference of one element over another. A careful urban and architectural response to the environmental conditions is expressed by maximizing shaded areas and green elements that characterize much of the architecture of the old city.

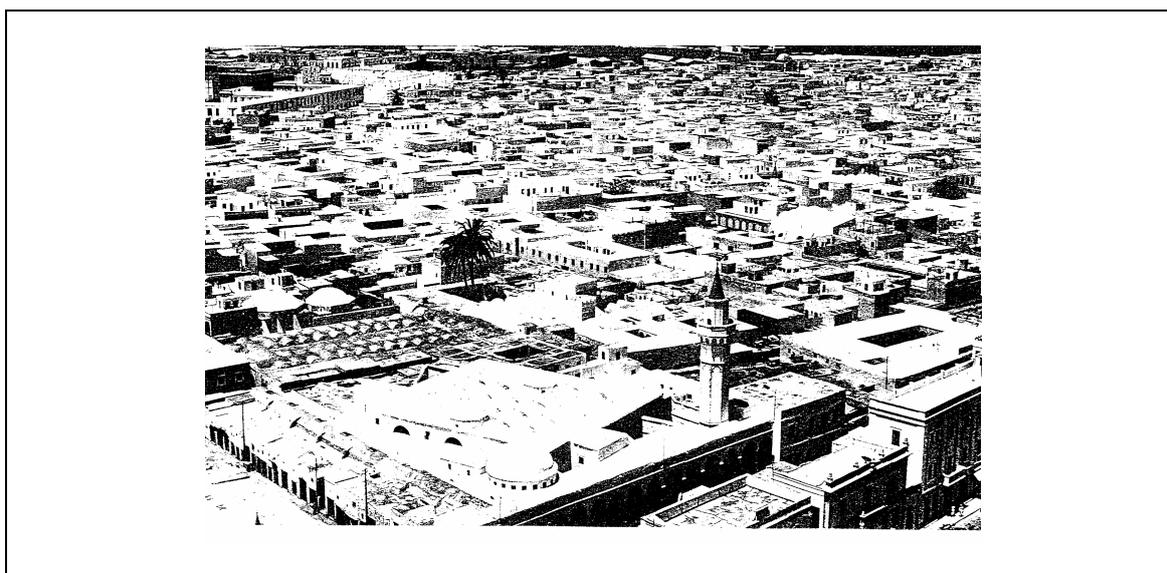


Figure 1: The Old City of Tripoli, general view

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two main developments have altered the picturesque image of the old city. The first development occurred during the first half of the past century, when the Italians built a new city around the periphery of the old town. The second started with the discovery of oil and the distribution of its wealth through extensive urban developments which happened during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both developments disrupted the social and economical life of the old city residents. When the Italians built their new sectors some of the well-to-do families moved into new houses outside the old city. Housing boom resulted from oil wealth influenced residents' views towards traditional towns and traditional houses. Such views were marked by a belief that the old represents decay and poverty and that modern life requires the provision of modern housing with modern standards. Many residents left their houses to live in new housing outside the old city.

The majority of the old city's residents who sought "better" living conditions in suburbia and other areas outside the old city abandoned their old town houses. From that moment onwards the decline of the old city and its buildings resulting from the lack of maintenance carried out by its inhabitants became definitive. Vacant houses were rented and many were "occupied" by a new wave of immigrants.

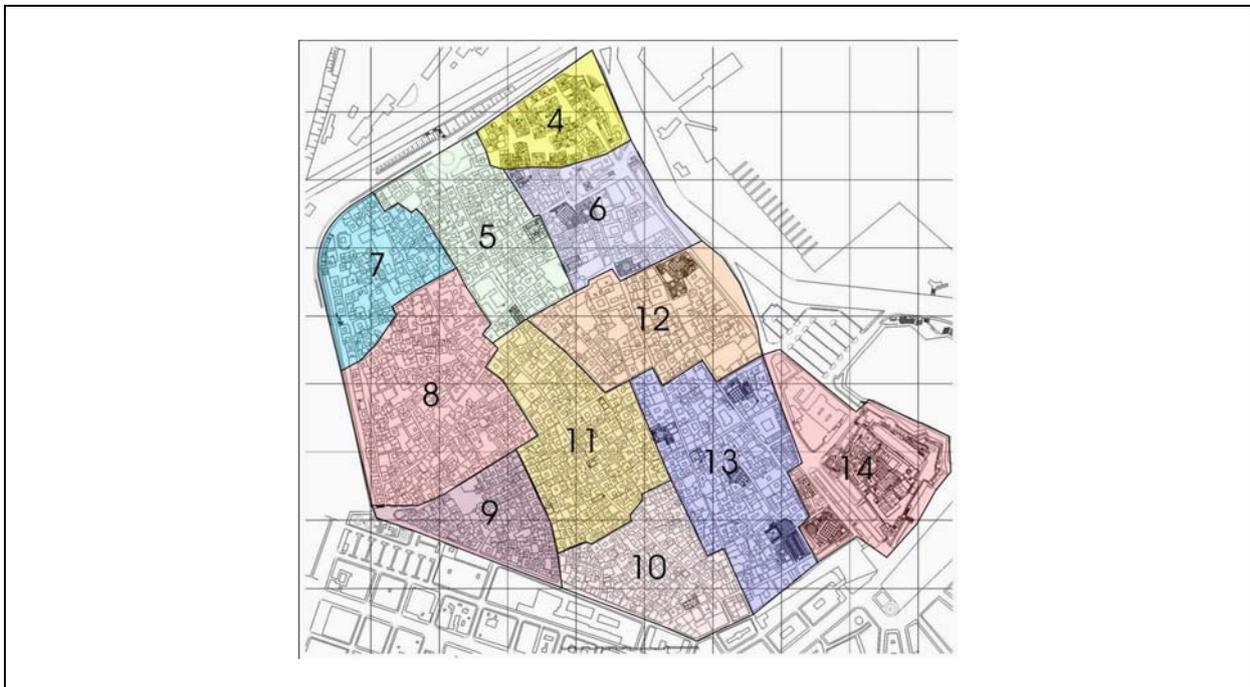


Figure 2: The Old City of Tripoli, districts' map

### 3.1 Immigrant and the old city

The old city of Tripoli houses a very high share of immigrant workers both in relative and absolute terms. They found in the old city of Tripoli a cheap if not free accommodating place. A majority of immigrants reside in districts number 5, 7, 8, 10 and 11 (Fig. 2 and 3). Those areas have the largest numbers of abandoned housing.

In fact, large areas in the city are known as foreign workers' neighborhoods. A study conducted by the PDMOCT estimates that at least 1000 non-Libyan workers currently reside within the boundaries of the old city and they add about 25 percent to the city's population [10]. The labor migrants in the city

are from different countries with various nationalities and religions, including African countries, such as Ghana, Mali, Niger, Chad, Arab countries such as Egypt Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Syria, and Iraq and Asian such as Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and the Philippines [11]. Their impact on the old city's living environment is very remarkable.

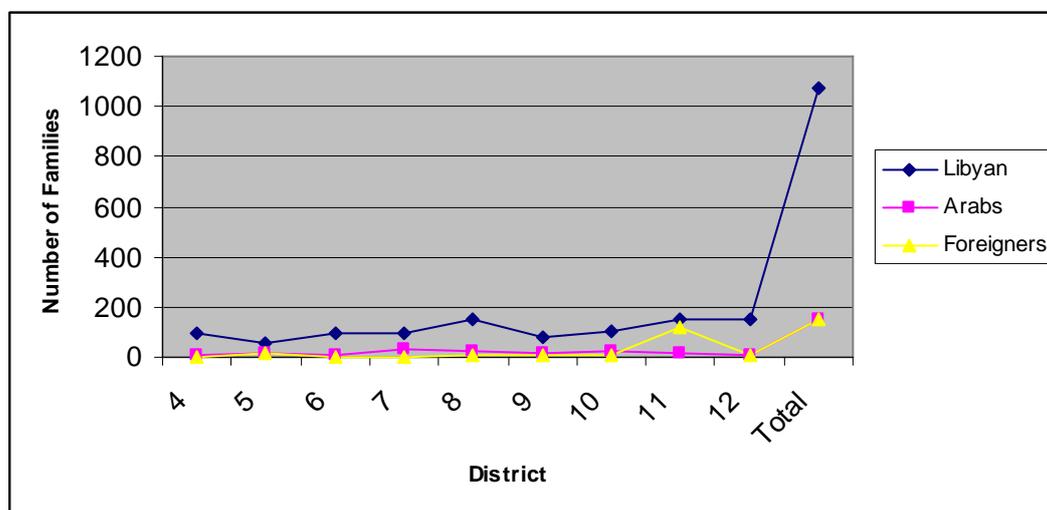


Figure 3: Number of Families living in Old City of Tripoli; Libyan and non-Libyan [Alkhuja2003]

Table 1: Status of Housing Occupation [Alkhuja 2003]

| District | Original Owner | Buying | PDMOCT | People's committee. | others | Rent | Without contract | Other Agencies | Vacant properties |
|----------|----------------|--------|--------|---------------------|--------|------|------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| 4        | 10             | 8      | 7      | 4                   | 1      | 1    | 57               | 4              | -                 |
| 5        | 54             | -      | 35     | 14                  | 2      | 10   | -                | -              | 43                |
| 6        | 37             | 7      | 37     | 29                  | 1      | 1    | 10               | 9              | -                 |
| 7        | 17             | -      | 16     | 2                   | 1      | 11   | 87               | -              | 16                |
| 8        | 36             | 15     | 36     | 20                  | 2      | 11   | 131              | -              | -                 |
| 9        | 3              | 25     | 7      | 15                  | 6      | 30   | 103              | -              | -                 |
| 10       | 63             | -      | 69     | 3                   | -      | -    | 113              | -              | -                 |
| 11       | 20             | 47     | 70     | 46                  | 5      | 19   | 65               | 6              | -                 |
| 12       | 31             | 9      | 83     | 11                  | 16     | 6    | 10               | 2              | -                 |
| Total    | 271            | 111    | 360    | 144                 | 34     | 89   | 576              | 21             | 59                |

### 3.2 Quality of living environment within the old city

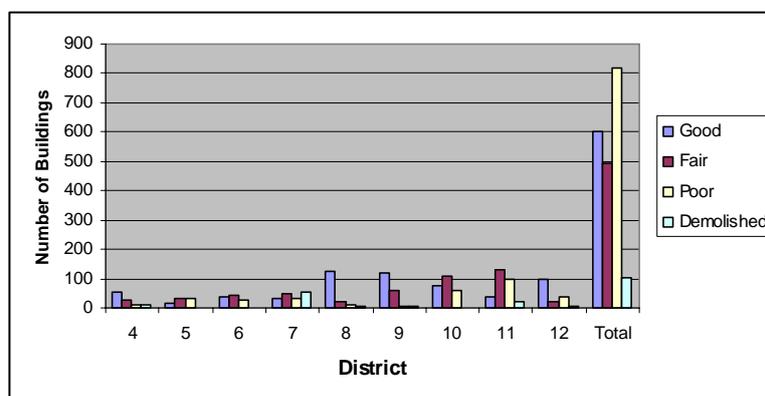
The degradation of the old city of Tripoli resulted from the same aspects that affected other old cities in the developing world, and proceeded by the disruption of its social and economical life. The replacement of local residents of the old town is a major source of such disruption. Such disruption can easily be seen in overcrowding, absence of maintenance work, and changes in architectural characteristics.

Overcrowding within the housing units resulted from the fact that too many people are living in one house where few rooms are available for them to live in. Many immigrants are living illegally in the old city houses [12]. Some illegal immigrants took an advantage of vacant houses by occupying it in

illegal squats. Others pay bribes to get an access into vacant lots and houses. In district No 10 nearly 50% of the residents are using the buildings of the old town “illegally” while 25% of the residents are legal owners (Table 1). Even those who are supposedly renting from the city project are not paying their rent. Many families live in crowded conditions which can lead to several social problems. Many houses have been used by more than one family. It is common for immigrants to share a house with other families. Multiple-family households are most common among persons from Arab and African countries. Some of these families are in the categories of single mothers with children. Among persons originating from Arab and African countries, Palestinians and some Chadian have the larger households; some of these families live in households of 8 or more persons. Even though immigrant households are generally larger, it is normal to find persons from Egypt and Bangladesh living alone. Moreover, there are a large number of cohabitants among immigrants. Cohabitation among Egyptians is most common. In one house in District 12, twenty five persons were found living in one single house [13]. Furthermore, most immigrants living in the old town are poor. A large portion of immigrants do not have a permanent work. And if they have a job it is of low pay. Street vendors, construction workers and house maids are some examples. Moreover, single mothers rarely have a job. Because resources are lacking, immigrant families seldom do maintenance work to their dwelling despite their deteriorating condition and the hazards to their safety [14].

A number of houses in the old city are in a deteriorating condition because no maintenance was done to these houses for a long time (Figure 4). The majority of illegal immigrants live in deteriorating housing. Many of these houses have structural problem like falling roofs, cracked walls, and broken windows. A large number of houses lack basic living standards. Some units don't have running water or proper sanitary facilities. Absence of hygiene is expressed in some residents' increased fear of mold, insects and rats. Despite the bad condition of these houses, some immigrants found in this type of houses a cheap vacant accommodation they can use at least for sleeping. Economic constraint is a factor for immigrants' preference of the old city.

Figure 4: Old city Building Condition [1]



### 3.3 Change of city character

Immigrant presence within the boundaries of the old city is becoming higher and more evident than before, producing a highly visible economic and cultural impact. Migrants are involved in an increasing number of economic activities both formal and informal. Within the old city there is a very high concentration of informal trade managed by migrants. Ethnic enclaves also affected house styles, streets' elevations, street life, color used, and the services such as tailors shops, barber shop, grocery stores, etc. It is often possible, by observation, to distinguish the presence of different groups in the old

city by social and activity differences. Changes in craft, cultural preference and social relations may have devastating results and could alter the old city character [15]. Loss of local identity and fear of crime due to changing social conditions have become major concerns for some visitors to the old city.

## **4 Conclusion**

Over the last few decades the existence of the old city of Tripoli has been seriously undermined. Lack of repairs and maintenance works and changes in its demographic characteristics, due to the flow of international migrants, are threatening its future. Nevertheless, the old town has inherent advantages as a residential area and a center of commercial activities and tourism. Its central location gives it an easy access to the rest of the city sectors. Its uniqueness of physical form, housing stock, historical and cultural association is potentially a sound base for developing effective comprehensive strategies for sustainable development. Furthermore, there is a need to develop efficient framework to regulate labor migration and improve their living and social condition. Three main aspects proved to be meaningful for this purpose; organizational development, building activity and design, and social and economical rehabilitation.

On an organizational level there are three aspects; first, the government has to create bodies for management of migrants' flows on local, national and international levels. Second, there is a need for redefining the roles of PDMOCT as an authority for organizing public agencies that have interests in the sustainable development of old town. One of these roles can be directed towards attracting private investors to rehabilitate the old city's deteriorating structures to enhance its image as a living environment for both natives and migrants. Third, there is a need for more studies on the old city, its urban morphology, demographic characteristics, and their impact on its future. In the present study, lack of existing reliable data made the task of reaching some conclusive results difficult.

On Building and design activities PDMOCT can provide building materials and technical aids for old city residents to help them restore their houses and improve their hygienic living conditions. Houses that require demolishing should be removed and new strict policies for urban and social renewal should be launched. Codes and laws for building uses should be reformed and means for implementing them should be reinforced. Priority in applying these policies should be given to migrants' housing and distressed neighborhoods that happened to house the largest concentration of migrants. To cushion migrants' impact on Tripoli traditional town, immediate redevelopment of the old city will improve its living condition, preserve its historic buildings and attract new tourists.

Socially, the city can develop more effective policies that aim at integrating illegal immigrants socially culturally and economically with local community. The city should encourage migrants to form a forum to highlight migration issues within local community with particular reference to housing problems. Cultural programs can be established by increasing migrants' participation in city cultural life and municipal affairs. Promoting cultural understanding among various groups of different background can also be achieved. Jobs' aids programs can be provided to alleviate poverty and improve the living conditions of immigrants' families. Different programs for socially integrating immigrants and reduce their marginalization proved to be very helpful [16]

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Reference

\* It is difficult to give a precise definition for the term “illegal immigrant.” Illegal means simply not legal; not legal may mean without proper documentation or legal status. Politically, this may become controversial. For the purpose of this paper, illegal immigrants include all those individuals who are not native of the old town; those who were born and lived part of their life outside the old town of Tripoli.

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