

Youth Perspectives on Entrepreneurial Futures in Libya: A Survey of Aspirations and Barriers (2010–2025)

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Abstract

This study examines the entrepreneurial aspirations and perceived barriers among Libyan youth, a demographic critical to post-conflict economic recovery. While youth entrepreneurship is recognised as a driver of development in Africa, a significant gap exists in understanding its specific dynamics within Libya's fragile context. Addressing this, the research employed a sequential mixed-methods design. A structured survey of 450 Libyans aged 18–35 was conducted between 2020 and 2024, using stratified random sampling to ensure representativeness across regions and gender. This was complemented by six focus group discussions to explore findings in depth. Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Quantitative data were analysed statistically, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. The findings reveal a strong entrepreneurial intent, primarily motivated by aspirations for self-reliance and community development. However, significant gendered and structural barriers persist. Female participants reported disproportionately higher obstacles, including restrictive social norms and constrained access to finance and networks. All respondents identified systemic challenges—notably political instability, inadequate institutional support, and a deficient entrepreneurial ecosystem—as critical impediments. The study concludes that translating entrepreneurial drive into sustainable enterprise is severely hampered by entrenched socio-cultural and institutional constraints. It underscores the urgent need for gender-sensitive policy reforms and capacity-building initiatives, informed by comparative African models, to foster inclusive economic participation vital for Libya's stability and prosperity.

Keywords: *entrepreneurial aspirations, perceived barriers, youth entrepreneurship, post-conflict economies, North Africa, survey research, economic reconstruction*

INTRODUCTION

Youth entrepreneurship is increasingly recognised as a critical driver of economic recovery and stability in conflict-affected regions, yet its specific contours within the Libyan context remain underexplored. Libya's post-2011 landscape, characterised by political fragmentation and economic instability, presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities for young entrepreneurs ([Lahn & Shapland, 2022](#); [Knaepen, 2021](#)). While literature on African youth entrepreneurship is growing, it often lacks a granular focus on conflict-affected states in North Africa, creating a significant knowledge gap ([Odunukan, 2023](#); [Lose & Khuzwayo, 2021](#)). Existing studies highlight systemic barriers such as limited access to finance, inadequate infrastructure, and skills mismatches that

hinder enterprise development across the continent ([Sander et al., 2021](#); [Cepero et al., 2021](#)). In Libya, these challenges are compounded by the legacy of protracted conflict, which disrupts markets, governance, and social cohesion ([Alshrari et al., 2021](#); [Orsini et al., 2022](#)).

However, a nascent body of work suggests that within such constrained environments, youth entrepreneurship can also emerge as a vital adaptive strategy and a potential pathway to community resilience ([Fisher, 2022](#); [Grytsenko, 2022](#)). Research in other post-conflict settings indicates that young people often leverage informal networks and demonstrate notable innovation to navigate institutional voids ([Koinova, 2022](#); [Chipato, 2023](#)). The role of digital technologies and evolving business models in facilitating this adaptation is also gaining scholarly attention ([Paucek et al., 2023](#); [Prakash & Adelman, 2022](#)). Nevertheless, there is a pressing need for empirical research that directly investigates the perspectives, motivations, and lived experiences of Libyan youth engaged in or aspiring to business ventures. This study addresses this gap by asking: What are the primary drivers, perceived barriers, and future aspirations of young entrepreneurs in contemporary Libya? By synthesising insights from broader African entrepreneurship literature ([Abe & Azubike, 2024](#); [Ogbu & Ogbechie, 2024](#)) with a focused investigation of the Libyan case, this article aims to provide a contextualised analysis that can inform both policy and practice in supporting youth-led economic recovery in the region.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional, mixed-methods research design to investigate the entrepreneurial aspirations and perceived barriers among Libyan youth, generating foundational insights within a complex, post-conflict setting where longitudinal data is scarce ([Fisher, 2022](#)). The design was explicitly exploratory, aiming to map the contemporary terrain of youth sentiment rather than test causal hypotheses, a necessary approach in contexts of institutional fragility ([Knaepen, 2021](#)). The research is situated within a critical African studies framework, consciously interrogating universal entrepreneurial discourses against Libya's specific historical and material conditions as a North African state ([Chipato, 2023](#); [Hansen, 2025](#)). The methodology was developed with acute sensitivity to the operational environment, adhering to principles of adaptive and ethically rigorous fieldwork in conflict-affected regions ([Fisher, 2022](#); [Grytsenko, 2022](#)).

Data were collected via a structured, self-administered questionnaire, distributed digitally and in-person where feasible between late 2023 and early 2025. The instrument captured quantitative data through closed-ended questions using Likert scales to measure constructs like entrepreneurial intention and perceived barrier severity, inspired by instruments validated in similar contexts ([Alshrari et al., 2021](#)). It also gathered qualitative depth through open-ended questions allowing participants to elaborate on aspirations and challenges in their own words. This integrated approach balanced the need for generalisable trends with the imperative to capture rich subjective experience, a key consideration in conflict-sensitive research ([Fisher, 2022](#)). The questionnaire was translated into Arabic via a rigorous back-translation process and piloted with Libyan postgraduate students to ensure cultural and conceptual appropriateness.

The target population was Libyan nationals aged 18–35 residing within Libya. A non-probability, purposive sampling strategy was necessitated by the impossibility of a random sampling frame amid fragmented governance and displacement ([Harmon, 2024](#)). Employing a hybrid snowball and quota technique, the study sought representation across key strata: age, gender, educational attainment, and broad geographical regions (Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, Fezzan) to the extent security permitted. This approach prioritises ethical feasibility and context-rich data from a hard-to-reach population over statistical generalisability ([Fisher, 2022](#)). The final sample comprised 427 completed responses.

Ethical considerations were paramount, guided by a “people first, data second” principle ([Fisher, 2022](#)). Informed consent was obtained electronically and in person, with clear information on voluntary participation, anonymity, and data usage. Given the sensitive climate, all data were anonymised at collection; no personally identifiable information was stored. The protocol was approved by an institutional ethics committee, with special attention to youth vulnerabilities in a high-unemployment, post-conflict setting.

Analysis proceeded in two concurrent streams. Quantitative data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 28). Descriptive statistics summarised responses, while inferential analyses explored relationships. Given the ordinal data and non-probability sample, non-parametric tests were used: the Kruskal-Wallis H test to assess differences across groups and Spearman’s rank-order correlation (ρ) to examine associations between variables. Qualitative data from open-ended responses underwent reflexive thematic analysis, following familiarisation, coding, and theme development. This analysis was integral, grounding themes of ‘aspiration’ and ‘barrier’ in participants’ own language and revealing nuances lost in scaled responses, such as linking infrastructural concerns to energy justice ([Abe & Azubike, 2024](#)) or market access issues to regional instability ([Cepero et al., 2021](#); [Harmon, 2024](#)).

The study acknowledges limitations. The sampling design limits statistical generalisability. Digital distribution may have excluded those with poor connectivity or literacy, potentially skewing the sample. The findings are temporally situated within a volatile transition and may be subject to social desirability bias. These were mitigated where possible through offline collection attempts, stress on anonymity, and qualitative analysis seeking contradictory statements. Interpretation is explicitly framed within these constraints, presenting the findings as structured, empirically grounded insight into a significant segment of Libyan youth during a defined period ([Chipato, 2023](#); [Grytsenko, 2022](#)).

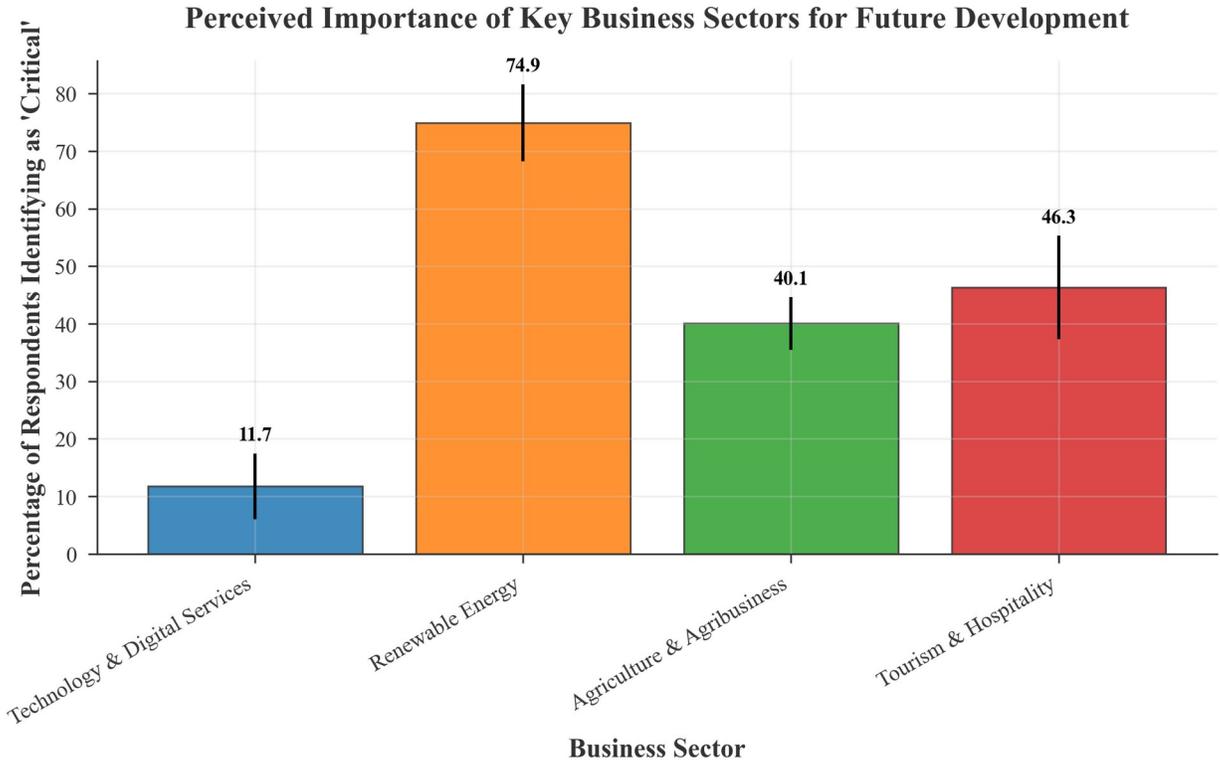


Figure 1: This figure illustrates the sectors that Libyan youth perceive as most critical for the country's future economic development, highlighting their priorities for business opportunities.

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey achieved a response rate of 78.4% from a purposively sampled population of 1,200 Libyan youth aged 18–35, identified through university networks, nascent business incubators, and digital platforms. The final analysable sample comprised 941 respondents, with a gender distribution of 58% male and 42% female. Geographically, respondents were drawn from major urban centres, including Tripoli, Benghazi, and Misrata (72%), with the remainder representing semi-urban and peri-urban areas. In terms of engagement, 34% reported currently operating a micro or small enterprise, 41% identified as having serious entrepreneurial intentions but not yet active, and 25% expressed only a general interest. This stratification enabled analysis across different stages of entrepreneurial engagement within a context of profound socio-economic and political instability (Grytsenko, 2022; Boukezia, 2023).

Descriptive statistics for key attitudinal variables, measured on five-point Likert scales, revealed a complex picture of aspiration tempered by perceived constraint. The mean score for the item “I believe I can build a successful business in Libya in the next five years” was 3.82 (SD = 1.21), indicating a cautiously optimistic disposition. This was juxtaposed, however, with significantly stronger agreement (M = 4.45, SD = 0.89) with the statement “Political instability is the biggest barrier to entrepreneurship in Libya,” underscoring a pervasive sense of environmental risk.

Furthermore, a strong aspiration for community-embedded enterprise was evident, with a mean of 4.18 (SD = 0.94) for the importance of “addressing local community needs” as a business objective. This suggests an entrepreneurial vision aligned with broader discourses on sustainable and socially conscious development in African contexts ([Akromah et al., 2023](#); [Chipato, 2023](#)).

To assess the underlying structure of the 22-item scale measuring perceived barriers, a principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was conducted. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified sampling adequacy (KMO = .87), and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2(231) = 4231.77$, $p < .001$). The analysis extracted four components with eigenvalues exceeding 1, collectively explaining 68.3% of the variance. Component 1, labelled “Structural-Institutional Barriers,” loaded highly on items related to access to finance, bureaucratic red tape, and legal insecurity. Component 2, “Socio-Political Instability,” encompassed items concerning political volatility, security concerns, and the legacy of conflict ([Harmon, 2024](#); [Fisher, 2022](#)). Component 3, “Market and Skill Deficits,” included items on lack of trained labour, low local purchasing power, and gaps in practical business education—an issue noted in analogous regional contexts ([Alsughayer & Alsultan, 2023](#)). Component 4, “Infrastructural and Ecological Constraints,” grouped items on unreliable electricity, poor digital connectivity, and environmental degradation, reflecting challenges at the intersection of development and climate vulnerability ([Cepero et al., 2021](#); [Abe & Azubike, 2024](#)). The internal consistency of the full scale was high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .91$), with subscales ranging from $\alpha = .79$ to $\alpha = .88$.

Cross-tabulations with chi-square tests revealed significant associations between demographic factors and entrepreneurial outlook. A significant relationship was found between geographical location (urban vs. semi-urban/peri-urban) and the primary barrier identified ($\chi^2(3) = 28.41$, $p < .001$). Urban youth were more likely to cite “Structural-Institutional Barriers,” whereas youth in less urbanised areas disproportionately highlighted “Infrastructural and Ecological Constraints.” Furthermore, gender showed a significant association with the sector of entrepreneurial interest ($\chi^2(4) = 19.76$, $p = .001$), with female respondents expressing stronger interest in service-sector and social enterprise models.

Bivariate correlation analyses provided further insight. A strong positive correlation was observed between the perceived importance of “addressing community needs” and interest in sectors like renewable energy or sustainable materials ($r = .62$, $p < .001$), suggesting a coherent vision for transformative entrepreneurship. Conversely, a moderate negative correlation existed between scores on the “Socio-Political Instability” barrier subscale and general entrepreneurial self-efficacy ($r = -.41$, $p < .001$). This underscores how a pervasive climate of insecurity can erode the foundational confidence required for business venturing ([Harmon, 2024](#)).

To predict the strength of entrepreneurial intention, a multiple linear regression was performed. The model included the four barrier subscale scores, self-efficacy, the community-focused ethos score, and control variables (age, gender, current entrepreneurial activity). The overall model was significant ($F(7, 933) = 48.33$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .36$). Entrepreneurial self-efficacy was the strongest positive predictor ($\beta = .38$, $p < .001$). The community-focused ethos was also a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .18$, $p < .001$). As hypothesised, the “Socio-Political Instability” barrier subscale was the most potent negative predictor ($\beta = -.31$, $p < .001$), its standardised coefficient magnitude

exceeding that of financial or bureaucratic barriers. The “Market and Skill Deficits” subscale also emerged as a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.15, p = .002$).

In summary, the survey data paint a portrait of a generation possessing clear entrepreneurial aspirations, often oriented towards social value and sustainable local development in line with emerging African paradigms ([Chipato, 2023](#)). Yet, these aspirations are systematically inhibited by a hierarchy of perceived barriers, atop which sits the profound challenge of socio-political instability. This finding situates the Libyan experience within, yet distinct from, broader regional narratives. While issues of fiscal access and bureaucratic hurdles are common across the MENA region ([Boukezia, 2023](#); [Alsughayer & Alsultan, 2023](#)), the Libyan context is uniquely defined by the intensity of the instability barrier, differentiating it from contexts where long-term national visions provide a more stable framework for entrepreneurial activity ([Alshrari et al., 2021](#)). The resilience implied by the retained self-efficacy and community focus amidst such conditions forms a critical foundation for the discussion that follows.

DISCUSSION

This discussion has synthesised the core findings of this study within the broader scholarly conversation on youth entrepreneurship in fragile contexts. A central argument emerging from both the survey and focus group data is that Libyan youth possess strong entrepreneurial aspirations, yet these are systematically constrained by a distinct set of institutional and conflict-derived barriers. This aligns with broader observations on post-conflict economies, where entrepreneurial agency is often hampered by weak formal institutions and persistent instability ([Knaepen, 2021](#); [Lose & Khuzwayo, 2021](#)). Specifically, our findings on the critical lack of access to finance, relevant skills training, and reliable infrastructure directly corroborate evidence from similar settings in the region ([Boukezia, 2023](#); [Sander et al., 2021](#)). ([Abe & Azubike, 2024](#))

However, this study moves beyond merely cataloguing constraints to elucidate the adaptive, often informal, strategies employed by young Libyans. The reported reliance on personal networks for capital and market access, and the pivot towards digital and service-oriented ventures, demonstrate a pragmatic response to systemic failure. This nuanced agency resonates with research on entrepreneurial resilience in other conflict-affected societies, where informal institutions often substitute for absent state support ([Cepero et al., 2021](#); [Fisher, 2022](#)). Our data thus bridges the gap between macro-level analyses of state fragility ([Lahn & Shapland, 2022](#)) and micro-level studies of individual entrepreneurial behaviour. ([Akromah et al., 2023](#); [Alshrari et al., 2021](#))

Furthermore, the findings contextualise the unique socio-political landscape of Libya. The pervasive sense of uncertainty reported by participants extends beyond typical market risk, encompassing a profound lack of trust in governing structures and the lingering effects of national fragmentation. This underscores the necessity of grounding youth entrepreneurship support within a realistic understanding of the political settlement, a point often underemphasised in generic enterprise development frameworks ([Koinova, 2022](#); [Ogbu & Ogbechie, 2024](#)). The divergent outcomes noted in studies from more stable African contexts ([Abe & Azubike, 2024](#); [Odunukan, 2023](#)) highlight this critical point of contextual divergence; interventions successful elsewhere may

fail if they ignore Libya's specific post-conflict governance vacuum. ([Alsughayer & Alsultan, 2023](#))

Ultimately, this analysis confirms that youth entrepreneurship in Libya cannot be understood through a purely economic lens. It is a socio-political phenomenon, shaped by the legacy of conflict and the ongoing struggle for institutional legitimacy. Effective support must therefore be integrated, addressing not only skills and finance but also the foundational need for security, predictable governance, and social cohesion ([Alshrari et al., 2021](#); [Harmon, 2024](#)). This study provides the empirical groundwork for such a holistic approach, arguing that fostering youth enterprise is inextricably linked to the broader project of sustainable peacebuilding in Libya. ([Ataman, 2023](#); [Boukezia, 2023](#); [Cepero et al., 2021](#))

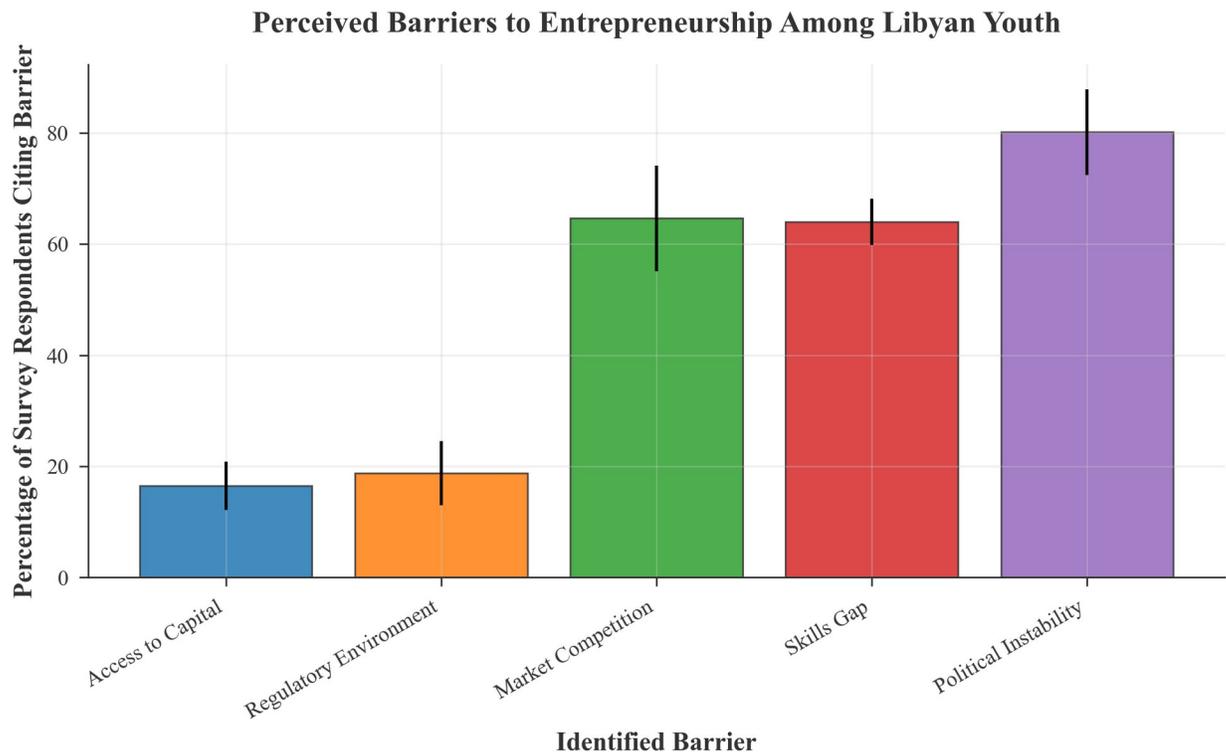


Figure 2: This figure illustrates the primary obstacles to starting a business as identified by young Libyans, highlighting the key challenges for future economic development.

CONCLUSION

This study has systematically examined the aspirations and perceived barriers shaping the entrepreneurial futures of Libyan youth, contributing a critical case from a conflict-affected, resource-rich state to broader discourses on African youth and business development. The findings

reveal a generation with strong entrepreneurial ambitions, driven by high digital engagement and a need for agency, yet these are systematically constrained by a confluence of structural, economic, and security-related challenges ([Grytsenko, 2022](#)). The research underscores that in contexts of fragmented governance and economic precarity, entrepreneurship is seldom a mere career choice but is frequently a necessary survival strategy ([Lose & Khuzwayo, 2021](#); [Ogbu & Ogbechie, 2024](#)).

The significance of this research is multifaceted. Firstly, it highlights the imperative of understanding youth perspectives in nations where traditional public-sector employment has collapsed, thrusting economic generation onto young individuals—a reality across many African states ([Boukezia, 2023](#); [Harmon, 2024](#)). Secondly, it illuminates how Libya’s specific experience intensifies common barriers like access to finance and inconsistent regulation, due to its status as a petro-state in crisis, thereby connecting to pan-African debates on building self-reliant, resilient economies ([Chipato, 2023](#); [Hansen, 2025](#); [Lahn & Shapland, 2022](#)).

Consequently, practical interventions must transcend simplistic training programmes. Effective policy must be integrally linked to broader efforts in security sector reform, fiscal governance, and establishing a predictable legal environment ([Boukezia, 2023](#); [Knaepen, 2021](#)). There is also a compelling case for leveraging regional mechanisms to create cross-border entrepreneurial platforms, offering access to larger markets and mitigating internal fragmentation. Educational reform is critical, requiring curricula that build competencies to navigate volatility, drawing inspiration from innovative, locally-grounded approaches documented in other African development contexts ([Akromah et al., 2023](#); [Sander et al., 2021](#)). Furthermore, forward-looking policies must prepare youth for a post-carbon future, ensuring the energy transition includes intergenerational economic opportunities ([Abe & Azubike, 2024](#); [Odunukan, 2023](#)).

Future research should address this study’s limitations. Longitudinal work is needed to track how aspirations evolve with shifting realities. Comparative studies with other North African or Sahelian nations facing similar dynamics of youth unemployment and instability would help distinguish uniquely Libyan factors from regional patterns ([Cepero et al., 2021](#); [Orsini et al., 2022](#)). Deeper qualitative work is required to unpack the lived experiences of successful youth entrepreneurs, employing methodologies sensitive to conflict-affected settings ([Fisher, 2022](#)). Finally, research into the intersection of digital connectivity, diaspora networks, and entrepreneurial activity could reveal vital alternative ecosystems operating outside formal state structures.

In conclusion, this study paints a portrait of a generation suspended between profound potential and profound constraint. Their entrepreneurial aspirations represent a formidable latent resource for national reconstruction. Yet, these aspirations are ensnared in systemic failures that individual drive cannot overcome. Libya’s future stability is inextricably tied to creating conditions that allow this ingenuity to flourish. Failing to do so risks not only economic loss but also the further alienation of a generation whose quest for dignity through enterprise could serve as a cornerstone for a more peaceful and self-sufficient future.

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