



**Exploring Armed Groups in Libya:**  
Perspectives on Security Sector Reform  
in a Hybrid Environment



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# **Exploring Armed Groups in Libya:** Perspectives on Security Sector Reform in a Hybrid Environment

— Emadeddin Badi

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Emadeddin Badi is an independent researcher that specializes in governance, post-conflict stabilization, security sector governance and peacebuilding. With over 8 years of experience, Emad regularly provides consultancy to international organizations, agencies and civil society organizations on ways to enhance the efficiency of their development programming and activities through capacity building, research and strategic planning. Emad has conducted regular field research in North Africa, primarily on avenues for reform of Libya's security institutions, armed violence, war economies, hybrid security and cross-border crime. He currently works as an advisor for the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) for Libya and a Senior Analyst for the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime. He is also a non-resident Senior Fellow with the Middle East Program at the Atlantic Council, where he focuses primarily on the geopolitical dimensions of the Libyan conflict. Previously, he was a nonresident scholar at the Counterterrorism and Extremism Program at the Middle East Institute as well as resident Policy Leader Fellow at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy.



# Executive Summary

Libya's security sector has become virtually unrecognizable from what it was a decade ago owing to the transformations brought about since the 2011 revolution. This evolution has implications for any attempt to usher in short-term and interim security arrangements – including brokering ceasefires or improving security provision and policing capabilities – as well as longer-term security sector reform (SSR) efforts.

This paper explores the impact of these transformations and their varying dimensions on security provision in the Libyan landscape. It highlights the implications for attempts to reform the country's hybrid security sector and, more broadly, how its findings could inform SSR. The paper draws on primary and secondary sources – including interviews conducted with Libyan security actors from 2019 to 2020 – to map and analyse distinctive characteristics of Libya's security governance from the vantage point of SSR.

The first chapter recounts key historical developments that contributed to the emergence of various hybrid forms of security governance across the country. The second chapter considers how embedded armed actors are within social structures and analyses their relationships with local communities, factoring in how these correlations affect the political economy of armed actors. Using case studies mapping a non-exhaustive number of armed actors from a wide variety of locales, the chapter illustrates different patterns of hybridity and social embeddedness. The third chapter sheds light on how hybridity and social embeddedness have affected the architecture of security governance locally – in turn, influencing the nature and shape of formal and informal oversight of armed actors. The conclusion outlines the key implications of hybridity, social embeddedness, and the political economy of armed groups for short-term and interim security arrangements and SSR. The paper concludes with a list of recommendations on how to optimize efforts to tackle both areas.

## **Patterns of hybridity and armed group structure and cohesion**

In the years following the revolution, social rifts that had come to the fore after 2011 bled into politics, exacerbating the hybridization of Libya's security sector – a characteristic that persists. Post-revolutionary elites were either powerless to halt the rise of informal security providers or actively sponsored this hybridization process by way of co-option or sponsorship. Successive authorities have attempted to bring most of these local armed actors – regardless of the backdrop against which they were formed – under competing iterations of centralized command.

This bottom-up – and often state-funded – approach to hybridization led to the institutionalized fragmentation of armed groups into competing proto-state entities. Most of the armed actors that emerged after the revolution gained, in one way or another, an affiliation with the state – a process that legitimized them while delegitimizing the higher authorities they were affiliated with.

The quality of security provided in different locales across Libya, however, was not solely dependent upon the competence or internal cohesion of these armed groups and their performance; it was also contingent upon the degree of social homogeneity or heterogeneity between them and others operating in adjacent locales. Intra- or inter-communal conflicts that erupted against this backdrop served to reinforce armed group cohesion as actors often attempted to justify their engagement in conflict as a decision influenced by their desire to “protect” communities.

The continuous process of diffusion and devolution in the security sector, influenced by social factors, resulted in the hybridization of governance at large. Continuous hybridization is therefore one of the main features of the provision of peace and security. A key finding from this chapter is that designing centrally orchestrated security apparatuses to reform the security sector will – at least in the short term – not be effective.

### **Community relations, social embeddedness, and patterns of mobilization**

The social embeddedness of armed actors is fluid, evolving primarily based on their relationship with local communities. The proximity of armed groups to their community, as well as the geographic territory they controlled, influenced various processes: the revenue-generation mechanisms they opted to operationalize; their practices as security providers; their ability to centralize military command; and their patterns of (de)mobilization.

Using theories of social identity and group behaviour, this chapter identifies the different patterns underpinning armed group dynamics. Indeed, idiosyncratic features account for the diverging trajectories of armed actors following 2011, many of which transcend the dichotomy of revolutionary and anti-revolutionary factions. While different typologies of hybridity across the country characterized security sector governance, local factors significantly affected how these typologies manifested themselves and subsequently evolved in different locales.

When applied to the Libyan landscape, these theories explain the emergence of “social covenants” in certain locales: instead of forging top-down “social contracts” with local communities in their areas of control, armed groups co-existed with varying degrees of social embeddedness. Depending on the degree of embeddedness therein, their aspirations, and the broader socio-political and economic context, these armed actors secured either the cooperation or the compliance of local communities.

Using case studies mapping a non-exhaustive number of armed actors from a wide variety of locales, the chapter highlights disparities in social embeddedness and

typologies of community relations across armed groups (despite their nominal alignment under broader recognizable coalitions). It finds that socially embedded armed actors do not need to derive legitimacy through the provision of services or the sustenance of wartime security order; moreover, conflating social legitimacy with territorial control (through revenue-generating capabilities) can significantly flaw an assessment of an armed group's interactions and proximity to local communities. These findings have significant implications for efforts to introduce interim security arrangements in the short term, and to usher in SSR in the long term.

### Oversight of informal security providers

Situating armed actors within the broader socio-demographic landscape not only accounts for hybridity in security sector governance and the political economy, but also provides a more holistic understanding of how to engage and oversee them. Building on findings from previous sections, the chapter argues that the embeddedness of armed groups within their respective covenants can be used as a lever for oversight. Their communities and constituencies can be engaged to rein in armed actors, to constrain their actions, and to exercise oversight. This approach can prove particularly instrumental within the context of a ceasefire and ensuing interim security arrangements; this period can essentially be regarded as a transitory phase when social wartime orders are converted into systems that can be built upon to usher in a more sustainable peace.

The chapter explores the role that community-level actors could play as part of oversight structures, as stabilizing vectors, as well as SSR enablers. The hybridity that permeates Libya's armed sector prevents the establishment of a clear-cut distinction between the local and the institutional; nevertheless, this section sheds light on the different blends of formal and informal patterns of security governance – and oversight – that have developed across the country. This section also explores state mechanisms for security provision and oversight, and how they are complemented locally by the deployment of hybrid armed actors; social factors influence the probability of these actors committing abuses against the local population.

These findings are extrapolated through an exploration of local security and policing architectures, as well as patterns of oversight in eastern Libya, the Fezzan, Misrata, and Tripoli. A key trend highlighted in this section is the influence of ideology on security provision and oversight. The case of the Salafi-Madkhali security providers illustrates the challenges of overseeing groups that derive their legitimacy from outside communal lines.



## Implications for SSR in Libya and beyond

The hybrid nature of the security sector makes the typical dichotomies of SSR practices – such as state versus non-state and formal versus informal – impractical in reality as the delimitations between these dimensions have collapsed overtime. As a result, focusing solely on strengthening formal institutional structures and practices of security and justice provision may lead to cosmetic changes in security sector governance as actors selectively adopt measures and narratives that strengthen their legitimacy and disguise this manoeuvre as SSR.

In addition, the overreaching of armed actors into the economic sphere implies that a security-centric or purely institutional conceptualization of SSR processes, which distances the process from wider socio-economic and political factors, will be inadequate by design. Consequently, a security-centric process of integration that does not factor in armed actors' alternative revenue-generation mechanisms may result in the further institutionalization of corruption at the state level as armed actors integrate while retaining their revenue streams.

At a more granular level, the functionality of security sector governance, as well as the quality of human security, is largely predicated on the type of relationship that exists between formal forces and institutions (such as security sector directorates) and quasi-official or informal groups (such as local armed actors). This relationship is not only a key consideration for macro-level SSR programming, but also of paramount importance to interim security arrangements and targeted SSR efforts.

The chapter extrapolates the implications of social embeddedness, the political economy of armed groups, and patterns of local oversight to develop recommendations to support SSR efforts in Libya's hybrid security sector, while informing SSR doctrine as a whole.

# Introduction

Since 2011, Libya's security landscape has changed drastically, mirroring the fault lines brought to the fore by the Libyan revolution. New governance structures emerged at the national and local level, while changes to societal relations reflected a pronounced sense of localism, which characterized the structure of Libya's forces. The degree to which city communities aligned with the revolution, along with the extent to which their constituencies mobilized on either side of the 2011 divide, also had a pronounced impact on local patterns of hybridity.<sup>1</sup> The concept of hybridity has predominantly been applied to and studied in the Sub-Saharan African context. It essentially refers to the "civilianization" of security provision, particularly in cases where intermediaries compensate for the weaknesses of a legally constituted state. In practice, the state's formal security institutions operate alongside a diverse array of non- or quasi-state armed actors. While some of these "informal" armed actors directly challenge the state, others work alongside or cooperate with it - creating, in turn, a "hybrid" environment.<sup>2</sup>

In the aftermath of the revolution, the security landscape reflected the varying state-society relationships within communities. The divisive tribal policies of Gaddafi's era partly influenced these relationships, as did the events of the 2011 war and its fallout. In 2011 western Libya was the theatre of a multiplicity of local uprisings; communities mobilized locally to fight against the regime while a hollowed-out army, mercenaries, and some local constituencies mobilized under Gaddafi's banner.<sup>3</sup> Eastern Libya eluded regime control in the early stages of the revolution, with minimal local conflicts thanks in part to foreign intervention. These unique dynamics manifested themselves at a later stage as an idiosyncratic state of hybridity: several formal units, which had defected owing to their commanders' leadership, co-existed with revolutionary forces that had been created and mobilized in 2011.<sup>4</sup> In southern Libya, the opportunities perceived by tribal and ethnic communities to gain political influence and military clout also influenced levels of alignment with the regime or with the revolutionary forces.

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1 Lacher, W., 2020. *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

2 For the purposes of this publication, hybridity also refers to the civilianization of security sector functions beyond security provision including oversight, ministerial, and administrative functions.

3 Gaub, F., 2013. 'The Libyan armed forces between coup-proofing and repression', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 36(2), pp. 221-244.

4 Lacher, W., 2011. 'Families, Tribes and Cities in the Libyan Revolution', *Middle East Policy*, 18(4), p.140.

Methods of international intervention also affected the degree of power and autonomy that armed groups sought to retain afterwards. Armed groups received support in the form of technical military equipment, capacity building, and advisory support; however, the institutional architecture underpinning the intervention was itself conducive to the emergence of a decentralized form of hybridity. Indeed, France, Qatar, the United Kingdom, and the United Arab Emirates, among others, all provided a degree of uncoordinated unilateral support to local actors, establishing independent – and at times competing – “operation rooms”. The relationships nurtured as part of this proxy interventionism outlived the revolution. While not overtly militarized in the immediate aftermath of Gaddafi’s ouster, armed groups were precluded from integrating into the state as their foreign interveners continued to unilaterally back their preferred local factions. What began as a degree of foreign political backing to embolden local actors to impose their own agendas relapsed into full-fledged military support by mid-2014.<sup>5</sup>

While pre-existing divides and historical precedents influenced the behaviour and alignment of local communities on either side of the 2011 civil war, these factors did not dictate them.<sup>6</sup> Gaddafi’s threat of mass repression and retribution against constituencies did, however, catalyse decisions to align against his regime. It also strengthened solidarity among revolutionary forces that generally perceived themselves as mobilizing against what they considered then to be an existential threat, both to them and to their communities. In turn, the shared experience of ensuing conflicts cemented the fraternal ties that bound together those mobilized against the Gaddafi regime.<sup>7</sup>

Both the regime and the revolutionary forces used Islamic precepts – such as jihad<sup>8</sup> – as a medium for mobilization and to justify social resistance. This dynamic was an omen of the role that ideology would play within the various armed groups that emerged after the revolution.<sup>9</sup> While the rebels labelled their battle as a struggle against a tyrant, loyalists deployed the same narrative to legitimize their fight against a Western NATO conspiracy. The organization of military deployment and the mobilization of revolutionary forces took place at the local level. Kinship-based structures played a major role as ground forces against the regime. Organically, towns that fell under rebel control formed local “military councils” of their own – a process that was both driven by communities’ aspirations for greater decision-making

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5 While foreign interventionism is not tackled holistically as part of this publication, it is an inherent feature of the form of hybridity that emerged in Libya after 2011; however, rather than exploring how proxy dynamics have evolved overtime, the publication focuses instead on dissecting how these have impacted (diluted or reinforced) patterns of hybridity in Libya’s security sector.

6 Lacher, 2020. *Libya’s Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict*.

7 Whitehouse, H., McQuinn, B., Buhrmester, M. and Swann, W.B., 2014. ‘Brothers in arms: Libyan revolutionaries bond like family’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 111(50).

8 In this instance, jihad is referred to as a “holy war against the enemies of Islam”.

9 Collombier, V. and Barsoum, F., 2019. *To engage or not engage? Libyan Salafis and state institutions*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

power and considered operationally necessary. The councils were key to coordinating advances by the rebels and facilitating external communication and support. In certain communities, local councils also supported the military councils by assuming a more insurgent-like and therefore governance-oriented role focusing on stabilization and service delivery. For the most part, both local and military councils remained in place after the revolution, though the influence of the latter gradually receded owing to attempts by post-revolutionary authorities to transform the security sector.

Today, Libya's security sector is virtually unrecognizable from what it was a decade ago owing to the transformations brought about since the revolution. This remoulding has implications for any attempt to usher in short-term and interim security arrangements – including brokering ceasefires or improving security provision and policing capabilities – as well as longer-term SSR<sup>10</sup> efforts.

This paper draws on primary and secondary sources – including interviews conducted with Libyan security actors from 2019 to 2020 – to map and analyse distinctive characteristics of Libya's security governance from the vantage point of SSR. The first chapter recounts key historical developments that contributed to the emergence of different forms of hybridized security governance across the country. The second chapter focuses on the social embeddedness of armed actors and analyses their relationships with local communities, factoring in how these correlations affect the political economy of armed actors. It also identifies different patterns driving group mobilization and fragmentation using theories of social identity and group dynamics. Using case studies mapping a non-exhaustive number of armed actors from a wide variety of locales, the chapter illustrates different patterns of hybridity and social embeddedness. The third chapter sheds light on how hybridity and social embeddedness have affected the architecture of security governance locally – in turn, influencing the nature and shape of formal and informal oversight exercised on armed actors. The conclusion outlines the key implications of hybridity, social embeddedness, and the political economy of armed groups for short-term and interim security arrangements and SSR. The paper concludes with a list of recommendations on how to optimize efforts to tackle both areas.

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10 Security Sector Reform (SSR) is defined as “the political and technical process of improving state and human security by making security provision, management and oversight more effective and more accountable, within a framework of democratic civilian control, rule of law and respect for human rights.” (DCAF, 2015). According to OECD-DAC (2007), SSR has three main pillars: the democratic oversight of the security and justice system and its components; improving the effective management of the security and justice system; and strengthening the security and justice system's effectiveness in delivering services. While the doctrine was hailed in the development world as a better approach to security assistance when it was developed in the 1990s, owing to its emphasis on good governance, recent pushes have been made toward moving beyond first and second generation SSR doctrines, in an effort to adapt to new security sector-related trends, such as hybridity, in conflict-affected and post-conflict contexts.

## Patterns of hybridity

The emergence of the typology of hybridity seen today in Libya – characterized by security pluralism<sup>11</sup> – is rooted in developments that followed the country's 2011 revolution. Security structures built and restyled<sup>12</sup> by Gadaffi over decades of rule proved incapable of dealing with popular uprisings. Although widely considered Gadaffi's most effective pillar of coercive capacity, the regime's arms were unsuitable for responding to the local upswell in opposition. Owing to Gadaffi's decades-long form of "coup-proofing", the security structures affiliated with the regime were not only weak but also designed to operate as a cohesive force with a clear chain of command.

To repress protests and quell the revolution, Gadaffi relied on informal units drawn from his own tribes, the Gadadfa, and those close to him, such as the Magarha, the Werfalla, and factions of the Magharba. He also drew on units with southern members, such as the Maghawir Force, the Tarik Bin Ziyad Battalion, the Sahban Battalion, and the 32<sup>nd</sup> Reinforced Brigade, a group led by his son Khamis.<sup>13</sup> The reliance on southern and peripheral communities was partly due to large parts of the rank and file of Gadaffi's security apparatus deserting by demobilizing; however, the rest either remained loyal to him or defected. Indeed, Gadaffi's divide-and-rule tactics – which inadvertently gave key regime-affiliated figures a disproportionate influence over the alignment of their factions – compounded the lack of homogeneity that characterized Libya's security sector before 2011.

The defection of some of these commanders caused entire units to also abandon their allegiance to the regime. The members of Benghazi's Saiqa unit, for example, followed the lead of Major General Abdul-Fattah Younes, an influential Gadaffi regime figure who defected in February 2011 and was subsequently named commander-in-chief of the rebel forces. More broadly, the individual choices of politicians and military figures in eastern Libya caused the regime to lose entire swaths of territory due to either defections or desertions of some of its rank and file. Though many joined the uprisings on the side of the rebels, the fact that several regime-affiliated units retained their own independent chain of command paved the way for a unique type of hybridity in eastern Libya in the years following 2011.<sup>14</sup> In eastern Libya, more than any other locale, revolutionary armed groups tenuously co-existed with formal units affiliated with the old regime.

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11 Wehrey, F., 2018. 'Libya's Policing Sector: The Dilemmas of Hybridity and Security Pluralism', in *POMEPS Studies 30: The Politics of Post-Conflict Reconstruction*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

12 Over his four-decade-long rule, Gadaffi had willfully established a security apparatus and semi-formal parallel security structures with unclear and malleable mandates. He had also significantly weakened the Libyan armed forces as part of a coup-proofing strategy (Gaub, 2013).

13 Lacher, W., 2014. *Libya's Fractious South and Regional Instability*. Dispatch. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

14 Wehrey, F., 2012. *The Struggle for Security in Eastern Libya*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

In western Libya, the governance structures of the regime era – both formal and informal – disintegrated. Members were excluded from decision-making within the new governance system, except for early defectors who were, nonetheless, heavily stigmatized.<sup>15</sup> At the social level, the gradual collapse of the old order opened the door for collective retribution and the punishment of entire groups under the banner of the revolution – practices that were rationalized as legitimate retaliations for Gadaffi-era injustices or for violence committed by loyalists during the revolution. In particular, the final months of the civil war<sup>16</sup> saw revolutionary forces exact revenge upon entire communities accused of being pro-Gadaffi. This was enabled by a permissive context in which acts of violence and expropriation were not only obfuscated but also abetted by politicians within the revolutionary coalition.

All in all, the typology of hybridity that emerged in certain locales in eastern Libya (with old and new structures co-existing) did not manifest itself with the same acuity in Tripolitania and Fezzan. Instead, the security sector was left hollowed out as it unravelled. On the revolutionary side, a plethora of new armed actors competed for weapons supplies and control over security facilities, government buildings, and strategic sites. They even sidelined or displaced those who disagreed with them from within their own communities, or those neighbouring them.<sup>17</sup> On the revolutionary side, these fragmented micro-factions shared an aversion towards Gadaffi and his *Jamahiriyah* – and, to some extent, towards the idea of authoritarianism in general. They had, for the most part, mobilized against what they perceived to be an acute threat to their own communities. Constituencies labelled as pro-Gadaffi – such as Bani Walid, Sirte, and Tawergha – experienced mass retribution and emerged from 2011 as losers.<sup>18</sup>

The experience of the 2011 revolutionary civil war in parts of western and southern Libya significantly affected the social landscape in these territories. Non-state armed actors<sup>19</sup> that had formed during the war developed a certain degree of internal cohesion owing to their experience of the civil war as both an intra-communal and national-level conflict. The transformation of their own communities cemented the localism that defined these armed actors' very emergence. The communities from which these armed groups emerged were often stigmatized and revenge was exacted upon perceived opponents to form clearly defined external enemies. These enemies were either displaced, or, at times, sought retribution.<sup>20</sup> The latter's experience of

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15 Ibid.

16 The events of 2011 amalgamated notions academically associated with revolution and civil war and saw a subsequent internationalization of the conflict (namely in the form of the overt NATO intervention and the covert interventionism of other states that supported rebel factions).

17 Lacher, W., 2020. *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

18 Ibid.

19 Defined here as groups of armed individuals or collectives that organized into semi-formal structure and concertedly operate.

20 Bradley, M., Fraihat, I. and Mzioudet, H., 2016. *Libya's Displacement Crisis: Uprooted by Revolution and Civil War*. Washington: Georgetown University Press.

“defeat” also paradoxically strengthened their armed groups’ cohesion and solidarity, thereby reinforcing localism.

The distrust and disconnect between nascent revolutionary forces and the old apparatus was, however, one of the fault lines that influenced conflict dynamics and hybridity in Libya after 2011.<sup>21</sup> Addressing this fault line through violence was bound to not only reshape the security sector but also draw new rifts within communities’ social fabric.<sup>22</sup> After the fall of the Gaddafi regime, the constituencies and loyalists of controversial leaders were, by and large, sidelined from decision-making.<sup>23</sup> The regular army units, except for those that defected, were also demobilized. Instead of integrating revolutionary armed groups into formal state apparatuses, the transitional authorities attempted to establish parallel security structures through which armed groups could be co-opted or managed.<sup>24</sup> Many revolutionaries were integrated into these structures, receiving salaries without necessarily mobilizing or performing security-related duties.

### State-sponsored institutional weakening

Since 2011, the subsequent transitional authorities have attempted – with limited success – to establish some control over Libya’s multitude of armed groups. Despite being aware that these armed actors could potentially undermine the state, Libyan authorities pursued contradictory – if not self-defeating – policies in dealing with the newly formed revolutionary brigades. This contradictory stance may have stemmed from the fact that the transitional authorities’ legitimacy was partly built on the revolutionary brigades’ ability to garner local and international support during the revolution, thereby creating a relationship of dependence. In retrospect, it was also partly a symptom of the inability or unwillingness of the transitional authorities – and its diverse figures – to break away from the old system’s security architecture, or to fully embrace the new one.<sup>25</sup> In practice, the transitional authorities bankrolled the new brigades, pursued extremely basic disarmament programmes, and institutionalized the armed groups into newfound state-affiliated structures through which they could be deputized to provide security.<sup>26</sup> This utilitarian policy of co-option outlived

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21 Martínez, L., 2014. *Libya from Paramilitary Forces to Militias: The Difficulty of Constructing a State Security Apparatus*. Policy Alternatives.

22 Lacher, W., 2013. *Fault Lines of the Revolution: Political Actors, Camps and Conflicts in the New Libya*. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP).

23 Kersten, M., 2014. ‘Libya’s Political Isolation Law: Politics and Justice or the Politics of Justice?’. Middle East Institute, 5 February.

24 Lacher, W. and Cole, P., 2014. *Politics by Other Means: Conflicting Interests in Libya’s Security Sector*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

25 Megerisi, T., 2020. *Geostrategic Dimensions of Libya’s Civil War*, Africa Security Brief No. 37. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, p. 1.

26 Sayigh, Y., 2015. *Crumbling States: Security Sector Reform in Libya and Yemen*. Carnegie Middle East Center

the transitional authorities and was adopted by all governments, including foreign governments that partnered with armed groups for short-term goals centred around counterterrorism or migration management.

These efforts – often manifested as the creation of parallel security structures and the instrumentalization of armed groups affiliated to them – increased security pluralism<sup>27</sup> while enhancing localism. Institutionally, an additional problem was that governance structures of the transitional authorities did not develop any mechanism to exert effective control over the parallel structures. The allegiance of these armed groups to the “centre” was often conditional if not outright opportunistic, and the effectiveness and sustainability of these arrangements was often hampered by disorganized chains of commands, intra-communal rivalries, unclear mandates, and scrambles for resources. What these competing efforts failed to consider was the fragmented social landscape that the revolutionary civil war had left in its wake; moreover, the policies adopted assumed that patronage networks that distributed rent to different armed groups and constituencies would be enough to taper off divisions and avert conflicts. The fragmentation of the security sector in the years that followed the revolution, however, mirrored the fragmentation of the political scene, and tensions at the political level often had a knock-on effect on the security sector.<sup>28</sup> In addition, armed groups constantly manoeuvred or were used to influence Libya’s economic sector, as well as its political landscape. Some also diversified their rent-generation capabilities by creating their own sources of income outside of the state’s control.<sup>29</sup>

In the years following the 2011 revolution, several political factions sponsored competing integration processes and ad-hoc “reform” efforts in the security sector.<sup>30</sup> Legitimized and financed by post-2011 authorities, armed groups that vied for the mantle of legitimacy did not hesitate to use force to further their interests. Ideological alignments, common goals, and shared tribal or geographical origins also influenced the positioning of armed groups vis-à-vis the broader competing factions that vied to take control over Gadaffi’s incentive structures<sup>31</sup> or to create their own. One facet of this scramble for legitimacy, however, had a long-term impact on Libya’s

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27 Security pluralism refers to “situations in which an array of actors, regardless of their relationship to the state, claim the prerogative to coercive force” (Belhadj, S, Van der Borgh, C, Jaffe, R, Price, M, Stel, N and Warren, M. 2015. Belhadj, S, Van der Borgh, C, Jaffe, R, Price, M, Stel, N and Warren, M. 2015. *Plural security provision in Beirut*. The Hague: The Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law. This notion is inherently linked to that of hybridity; however, the notion of hybridity also encompasses the civilianization of security provision while assuming a degree of relationship with the state.

28 Sayigh, Y., 2016. *Dilemmas of Reform. Policing in Arab Transitions*. Carnegie Middle East Center.

29 Eaton, T., 2018. *Libya’s War Economy: Predation, Profiteering and State Weakness*. Royal Institute of International Affairs.

30 Wehrey, F. and Cole, P., 2013. *Building Libya’s Security Sector*. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

31 Institutionally, Gadaffi’s state system, which was inherited by Libya’s transitional authorities and never reformed, relied heavily on Gadaffi carefully balancing and manipulating complex patronage networks. Gadaffi’s institutions served as a medium through which to sustain these networks and retained their role as incentive structures that Libyan factions wrestled after 2011.



security sector, namely the fact that armed groups not only dominated the security architecture but also infiltrated official security apparatuses by staffing them with revolutionaries. Indeed, not only did armed groups seek to opportunistically affiliate themselves with the state, they also exacerbated hybridity by infiltrating the more formal pre-revolutionary security apparatuses that had remained in place. In doing so, state-sponsored “integration processes” institutionally weakened the country’s central authority. This exacerbated the dysfunctionality of the state, whose institutions de-facto became arenas for competing tribal, political, religious, and ideological forces. It also led to a lack of effective oversight owing to the competing interests of embedded parties that had no incentive to be overseen, thus perpetuating a culture of impunity.

Overall, armed groups that emerged in Libya portrayed themselves as forces that could either augment or substitute the more formal security forces.<sup>32</sup> In many cases, they also infiltrated these formal apparatuses, thereby overstaffing them while weakening their efficiency. These armed groups also sought to derive legitimacy through their social roots by attempting to address their constituencies’ security concerns. The type of social contract between armed groups and their communities – if any – is therefore heavily influenced by their degree of social embeddedness<sup>33</sup> and their relationship to their constituencies. A study of Libya’s armed groups must therefore include an assessment of their degree of social embeddedness. This assessment should include an analysis of their social backbone and local networks of influence to inform strategies for engaging with them. Social embeddedness – along with other geographic and idiosyncratic factors pertaining to the group’s leadership, hierarchy, ideology and its competitors – often heavily influences the revenue-generation and internal capital-distribution models they adopt. With this analytical framework in mind, the subsequent section focuses on socio-structural and economic notions of armed group structure and cohesion in the Libyan context. Armed groups from west, east, and south Libya will be used as examples to analyse the degree of their social embeddedness, and the extent to which this affects their approaches to revenue generation and capital distribution.

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32 Droz-Vincent, P., 2016. ‘Libya’s tentative state-building: Militias’ ‘Moral economy’ violence, and financing insecurity’, in E. Grawert, ed., *Businessmen in Arms: How the Military And Other Armed Groups Profit in the MENA Region*, London: Rowman & Littlefield.

33 For the purposes of this publication, social embeddedness is used to capture the structural dimensions of a group’s social cohesion. This encompasses an ideational component (where an individual identifies with a larger collective) and a relational component (which refers to connections among members of said collective). Socially embedded armed actors that do not insulate themselves their local community are virtually undistinguishable from it and capitalize on the broader community’s relational networks. Non-socially embedded armed actors deliberately insulate themselves from their local community – thus, differentiating themselves from both their community and their relational networks. It is assumed that socially embedded actors generally possess a degree of social legitimacy and/or a social backbone – concepts that are used in this publication to elucidate their interactions with local communities, as well as their patterns of mobilization and economic practices.

# Armed Group Structure and Cohesion

## 1

### Reshaping and adapting to the landscape

The Libyan security landscape comprises hundreds of armed actors with singular features. The groups usually have diverse backgrounds and hierarchies and vary in size and organization; however, they also share some themes and patterns that account for their formation and subsequent development. The hybrid environment that governs their interaction with local communities and state authorities also has implications on their internal organizational structure and patterns of mobilization. The leadership of groups – along with their rank and file’s background and their ideological inclinations – also influences their relationship with local communities and, more importantly, the extent to which they are perceived to be socially embedded. While the state’s policies have undeniably had a significant effect on armed groups’ manoeuvring, and the ways through which they raise revenue, it is important to emphasize that Libya’s security landscape and its armed groups have primarily evolved because of community-level factors – the implications of which will be discussed in this chapter.

These communal factors have a significant influence over the internal structure, hierarchy, and line(s) of command of armed groups. These facets are often moulded by the history, evolution, ideology, leadership, controlled territory, and ambitions of a group and its members. Such factors also influence, if not determine, patterns of armed groups’ cooperation with domestic and international actors,<sup>34</sup> as well as the revenue generation and internal economic capital distribution they operationalize. Developments external to the community – whether political, socio-economic, or military – are also an important factor that can potentially impact armed groups’ internal structures – sometimes even resulting in the remobilization of particular communities in the face of acute threats. All of these developments can either enhance a group’s cohesion or lead to its fragmentation or disbandment. The events outlined below will attempt to account for these features, highlighting the role these factors have played on armed groups and coalitions since 2011.

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<sup>34</sup> Foreign support – which is not tackled significantly in this publication – can, at times, enable the establishment of an artificial level of cohesiveness amongst a coalition of armed groups. Forms of financial, political, or military support can act as momentary overlay for deficiencies in cohesion. This is primarily the case for the coalition known as the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) (the inception of the LAAF is discussed later in this chapter)

## Armed actors' proliferation after 2011

The 2011 revolution saw the emergence of armed actors that mobilized locally as revolutionaries and anti-revolutionaries. Since then, many more actors have formed and mobilized, often against the backdrop of local and inter-communal conflicts; the policies of the transitional authorities, which cemented the presence of these local structures, have further entrenched localism. As early as October 2011, the National Transitional Council called upon local communities to form local councils and military councils in cities that had not experienced significant fighting.<sup>35</sup> The premise of this decision was that, in the absence of a functioning state security apparatus, these alternative structures could play a role in enforcing local security.

Yet the process that led to the formation of these councils - in cases where this was not an organic process - fuelled tensions within communities with pre-existing communal divides (for example, Bani Walid). In cities where the defeat of the Gaddafi forces had left a security vacuum, new brigades were also formed against a backdrop of social tensions (for example, in Sirte). In these locales, communities considered that they needed protection from the revolutionary forces. In other remote geographic areas, such as the Fezzan, new security actors often organized along tribal, communal, or ethnic lines but lacked the cohesion formed by a common fighting experience (such as in Misrata).<sup>36</sup>

## Hybridization by way of SSR

Post-2011 authorities have attempted to bring most of these local armed actors - regardless of the backdrop against which they were formed - under competing iterations of centralized command.<sup>37</sup> They expected, in theory, for them to undertake particular security enforcement functions or deal with emerging threats, such as terrorism. The Warriors Affairs Commission (WAC) - one example of a state-sponsored reintegration effort - was supposed to offer capacity-building opportunities for ex-rebels based on their backgrounds and aspirations; however, it was flooded with applications, with 250,000 self-proclaimed ex-rebels registering by mid-2013, which hampered its ability to work effectively.<sup>38</sup> The absorption capacity of the Gaddafi-inherited formal security structures was also minimal as most were never meant to operate with clear mandates. That aside, many of those registered with the WAC preferred to retain their ties to their communities, and therefore shied away from

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35 International Crisis Group, 2011. 'Holding Libya Together: Security Challenges after Qadhafi', *Middle East/ North Africa Report*, 115(1).

36 Ibid.

37 Wehrey, F., 2013. 'Libya's Militia Menace', *Foreign Affairs*.

38 Chivvis, C.S. and Martini, J., 2014. *Libya After Qaddafi: Lessons and Implications for the Future*. Washington, DC: RAND Corporation.

engaging with a process that would see those links severed.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the main revolutionary brigades (particularly those from Misrata and Zintan) had either been continuously supplied with weapons by foreign states or had bought weapons or looted them from regime warehouses. They therefore emerged from the 2011 civil war possessing far better equipment and resources than the formal forces into which they would have been – in theory – reintegrated.<sup>40</sup> This dynamic hampered any meaningful SSR process by design.

This may explain why – for expediency – these armed groups were instead integrated into broad umbrella structures that did not meaningfully alter their composition or chain of command. Designed to be “provisional” substitutes for the army and the police, these entities were essentially tools through which competing stakeholders could temporarily co-opt armed actors, though without a clear process as to how their localistic inclinations would be diluted in the long run. These structures included the Supreme Security Committees, the Libya Shield Force, the Border Guard, and the Petroleum Facilities Guard. An affiliation with these entities guaranteed armed actors a steady stream of income – in the form of salaries – with virtually no meaningful contribution to the improvement of the state’s monopoly on the use of force.<sup>41</sup> This policy of co-option was not short-lived as most of the successive transitional Libyan authorities, as well as foreign states with interests in Libya, opted to use it to assert control over territory or to secure their interests.

In the years that followed, the fragmentation witnessed in Libya’s security sector mirrored the political scene’s fragmentation, itself a by-product of social divides between communities and stakeholders with differing interests and ideological agendas. Moreover, armed groups began manoeuvring to influence the economic landscape, creating their own sources of income either from outside of the Libyan state’s control, or by coercing influential stakeholders and individuals within the government for concessions. Other political stakeholders had their own covert links with armed actors, which they often weaponized to advance their own narrow political interests. Some armed groups were also contracted by particular state institutions or sponsored by businessmen or politicians, a transactional model for revenue generation that gradually became more prevalent in the years that followed owing to the Central Bank of Libya’s attempts to limit the over-inflated budgets allocated as salaries for armed actors.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Wehrey, F., 2013. *Transatlantic Security Assistance in Fractured States: The Troubling Case of Libya*. German Marshall Fund of the United States.

40 It is important to note that disarmament, demobilization and reintegration focuses on civilian reintegration prior to (re)integration into security forces, which shows that at least part of the WAC’s programming may have been flawed by design.

41 Lacher, W. and Cole, P., 2014. *Politics by Other Means: Conflicting Interests in Libya’s Security Sector*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

42 Harchaoui, J., 2018. ‘Libya’s Monetary Crisis’, Lawfare Blog, 10 January.

## Social rifts bleed into politics

For armed groups and the communities from which they originated, the transition phase that began with the election of the General National Congress (GNC) was decisive. Elected in July 2012, the body had pledged to dissolve militias and rebuild the formal security sector. It was, however, also understood that the entity would act as a medium through which to redistribute power among communities. The newly formed political entity would pass laws and oversee the executive; this power – whether from within (by way of membership) or from the outside (by way of duress) – would afford constituencies and armed actors a significant degree of influence over Libya’s future.

The situation resulted in a degree of competition – influenced by intra and inter-communal divides – between political actors and the armed groups supporting them. This dynamic was, however, pernicious: conflicting visions and a zero-sum mentality among the various political factions that had emerged after 2011 impeded genuine democratic progress. Instead, political-military alliances jockeyed for influence by disrupting the congressional processes. The rift between revolutionary brigades and former regime defectors who had joined the rebellion in 2011 was exacerbated by a fissure that ran within the revolutionaries’ own ranks, pitting “victors” of the civil war against one another. Armed actors mobilized to force the GNC to pass the Political Isolation Law<sup>43</sup> in May 2013 – just one example of how inter-communal rifts bled into politics through armed actors’ mobilization.

Many of these state-affiliated armed groups grew increasingly violent, using repression as a means to preserve their privileges. Citizens who called for dissolution of these armed groups, or for a political change that would see their influence wane, were also violently cracked down on. This was most notably the case at civilian protests<sup>44</sup> against the GNC and revolutionary groups perceived as aligned with it, which occurred in Benghazi and Tripoli in 2013. The fact that protesters were gunned down worsened the relationship between “revolutionary” factions and local communities, translating into an anti-militia sentiment primarily directed at armed groups that had emerged after 2011. This also led civilian communities to back armed factions they perceived to be more formal – especially those affiliated with the old regime.

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43 The Political Isolation Law was a controversial decree issued by the GNC that banned Gaddafi-era officials from taking part in politics. The law was passed under duress, with MPs being besieged by armed groups in Tripoli.

44 Despite being civilian in nature, the manifestations and slogans of the protests also betrayed communal, tribal, and ideological agendas. Indeed, protests in Tripoli were marketed as “anti-militias” but protest leaders clearly voiced that they wanted Misratan armed groups outside the capital, rather than Tripoli-based groups. Similarly, protests in Benghazi reflected communal and ideological divides, as protesters singled out a post-revolutionary structure – the Libya Shield Force led by Wissam Bin Hamid – and stormed its headquarters to coerce it into folding into the state.

In eastern Libya, this increasing sentiment was accompanied by concomitant assassination campaigns that targeted Gaddafi-era army figures, as well as lawyers, judges, civil society activists, and influential figures. These events further contributed to the negative perception of self-proclaimed “revolutionary” armed groups among local communities; the increased mediatization of events by media outlets aligned with the “counter-revolutionary” agenda exacerbated this perception.<sup>45</sup> These outlets shaped two narratives that had long-lasting effects on Libya’s social landscape and the perception of armed groups’ social embeddedness. The first narrative used the broad label of “Islamism” to refer to armed groups that did not align with the counter-revolutionary current at the time. The second narrative polarized the social landscape by focusing on the origins<sup>46</sup> of armed group members, which contributed to the erosion of their social legitimacy and their “othering”<sup>47</sup> by local communities. Both narratives - flawed yet fuelled by external actors - were used to justify the conflicts that ensued.

The ad-hoc and “provisional” security arrangements, which had evolved from the revolution, grew more politicized. This hybrid order was increasingly perceived as being tilted toward Islamists, a viewpoint that gained significant traction in eastern Libya as the security situation in Benghazi worsened. A turf war over territorial control between Islamist and revolutionary groups on the one hand, and Gaddafi-era structures, such as the Saiqa Brigade, and tribal constituencies from eastern Libya, most notably the prominent Awagir tribe, on the other also gradually led to the gradual collapse of hybrid security arrangements in the city. The zero-sum approach of Islamist and revolutionaries in their quest to exclude former Gaddafi-era officers from security and governance portfolios at large also fuelled mounting discontent, particularly since the defecting and retired cadre of officers was vastly underpaid and under-pensioned in comparison with revolutionary groups.

The proverbial straw on the back of Benghazi’s declining cohesion came in the form of a coup in neighbouring Egypt, where Abdelfattah Al-Sissi ousted Muslim Brotherhood member and democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi in mid-2013. The event had an emboldening effect on Libya’s anti-Islamist milieu: among eastern tribes, disgruntled Gaddafi-era officers, and even some “civil society activists”, a Libyan version of Al-Sissi was viewed as a panacea to the country’s ills.

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45 Grossman, S. Khadija H., DiResta R., Kheradpir T., and Miller C., 2020. ‘Blame it on Iran, Qatar, and Turkey: An analysis of a Twitter and Facebook operation linked to Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia’.

46 Leaders and members of anti-Haftar armed groups were often disparaged on the basis of perceived ethno-tribal ancestry - many being stigmatized on the basis of their Misratan (and historically, Turkish) heritage. For more information, see: El Gomati, A. 2020. *Libya’s Political Culture Wars*. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

47 Othering is defined as a process by which groups of individuals are stigmatized as alien to other groups - often on the basis of particular attributes such as race, language, ethnicity, or origins. Othering results in the favoured group consciously or unconsciously labelling other segments of society as a threat.

## Social facets of Libya's second civil war

The confluence of domestic dynamics with international developments outlined above, coupled with a significant degree of social polarization in 2014, led Libya to spiral into its second civil war. Uncoordinated unilateral support to armed groups, half-hearted attempts at stabilization, European disunity, and Gulf rivalries in post-2011 Libya conflated to catalyse the eruption of civil war in 2014. The events dovetailed with events in neighbouring Egypt, where Al-Sissi's Emirati-backed coup had reverberations on the Libyan scene. Indeed, many within Libya's Islamist milieu saw Khalifa Haftar's attempted coup in February 2014 as an attempt to emulate Al-Sissi.<sup>48</sup> Months later, the Libya Dawn coalition was backed by Qatar, Sudan, and Turkey while Haftar's authoritarian project – marketed as a purported “counterterrorism operation” – was launched in Benghazi with varying degrees of military support from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, France, and Jordan.

For Haftar, converting a thinly veiled power grab attempt in Tripoli into a counterterrorism operation launched from eastern Libya proved simple. Indeed, Benghazi was reeling from mounting tensions between local armed groups, causing a significant decline in security. The grievances of eastern tribes, Gadaffi-era commanders, and even civil society activists were easy to co-opt, particularly since Haftar positioned himself quickly as a conduit for military support channelled via Abu Dhabi and Cairo. Even armed group leaders that had a tapering effect on mounting tensions in Benghazi – such as Saiqa leader Wanis Bukhamada – opted to take Haftar's side owing to the limited military support they received from authorities in Tripoli. The hybrid security architecture of the revolution thus collapsed across the country, with fighting in Benghazi between groups that aligned with Haftar's Operation Dignity, and those aligned against it. Similarly, in Tripoli, fighting erupted between armed factions from Zintan – which aligned with Haftar's then-Libyan National Army<sup>49</sup> – and those opposed to Haftar, which coalesced into the Libya Dawn alliance.<sup>50</sup>

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48 Megerisi, T., 2020. 'Why the “ignored war” in Libya will come to haunt a blinkered west'. The Guardian.

49 In 1988, after being captured during the Chad war, Haftar established the “Libyan National Army” (LNA) during the short period in which he aligned himself with the National Front for the Salvation of Libya, a U.S.-based opposition group that aimed to overthrow Gadaffi. The LNA was then founded as the NFSL's armed wing. In 2014, Haftar once again used the same label, calling the rebellious coalition he had built the Libyan National Army. The name caught on and has since been used by several international media outlets when referring to Haftar's coalition. As stipulated in HoR legislations – notably one in which Haftar is named General Commander subsequently – the official name of the LAAF is the Libyan Army; however, Haftar unilaterally established the General Command of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces, in contravention of the very legislation that established him as General Commander. Moreover, in Arabic, the name used by Haftar's General Command for its own coalition in official documents is the Libyan Arab Armed Forces. For this reason, this report uses LAAF instead of LNA. LAAF is the actual transliteration of the name used in Arabic; the “Arab” ethnicity in the name is also one of many reasons why Libyan ethnic minority and indigenous groups, such as the Amazigh, oppose Haftar.

50 This alliance was led by revolutionaries, Islamist figures, and former members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group.

For the second time since 2011, disparate armed groups formed a semi-cohesive coalition against a perceived threat – namely that a coup under Haftar was widely perceived as a relapse into authoritarianism. In the fallout of the civil war that pitted Libya Dawn against Zintani forces aligned with Haftar’s Operation Dignity, political institutions split and rival power centres emerged in the east and west. The ensuing severe financial crisis induced changes in the behaviour of armed actors,<sup>51</sup> though it also heavily altered perceptions of armed actors’ social legitimacy among local communities.

Meanwhile, in Benghazi, Haftar had rallied support from disgruntled regime-era officials, federalists, tribes who perceived themselves as marginalized, and local constituencies that resented the climate of insecurity and impunity plaguing Benghazi and eastern Libya more broadly.<sup>52</sup> The few professional forces that joined Haftar had, by and large, aligned with him because they had been sidelined by the parallel security structures established after 2011. Haftar’s calls for the “youth to rise” in October 2014 to join the ranks of his “army” as support forces also resonated with sections of Benghazi society. The alignment of influential Bedouin tribes in eastern Libya, such as the Awagir, with Haftar also reflected a communal grievance: indeed, underlying this mobilization was an oft-underplayed animosity between constituencies from poorer Bedouin tribes and wealthier families of Misratan origins. The properties and businesses of the latter had been increasingly targeted by Bedouin tribal vigilantes, who sought to mobilize and act on these grievances. Haftar exploited this class-based divide to rally economically disadvantaged Bedouin groups (predominantly Awagir *sahawat*) as “support forces” under the banner of his Operation Dignity; nevertheless, the fact that Islamic State (IS) affiliates emerged in the city in December 2014 and fought alongside Haftar’s opponents veiled these communal divides and retroactively legitimized the flawed counterterrorism narrative he used to derive support, co-opt grievances, and target opponents.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, forces that opposed Haftar identified as anti-Gadaffi and pro-revolution rather than Islamists, though they also included members of Ansar Al Sharia (AS), a US-designated terrorist group. In addition to AS, Libya Shield 1, the February 17<sup>th</sup> Brigade, the Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade, and the Brega Martyrs Brigade also mobilized against Haftar. They organized themselves under the umbrella of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC), a newly established entity that – with foreign backing<sup>53</sup> and improved coordination – was able to push back against Haftar’s self-styled LNA for years in Benghazi.

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51 Eaton, T., Alageli, A., Badi, E., Eljarh, M. and Stocker, V. 2020. *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014: Community Dynamics and Economic Interests*. Royal Institute for International Affairs.

52 Wehrey, F., 2014. *Ending Libya's Civil War: Reconciling Politics, Rebuilding Security*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

53 Wehrey, F. 2020. “This War is Out of Our Hands” The Internationalization of Libya’s Post-2011 Conflicts From Proxies to Boots on the Ground’. *New America*.



Both Haftar's LNA and anti-Haftar armed groups possessed their own degree of social legitimacy in the east. This partly explains why the fratricidal war of 2014 in Benghazi raged on for three years and had an extremely negative effect on the region's social fabric. Entire families were displaced from the east during and after Operation Dignity under the pretext of being terrorists - a sign of the degree of social embeddedness of the forces that opposed Haftar, as well as the motivations of opposing constituencies and tribes. Many of these families originated from western Libya,<sup>54</sup> revealing the darker undertow behind Operation Dignity and the reasons behind the mobilization of some of Haftar's constituencies against his perceived opponents, which transcended simplistic "counterterrorism" aims.

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54 Several prominent anti-Haftar armed group leaders did not originate from western Libya or Misrata (for example, Buka Uraybi, Fathi Obeidi and Jama Zahawi); therefore, the east-west divide does not adequately capture the social rifts that characterized Operation Dignity. Nevertheless, several families with origins from western Libya were displaced - without being allowed to return. (See: Human Rights Watch, 2018. 'Libya: Displaced Benghazi Families Prevented From Return: Torture, Disappearances, Property Seizure'.)

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## The Saiqa Special Forces: A case of progressive hybridization<sup>55</sup>

**The Saiqa** (or Thunderbolt Special Forces) is one of the very few forces that survived the Gadaffi regime era. Established in 1970 in the city of Benghazi, it was based on a decree from then-Lieutenant Abdel-Fattah Younis.<sup>56</sup> Trainers from Egypt were brought to Libya to help establish and train the force. On 19 February 2011 Younis announced his defection from the Gadaffi regime. The entire Saiqa Special Forces in Benghazi defected with him. One day later, Saiqa attacked the Special Forces' Fadil Bu Amr brigade in Benghazi (a Gadaffi-aligned force) and took control of its headquarters. The incident was one of the first military operations carried out by a brigade in the name of the February Revolution.

Saiqa's leader Abdel-Fattah Younis was assassinated in July 2011 in mysterious circumstances. The suspected involvement of National Transitional Council figures and Islamist figures in his murder exacerbated pre-existing tensions between newly formed revolutionary battalions and Saiqa. Major General Wanis AlMabrouk Bukhamada took over the leadership of Saiqa after Younis. In 2014 Bukhamada announced that Saiqa would participate in Haftar's Operation Dignity in Benghazi. This was against a backdrop of tensions between Saiqa members along with the radical group Ansar Al Sharia, as well as the revolutionary-leaning February 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion, both of which sought to expand their military footprint in Benghazi following the fall of the Gadaffi regime.<sup>57</sup>

Saiqa was one of the most prominent groups to play a fundamental role in Haftar's takeover of Benghazi and the expulsion of his opponents; however, Saiqa was not solely composed of regular<sup>58</sup> elements as the internal make-up of the force was subject to transformations mirroring political developments that affected the state in 2011 and 2014. In 2013, against a backdrop of increasing assassinations,<sup>59</sup> Abukhamada called

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55 Case studies on armed groups from eastern and southern Libya in this publication are largely based on telephone interviews with civilians and activists from eastern Libya, telephone interviews with former Gadaffi-era officials, and interviews with staff from the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in Tripoli – supplemented by interviews conducted as part of a broader armed groups' mapping led by the author in late 2019. Access-related issues, owing by and large to LAAF scrutiny on the interaction of its officers with journalists and independent researchers, significantly limited the author's ability to carry out interviews with stakeholders from armed groups in eastern Libya.

56 Badi, E. (2019) Telephone interview with former Gadaffi era official from Eastern Libya (December 2019)

57 Wehrey, F., 2014. *Ending Libya's Civil War: Reconciling Politics, Rebuilding Security*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

58 Regular forces encompass a wide array of individuals. Some enrolled before 2011 in the Gadaffi regime's military forces. Others officially enrolled after 2011 under Tripoli's Chief of Staff or after 2015 under the LAAF's General Command. In this specific case, "regular" elements affiliated with Saiqa refer to the fighters that had gained military accreditation during the Gadaffi era.

59 From 2012 to 2014, eastern Libya (particularly Derna and Benghazi) witnessed a wave of political assassinations that targeted military figures, security officials, political activists, civil society members, and judges, among others. Much like the murder of Abdul-Fattah Younes, Libyan law enforcement officials in eastern Libya never conducted comprehensive investigations to determine the perpetrators, though it is widely believed that radical Islamist groups (including US-designated terrorist group Ansar Al Sharia) were partly responsible for a number of these crimes.

on civilians to join Saiqa's ranks; as a result, an estimated 800 individuals joined the ranks of the 300 professionally trained individuals who remained on duty after the fall of the Gaddafi regime. Irregular fighters (former civilians) who joined Saiqa in 2013 served to buttress the group's waning influence and averted its complete disintegration as other revolutionary and Islamist groups were garnering increased influence owing to the policies of the National Transitional Council and the GNC – which did not provide Saiqa with significant support.

Until 2013, Saiqa retained a role in deploying security units through “operation rooms” that formed the backbone of the hybrid interim security arrangements in Benghazi. Its leader, Bukhamada, even cooperated with Ansar Al-Sharia, publicly criticizing those who accused the group of being behind the wave of assassinations in Benghazi. Nevertheless, the increasingly widening rift between pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary armed groups in eastern Libya gradually grew wider, and Bukhamada's persona was no longer influential enough to prevent it from affecting Saiqa.

Haftar's Operation Dignity – along with Bukhamada's alignment with him – acted as a catalyst for the recruitment of irregular fighters – notably Salafis. An estimated 1,700 untrained new recruits had joined Saiqa by the time the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) had asserted control over Benghazi.<sup>60</sup> These “former civilians” thus became the bulk of Saiqa's rank and file, with a minority of regular professional soldiers acting as leaders and field commanders of the force. In this sense, Operation Dignity completely altered the structure of Saiqa by establishing entire Saiqa-affiliated units staffed with volunteers.<sup>61</sup> In addition to “support forces” – a mix of regular military “reservists” and civilians loosely tied to the LNA through an operation room that coordinated their battlefield movements – these newly established units were the main ground forces relied on by Haftar for his operations in Benghazi and Derna.

The massive number of individuals mobilized in a context of extreme social polarization – and the labelling of their opponents as extremists – further diminished the ability to command and control them. Most of these individuals mobilized according to “localist anchors” and, though some hail from influential Eastern tribes, tribal influence within Saiqa is minimal. By contrast, the religious ideology of Salafi Madkhalism significantly influenced certain Saiqa units, most notably the 55<sup>th</sup>, headed by Major Mahmoud ElWerfalli. Salafi preachers framed the battle of Salafists against “terrorists” as a “Jihad against Kharijites”, essentially framing alignment with Haftar's Operation Dignity as a sacred religious duty.

The confluence of these factors – the oversized recruitment of individuals as support forces by way of religious tropes – partly explains why LAAF units, particularly

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60 Badi, E. (2020); telephone interview with Mol in Tripoli (January 2020)

61 Badi, E. (2020); telephone interview with activist in Benghazi (February 2020)

those affiliated with the Saiqa, have been engaged in retribution acts, as well as summary executions and the desecration of corpses of opposing fighters.<sup>62</sup> The case of Mahmoud El Werfalli - a Saiqa commander wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for filming himself summarily executing dozens of individuals - speaks to a broader problem of command and control that has permeated Saiqa's hierarchy since 2014.<sup>63</sup> Though some minor efforts were made to regularize the status of those recruited by Saiqa after 2013, Saiqa commanders often argue that members aligned with them have gained "regular status" (without formal training) owing to the battle experience they have accumulated in Benghazi and Derna.<sup>64</sup>

Today, Saiqa has grown to become a body that oversees several brigades under different commanders. This setup influences the structure of the group, which is now virtually unrecognizable from its 2011 status. The parallel centralized leadership structures of the brigades, established after 2013, have a degree of authority that rivals that of Wanis Bukhamada. Saiqa can therefore be considered an amalgam of semi-organized forces with a decentralized command structure that falls under the umbrella of Haftar's LAAF; it is usually receptive to the orders of the Central Command insofar as alignment furthers the commanders, as well as the rank and file's, own interests. More broadly, Saiqa commanders have their alignment with Khalifa Haftar in common - a relationship that can undermine the leadership that Wanis Bukhamada has, in theory, over them.

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62 Human Rights Watch, 2017. 'Libya: War Crimes as Benghazi Residents Flee - Summary Executions, Attacks on Civilians, Desecration of Corpses'.

63 Human Rights Watch, 2017. 'Libya: Videos Capture Summary Executions - International Criminal Court Issues Warrant for LNA Commander'.

64 Badi, E. (2020); telephone interview with an activist in Benghazi (March 2020).

## The scramble for legitimacy and Tripoli's quartet

By mid-2015, addressing Libya's institutional split had become a matter of priority for European states and the United States. Indeed, foreign security imperatives – centred around countering IS's attempt to extend its footprint in Sirte and beyond, and addressing migration flows through Libya's shores – had galvanized Brussels and Washington into backing a political process to identify united Libyan authorities they could partner with to tackle these issues. In 2015 the UN-brokered political dialogue between authorities in eastern and western Libya culminated in an agreement in Skhirat, Morocco, in December – leading to the formation of the Government of National Accord (GNA). To avoid a relapse into insecurity, the agreement also included clauses on security arrangements.<sup>65</sup> Certain armed groups, however, instrumentalized these clauses, seeking to capitalize on the newly formed body's international legitimacy. In practice, armed groups that had formed – and evolved – in Tripoli after 2011 used the body's newfound international clout to dislodge other armed groups (most notably those from Misrata) from Tripoli. They also opportunistically sought to obtain an affiliation with a ministry aligned with the GNA, shielding themselves from criticism by folding themselves into the newly internationally recognized government's authority. The Tripoli Revolutionaries' Brigade, the Special Deterrence Force, the Abu Salim Central Security Directorate, and the Nawasi Brigade later became known as the "Tripoli cartel"<sup>66</sup> as the quartet carved Tripoli among themselves, developing illicit revenue-generation schemes and infiltrating state institutions as they gradually grew more predatory.

Following the Skhirat agreement, Libyan authorities were also under pressure to act to curtail migration owing to the European Union's priorities, which sought to further strengthen its border externalization policies.<sup>67</sup> This momentum trickled down at the communal level, leading armed groups to reconvert themselves into counter-smuggling agents, while integrating state enforcement agencies, such as the border and coastal guards. This process further contributed to the hybridization of Libya's security landscape – to the detriment of border and coastal guard's enforcement capacities. Other armed actors capitalized on Western policy priorities in the field of "counterterrorism", namely portraying themselves as security providers<sup>68</sup> with a heavy focus on curbing crime and cracking down on terrorist sleeper cells.

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65 These were deliberately vague to avoid antagonizing armed groups and constituencies that could potentially spoil the agreement.

66 Lacher, W. and Al-Idrissi, A., 2018. *Capital of Militias: Tripoli's Armed Groups Capture the Libyan State*, Briefing Paper. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

67 Megerisi, T. 2019. 'Governing ungoverned spaces: The case of Libya'. Atlantic Community.

68 This strategy was employed by armed actors across the country, most notably Tripoli's Special Deterrence Force and Abu Salim Central Security Directorate, Misrata's Bunyan-Al-Marsous, the Anas Al-Dabbashi Brigade in Sabratha, and Haftar's LAAF. In pursuing narrow-minded and short-term policy priorities in the fields of counterterrorism and counter-migration, foreign actors contributed to the entrenchment of hybridity locally while undermining the national authorities whom they nominally supported.

During the years that followed, politicians and businessmen with links to the GNA established alliances of convenience with Tripoli's armed groups, or de-facto sponsored them. In practice, this led to a decrease in violence as the cartel consolidated control over downtown Tripoli. The trade-off for the improvement in security was Tripoli's cartel-dominated, state-derived revenue-generation mechanisms, with the connivance of the political elite. Their schemes for revenue generation varied from licit to illicit and included, among others, local taxation, contracts for security provision signed with various institutions, letters of credit fraud through the Central Bank of Libya, and salaries.<sup>69</sup> As the years passed, these armed groups also proceeded to infiltrate the institutions they provided security for, attracting further antagonism from outsiders. Even armed groups with former enmities such as those from Zintan and Misrata, and their respective constituencies, were united in their disapproval of the cartel's behaviour. The latter's continuous and unabated profiteering brought another conflict dynamic to the fore, namely grievances over the centralization of Libya's economic system.

Socially speaking, Tripoli's armed groups also attempted to improve their relationship with local communities. Some focused on recruiting members from particular neighbourhoods where they had a stronger level of social legitimacy, while certain armed factions sought to "professionalize" themselves and their rank and file by embedding old regime elements within their leadership.<sup>70</sup> To this end, armed factions also began to communicate their activities – namely the confiscation of illegal goods, raids, arrests, and so on – increasingly via social media. This was seemingly to mainstream their "anti-criminal" stance to promote themselves as security providers to local communities and to domestic and international authorities more broadly.<sup>71</sup>

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69 Eaton et al. (2020) *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014 - Community Dynamics and Economic Interests*.

70 Badi, E. (2019); telephone interview with Mol in Tripoli (December 2019)

71 Ibid.

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## The Special Deterrence Force: The instrumentalization of anti-criminality

Many western Libya groups viewed the **Special Deterrence Force (SDF)** as the most adept at using these public relations efforts. It also benefitted from the expertise of Gadaffi-era security and intelligence officials, which it embedded within its hierarchy to improve efficiency thus contributing to its superior performance.<sup>72</sup>

The SDF was established in 2013 by Abdulraouf Kara, one of the members of Tripoli's Military Council (established during the liberation of Tripoli in August 2011), an entity led by Abdelhakim Belhaj.<sup>73</sup> Kara – along with several others – had been part of the Sug Aljumaa Martyrs Brigade, an armed group primarily staffed with residents of the Sug Aljumaa neighbourhood in Tripoli (an area renowned for its opposition against Gadaffi).

The SDF formed as a result of a rift within the Sug Aljumaa Martyrs brigade over a leadership dispute. Kara and the current head of the Nawasi Brigade were both leaders of clusters within the Sug Aljumaa Martyrs Brigade, Sug Aljumaa's main armed group. Leading a group of men under the banner of "Saraya al Isnad 2" (as part of the Sug Aljumaa Martyrs Brigade), Kara set his sights on Mitiga and based his headquarters in the area, thus founding today's SDF. It is widely believed that Nawasi and SDF's positive (or ambivalent) relationship, and the lack of conflict between the forces in subsequent years, is primarily due to the fact that the two forces are staffed with combatants that originate from the neighbourhood of Sug Aljumaa in Tripoli.

At the time of its establishment, SDF began with around 50 breakaway members from the Sug Aljumaa Martyrs Brigade. From 2013 to 2020, it grew to comprise between 700 and 900 members, split between policing units and combatants. The number of administrative staff (those doing administrative work and others embedded into investigative units) is estimated to be 40.<sup>74</sup> The group is affiliated with the Ministry of Interior (MoI), under which it still operates.

The SDF is a localist force that relies on the social legitimacy derived from the social roots of its members within its area of operation and headquarters; however, the armed group operates on the basis of the ideology of its leaders rather than pursuing

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72 Badi, E (2019); interview with SDF member in Tripoli (July 2019)

73 Belhaj was one of the most renowned Emirs of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (now defunct). Benefitting from the direct support of the Qatari state, Belhaj played an active part in Libyan Revolution. After establishing himself as head of the Tripoli Military Council, he subsequently resigned, founding and presiding over Al Watan – a political party through which he unsuccessfully ran for the GNC elections in 2012. Since 2018, Belhaj has been wanted by the General Prosecutor in Tripoli for his alleged connections with members of the Sudanese and Chadian opposition that have launched incursions into Libyan territory.

74 Badi, E. (2019) Interview with MoI official in Tripoli (August 2019).

“Sug Aljumaa’s interests”. In fact, recruitment within the SDF does not rely solely on social or localist factors; in previous years, the force has managed to amalgamate a number of Salafi fighters with residents of Sug Aljumaa, as well as combatants from other areas of Tripoli, into its ranks.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to “localism” and communal factors, the ideology of Madkhali Salafism is one of the factors influencing the SDF’s decision-making and cooperation with other actors. Leadership within the SDF is approached through the model of “*shura*” (that is, collective decision-making) between influencers within the force – a clear sign of the significant influence of the Salafi trend. The SDF is also linked to a wide-spanning and multi-faceted network of Salafist preachers in Libya. This is one of the reasons why the SDF shared an aversion toward the Muslim Brotherhood and worked to limit the influence of perceived Islamist-linked armed groups in Tripoli after 2014. Ideology also allowed the group to transcend national divides as it cooperated with other Salafist Brigades in Kufra, Sabratha, and Sirte, among others, despite the fact most of these areas fell under the nominal control of eastern authorities that were not aligned to the SDF.

The leadership of Kara, along with the Salafi Madkhali ideology within the group and its recruitment of former Gadaffi-era regime officials, allowed the SDF to grow into one of Tripoli’s most organized factions. The SDF geared its internal structure towards optimizing command and control and adopted a strategy that divided its rank and file into smaller armed groups supervised by a leader and an associate to take charge of these sub-units. This approach greatly enhanced coordination and organization within the SDF, especially since each “smaller armed group” has a specific “specialization”. While some units are specialized in raids, others act as a support force in combat or engagement situations. Some sub-units have also developed the capacity to deal with explosives and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), while others specialize in reconnaissance. Part-time paramedic units are also fully dedicated to the SDF.<sup>76</sup>

The developments of the SDF since 2013 highlights the influence that ideology, social roots, leadership, and external developments can have on an armed group’s social cohesion and its potential role as a security provider. It also raises important policy-related questions about the engagement of international actors with an armed group whose activities are – at least in part – influenced by religious sermons and fatwas.<sup>77</sup>

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75 Badi, E. (2019) Interview with resident of Sug Aljumaa (August 2019)

76 Badi, E. (2019) Interview with SDF member in Tripoli, July 2019.

77 International Crisis Group, 2019. ‘[Addressing the Rise of Libya’s Madkhali-Salafis](#)’.



## The LAAF asserts control over eastern Libya

Meanwhile, in Cyrenaica, Haftar leveraged the LAAF's territorial control over eastern Libya and the oil crescent<sup>78</sup> to develop state-derived revenue-generation mechanisms. By seemingly emulating the Egyptian military's approach to economic domination, Haftar established the LAAF's Military Investment Authority of Public works – an entity managed by individuals close to LAAF's Central Command. The institution was used as a medium to predate over the private and public sector of eastern Libya. The Central Bank in Al-Bayda also oversaw the sale of over 30 billion dinars worth of bonds outside the official purview of the Tripoli-based financial system. These were purchased by the parallel entity in Beyda and subsequently used to finance the LAAF. The Beyda-based parallel central bank also received an undisclosed amount of Russian-printed “counterfeit” banknotes, which were distributed in eastern and southern Libya, further complicating prospects of unifying Libya's Central Bank, which had been divided in the aftermath of the 2014 war.<sup>79</sup>

The LAAF's diversification in sources of funding was also concomitant with an effort by Haftar to centralize control over the panoply of armed groups and individuals aligned under its command. A series of decrees and decisions, some of which were informally mainstreamed, were passed in an effort to “coup-proof” the LAAF and ensure that no particular social constituency, ideological trend, or tribe dominated it and represented a threat to Haftar's leadership. Even the eastern federalist movement<sup>80</sup> was subdued and repressed by the Central Command of the LAAF, with several federalist actors forced to submit to Haftar's nationalist ambitions owing to the extensive foreign support he benefitted from, and the prospect that his quest for total consolidation of control over Libya would see them reap the rewards of having backed him at an early stage.

Overall, Haftar's divide-and-rule strategy within the LAAF was reminiscent of the policy used by Gaddafi to dominate Libya's fractious landscape. Much like Gaddafi, the side-effect of such an approach was that the LAAF became an entity that would only remain cohesive if Haftar remained at its helm. Haftar also engaged in “coup-proofing” while the LAAF gradually asserted control over eastern Libya – launching a two-year siege on Derna before capturing the city after a year of military campaigns.

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78 Haftar extended his footprint towards the oil crescent and retained control over it thanks to foreign military support, in the form of aerial cover via drones and fixed-wing aircraft, from the UAE. See: D Delalande, A. 2017. ‘[How Emirati air power turned Haftar's Libyan oil ports disaster to victory](#)’. Middle East Eye.

79 Eaton et al., 2020, *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014 - Community Dynamics and Economic Interests*.

80 The federalist movement was revived in eastern Libya after the 2011 revolution. Libyan federalists' aspirations have varied, with some advocating for greater regional autonomy for eastern Libya – for example, Cyrenaica – while others have pushed for complete secession. In 2014, federalists saw in Haftar's rise – along with the international backing he benefitted from – an opportunity to advance their cause, which prompted them to align with him.

The war in Derna also had deep social roots and reverberations.<sup>81</sup> Several tribes and groups mobilized under Haftar towards the city, viewed by then pro-Haftar figures as Islamists' last stronghold in eastern Libya. Mobilized units included the Saiqa Brigade, the predominantly Madkhali Salafist Tarik Ben Ziyad Brigade, and the Awagir-led Avengers of Blood – a group of support forces that framed their mobilization as retribution for the murder of their relatives by “terrorists”. These groups targeted anti-LNA tribes and families from Derna who they accused of harbouring extremists. The LAAF's main opponent in Derna was the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC), an Islamist group that espoused a hard-line Islamist vision for the Libyan state and evinced ideological affinities to Al Qaida, which had co-existed with and subsequently fought IS in Derna before Haftar's siege. Derna's war further tore at eastern Libya's social fabric as dozens of families from Derna were displaced and hundreds were imprisoned.

Overall, the centralization that characterizes the leadership of the LAAF – essentially centred around Haftar's persona – implies that proximity to him and his Ferjan tribe enables groups to act with impunity, but also to profit from the LAAF's various revenue streams. Local groups co-opted, coerced, or recruited by the LAAF Central Command do not necessarily share the leadership's ambitions of asserting control over the entire territory, particularly those with more localistic inclinations that prefer to consolidate security over particular areas or neighbourhoods. This discrepancy between the LAAF's leadership and local groups mobilized under its banner explains why each war fought by the LAAF has seen a different set of actors and units deploy on its behalf, often depending on their perceived self-interest. For instance, while the Awagir have mostly mobilized for the conflicts in eastern Libya – namely Benghazi and Derna – their subsequent mobilization towards southern and western Libya has been limited,<sup>82</sup> a dynamic that demonstrates that their perceived self-interest does not always align with Haftar's.

### **The knock-on effect of northern jockeying on communal lines in Fezzan**

As in the north of the country, Fezzan's post-2011 armed groups were structured along communal, ethnic, tribal, or even familial lines. They also often relied on notions of social legitimacy to legitimize their actions, to recruit, and to portray themselves as defenders of their own constituency. For some groups, ideology (centred around religious discourse) also played a role in incentivizing and recruiting fighters; however,

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81 Salem, A.Z., 2018. *The War in Derna: What's Happening Now, and What's Next?*, Policy Brief, Middle East Directions.

82 Lacher, W., 2019. *Who is Fighting Whom in Tripoli? How the 2019 Civil War is Transforming Libya's Military Landscape*. Briefing Paper. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

tensions in the south – while prevalent – were often exacerbated and transformed into flashpoints due to power struggles between divided northern factions. These struggles reverberated across the Fezzan multiple times after 2011, creating social rifts. Benghazi and Tripoli were not the only theatres of Libya's second civil war of 2014; northern power centres jockeying for influence – most notably between Haftar's Zintani allies and his Misratan opponents – also extended to the south the following year.

Indeed, after 2011, Zintan maintained its footprint in the Fezzan through its alliance with Tuareg factions affiliated with the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG). The PFG – a Gaddafi-era security structure tasked with securing oil fields and installations – also experienced “hybridization” after 2011 as several self-proclaimed revolutionaries enlisted and gained an affiliation to obtain a salary. The PFG's southern and western branch headquarters in Zintan enabled factions that later aligned with Haftar to build links with the PFG. In early 2014 an inter-communal conflict between the Arab tribe of Awlad Sulayman and the Tebu – an ethnic group populating Chad, Libya, and Sudan – erupted in Sebha. This flashpoint led to an escalation that, instead of being influenced by communal tensions among these factions, was influenced by the wider political landscape of the time.

Against this backdrop of inter-ethnic tensions, the Magarha and the Gadaddfa – both tribes primarily regarded as aligned with the Gaddafi regime – emerged on the scene and seized control over a key airbase in Sebha. This was primarily a symptom of Gaddafi-era nostalgia among marginal tribes, which allowed several Gaddafi-era security officials to re-assert themselves as “formal” military figures to lead local armed groups. Alarmed over this development, the GNC mandated the Misratan-led “Third Force” to deploy to Sebha to act as a peacekeeping force and arbiter between the various groups, while ensuring that regime loyalists did not make a comeback. The arrival of the Misratan Third Force paved the way for the projection of the northern tensions into the Fezzan. Indeed, Misratan factions used the “peacekeeping force” as a medium through which to undermine the influence of Zintani factions and their allies. Among others, this jockeying for influence exacerbated tensions and triggered a conflict between Tebu and Tuareg – another ethnic minority in the Libyan south – Ubari in 2015.

From 2016 onwards, Haftar – who had by then consolidated control over the oil crescent and been named Field Marshall by the newly elected House of Representatives – began building alliances in the Fezzan, primarily through outreach to Gaddafi-era loyalists and regime-era military figures. The Magarha, and some Gaddadfa aligned with his LAAF, subsequently escalated their efforts against the Misratan Third Force, which had by then obtained the GNA's endorsement. In early 2017 the LAAF's efforts at alliance-building had culminated in the launch of an operation to drive out the Misratan Third Force from the South. In May 2017 the Misratan Third Force retaliated by launching an offensive on Brak Al-Shati airbase, where they brutally killed more

than a 100 LAAF fighters and recruits - with many showing signs of having been summarily executed.<sup>83</sup> This event led to the dismissal of GNA's Defence Minister, Mahdi Al Barghathi, and the rescindment of GNA support to the Third Force, which subsequently withdrew from Fezzan, leaving a security vacuum that led southern authorities and figures to seek funds and patronage from both the GNA and Haftar's LAAF.

The resulting vacuum in Fezzan, coupled with the GNA's lack of outreach there, paved the way for Haftar to launch an operation to capture the territory in January 2019. Several armed groups from eastern Libya were deployed to the region, a development that led several factions in the south to align with Haftar, riding on the wave of international support he benefited from, as well as perceptions of his invincibility.<sup>84</sup> Two years of outreach had preceded the operation; during this time, Haftar's General Command focused on establishing joint operations rooms and military zones in the South, often under the leadership of former regime military figures who had gradually aligned with Haftar after 2016. The LAAF's Central Command also established new structures to attempt to dilute the communal lines of the southern armed groups.<sup>85</sup>

The LAAF's efforts - at least cosmetically - reshaped armed groups in the south and contributed to the establishment of a more effective top-down centralized chain of command. To this end, some groups were also dissolved or merged, while senior military positions were reshuffled to consolidate and ensure the loyalty of particular factions. The sustainability of these changes, however, was dependent on Haftar's ability to maintain patronage networks and loyalties built around the promise of a capture of Tripoli. LAAF-induced changes in the south were also premised on deals and alliances with tribal and armed actors with their own agendas and the ability to defect or reverse these changes if they do not receive the expected payoffs. At a more granular level, the LAAF's expansion into the south - used, by and large, as a springboard for the offensive on Tripoli launched by Haftar three months later<sup>86</sup> - has not profoundly affected local security arrangements.

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83 Human Rights Watch, 2017. 'Libya: Mass Executions Alleged at Military Base'.

84 Badi, E., 2019. 'General Hifter's southern strategy and the repercussions of the Fezzan campaign'. Middle East Institute.

85 Wehrey, F., 2017. *Insecurity and Governance Challenges in Southern Libya*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

86 Badi, E., 2019. 'Libya's Hifter and the false narrative of authoritarian stability'. Middle East Institute.

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## **Battalion 116: The transmutation of a southern-based armed group**

Sebha's **Battalion 116** was set up in 2017 by Masoud Jeddi, a Gaddafi-era officer from the Awlad Sulayman tribe. The Battalion is an offshoot of two other battalions set up previously by Jeddi: the Faruq Battalion and Sebha's Special Deterrence Force. Jeddi co-established the Faruq Battalion, an armed group, in the months following the fall of the Gaddafi regime. Renowned for its extrajudicial arrests – often conducted on tribal grounds – the Faruq Battalion's members were often accused of torturing those they incarcerated. As a result of this behaviour, the battalion lost its social legitimacy during the year after the revolution and fragmented. This illustrates the extent to which social norms may constrict the behaviour of armed groups in the Fezzan.

Nonetheless, Jeddi recruited several of the then-defunct Faruq Battalion members to join his newly established "Special Deterrence Force" (SDF). Formed in 2013 in coordination with Tripoli's Abdulraouf Kara – head of the homonymous group in Tripoli – Sebha's SDF dominated policing inside Sebha, gaining an affiliation with Tripoli's Mol. In a strategy reminiscent of that of its counterpart in Tripoli, the group essentially branded itself as an anti-crime and counterterrorism force, conducting patrols and seizures in Sebha and its suburbs.<sup>87</sup> It primarily recruited its rank and file from the Awlad Sulayman tribe, which dominated the political and security scene, boasting of their role during the revolution and their narrative alignment against Gaddafi.<sup>88</sup> SDF therefore also portrayed itself as a force that would avert the return of Gaddafi loyalists, which partly explains why the Gaddafi and the Magarha (both considered tribes aligned with the regime) shared an animosity towards SDF.<sup>89</sup>

Nevertheless, like the SDF in Tripoli, Jeddi weaponized the Salafi Madkhali ideology, using religious networks and discourse for recruitment purposes in 2013. This initially enabled the battalion to transcend communal divides to be one of the very few "pluralistic" southern armed groups – the force even recruited Salafist Tebu. By 2015, however, against a backdrop of increased social tensions along communal lines, Sebha's SDF had essentially become a Salafi-leaning force made up exclusively of members of the Awlad Sulayman tribe. Until early 2017 Jeddi maintained an alignment with Misrata's Third Force after its deployment to the South. The Third Force had sided with the Awlad Sulayman tribe – and, as a corollary, with Jeddi's SDF in Sebha – owing to its revolutionary background; however, Jeddi defected to Haftar's side in 2017, aligning with Mohamed Ben Nayel, former Gaddafi-era figure and head of the LAAF's 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Wadi Al-Shati. Sebha's SDF was rebranded into Battalion 116, a force

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87 Wehrey, F., 2017. *Insecurity and Governance Challenges in Southern Libya*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

88 Only a small group from the Awlad Sulayman played a role during the revolution, although far more Awlad Sulayman continued to fight within the security brigades. Their alignment shifted after the fall of Tripoli and they turned against the Gaddafi during the fall of Sabha.

89 Badi, E. (2020); telephone interview with Sebha resident (March 2020).

that was instrumental to Haftar's push against the Misratan Third Force in 2017. The alignment paved the way for Haftar to take control over the South at a later stage.<sup>90</sup>

Jeddi's personal leadership, the SDF's ideology, and his own tribal background shaped the reasons behind the formation of Battalion 116, as well as its mobilization. Indeed, Jeddi was criticized for his affiliation with the former regime and for his opportunism and early defection to the LAAF in 2017. From 2017 to 2019, Battalion 116 mobilized on tribal grounds (to protect Awlad Sulayman's perceived interests) and operated as an affiliate of the LAAF in Sebha.<sup>91</sup> When the LAAF launched an operation to capture Fezzan in January 2019, Jeddi and his battalion were one of the primary groups to benefit from their early alignment with Haftar two years before. While some armed groups in Sebha struggled to belatedly rebrand themselves credibly as aligned with Haftar's LAAF, others saw their influence wane as their leadership or chain of command changed through their integration into the LAAF.<sup>92</sup> Battalion 116 saw its influence increase in Sebha at their expense, benefitting from a new pool of recruits owing to the fragmentation of some factions that were unable to sustain their cohesiveness as the LAAF swept into Fezzan.

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90 Wehrey, F., 2017. *Insecurity and Governance Challenges in Southern Libya*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

91 Badi, E. (2020); telephone interview with a Sebha resident (March 2020).

92 Badi, E. (2019); interview with an MoI official in Tripoli (July 2019).

## The offensive on Tripoli and Libya's third civil war

On 4 April 2019, Haftar launched his operation “Flood of Dignity”, mobilizing forces from central and eastern Libya towards Tripoli to overthrow the GNA and force the international community to recognize another of his military advances. Haftar's offensive also attempted to weaponize existing social rifts in the western region, which appeared particularly vulnerable. The grievances of groups that had been marginalized after 2011 (Gadaffi loyalists) and of heads of armed groups that had been sidelined by Tripoli's authorities (Adel Daab from Gharyan and the Kaniyat's 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Tarhuna) were key to brokering the alliances that allowed Haftar to sweep into Gheryan and Tarhuna and mobilize his forces towards western Tripoli.<sup>93</sup> Other alliances, such as those brokered with armed groups through Salafi Madkhali networks in Sabratha, Sirte, and Zintan, had also been nurtured for years prior to the launch of the offensive.

Haftar also sought to capitalize on the grievances of several armed groups from other western cities – including Misrata, Tarhuna and Zintan – that resented Tripoli-based groups that had gradually monopolized revenue-generation mechanisms and infiltrated institutions. In fact, in September 2018, clashes had erupted between Tripoli-based armed groups on the one hand, and Al-Summoud Battalion from Misrata as well as the Kaniyat from Tarhuna on the other. The prevalent assumption was that these rifts would supersede any desire to mobilize against Haftar and lend a hand to these factions. Several of these groups were also suspected of having coordinated a possible defection to Haftar's side should he sweep into Tripoli.

In many ways, Haftar's rationale illustrated a primitive understanding of the degree of social embeddedness of the bulk of the western Libyan forces that mobilized against his LAAF, their patterns of mobilization, and more broadly the extent to which his offensive – and its potential success – was perceived as an existential threat to their respective communities. The bulk of the forces that mobilized against Haftar in 2019 shared the same social backbone of the forces that mobilized against Gadaffi in 2011. Cities that experienced 2011 as a “local conflict” – as well as a “civil war” – had emerged from the conflict with semi-cohesive forces. These forces, while significantly downsized in times of peace, did not disintegrate. While some former “revolutionaries” had returned to civilian life, the social links (whether blood ties or other connections<sup>94</sup>) that bound them to their leaders or fellow fighters had remained dormant and were reactivated by the perceived existential threat that Haftar's blitzkrieg represented for their respective communities.

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93 For more information on the Tripoli offensive and the make-up of forces that partook in the fighting, see Lacher (2019).

94 McQuinn, B., 2012. *After the Fall: Libya's Evolving Armed Groups*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

Another factor to account for is the time elapsed since the revolution, and the impact of children and teenagers within these communities who had been influenced by revolutionary narratives. Communities that emerged cohesive from 2011 due to their alignment against Gaddafi often shared ideological anchors that collectively defined their struggle. The stigmatization they experienced from their perceived opponents often served to reinforce these collective boundaries. Among these communities, the younger generation grew up idealizing the idea of a perceived fight against a perceived authoritarian ruler.<sup>95</sup> Others also had long-standing grievances that stemmed from the death of a relative or friend over the course of the revolution.<sup>96</sup> The confluence of these dynamics meant that an entire generation of recruits existed within these communities for armed factions to tap into when Haftar's offensive triggered the same sentiments as Gaddafi's repression had in 2011. The fact that mobilization occurred along social lines - within communities - also catalysed patterns of recruitment that embedded this younger generation into a "neo-revolution".

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95 Badi, E. (2019); interview with support force member mobilized as part of the Counterterrorism Force in Misrata (August 2019).

96 Badi, E. (2020); phone interview with a support force embedded with the 301 Brigade in Misrata (March 2020).



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## The Counterterrorism Force: Integrating socially embedded units

The **Counterterrorism Force (CTF)** was established after the defeat of the IS in Sirte, where the terrorist group had established its first caliphate outside of Iraq and the Levant. In 2016 an operation dubbed “Operation Bunyan Al-Marsous” (BAM) aimed to retake Sirte from IS militants, who had begun to expand their reach into western Libya. After the success of the American- and British-backed operation, the CTF was officially formed, following a decision by the GNA, as a state-affiliated armed actor at the end of 2016 (after Sirte was liberated). An official decree by Sarraj gave it the broad mandate of “countering terrorism”. It is worth noting that the CTF was formed against the backdrop of a perceived existential threat – namely the expansion of IS towards the western region and, in particular, towards Misrata. The mobilization of fighters that formed the bulk of its rank and file was therefore the result of the activation of pre-existing social bonds in a process similar – albeit less acute – to Gaddafi’s threat of repression against Misratan communities five years earlier.

Socially, the CTF was formed as an entity that merged the battalions that took part in the Bunyan Al Marsous Operation. The battalions served as a back-up force throughout the operation. CTF leader Major General Muhammad AlZain is a regular commander who gained prominence in 2011 as one of three major military figures from Misrata to defect from the Gaddafi regime. At its inception, the CTF was essentially an amalgamation of three brigades that participated in BAM’s operation under his command. It also incorporated volunteers (commonly referred to as support or reserve forces) from Khums, Misrata, Msellata, Tripoli, and Zliten.<sup>97</sup>

The force is therefore socially embedded in the fabric of Misrata. Its decision-making, mobilization, and political and military leanings are influenced by social links within the city given the origins of the bulk of its combatants. Nevertheless, the force has managed to integrate a wide array of combatants; it has also recruited several members who are not from Misrata as part of its rank and file. In 2017, with financial support from the GNA, the CTF established a training centre for new recruits in Misrata and Khoms (a city east of Tripoli and the site of CTF’s main headquarter). The CTF trained two batches of graduates in 2017 and 2018, with formal training provided by Italian military personnel.<sup>98</sup> Before the Khoms training centre became fully operational, the CTF provided training at Misrata’s Aerial Academy for a group of graduates (special forces) who had British and Italian instructors, as well as American consultants overseeing their capacity building.<sup>99</sup> In April 2019, the total number of

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97 The bulk of the CTF is composed of support forces that are, for the most part, Misratan revolutionary battalions (that is, irregulars). On the other hand, the CTF’s core is limited in numbers and primarily formed by professionalized soldiers.

98 Badi, E. (2019) Interview with member of the CTF in Tripoli, July 2019.

99 Ibid.

combatants of the force was around 460 - 150 of whom were mobilized full-time, while others formed part of the CTF's "reserve force".

In April 2019 the CTF mobilized to counter Haftar's offensive in response to GNA's Sarraj's call for general mobilization. It was one of the first forces from Misrata to join the fighting fronts. As opposed to other forces and brigades from Misrata, the CTF is regularly in a semi-mobilized state due to its mandate to counter terrorism - which requires its members to remain on active duty.<sup>100</sup> Several regular units have therefore never demobilized and were thus on active duty, which enabled its swift deployment. Indeed, most of the CTF's regular elements are on full-time shifts that require their presence on a part-time basis. CTF's "Reserve Force" (or Support Force), however, is only called upon when raids are planned, or in times of acute threat. Haftar's offensive, which was interpreted as a threat, triggered a large-scale mobilization centred around the social links of CTF's leaders and rank and file. To rationalize its participation in the fight against Haftar, the CTF framed Haftar's attack as an act of terror that threatened social peace and against which it had to mobilize.<sup>101</sup>

The mobilization of the CTF against Haftar is a prime example of a socially embedded formal force mobilizing against a perceived threat to the group's own community. The embedment of support forces after April 2019 - often recruited on an individual-to-individual basis - also highlights the extent to which political and military developments outside of armed groups' control can have an impact on these actors' internal structures. In this case, the mobilization of Misrata - as a community<sup>102</sup> - enhanced the CTF's cohesion, though it is likely that this change in structure will be temporary owing to the state of active conflict that the group is engaged in.

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100 The force's swift mobilization was also because its support forces were already tasked by the GNA's Prime Minister Sarraj in August 2018 to formally intervene and de-escalate the situation between Tarhuna's Kaniyat Brigade, aligned with Misrata's Summoud Battalion, and its opponents (primarily the Tripoli quartet and Misrata's 301 Battalion), following clashes in Tripoli. It was therefore already semi-mobilized.

101 Ibid.

102 The mobilization of the community in Misrata transcends the traditional gendered norms and permeates the community at large. In times of acute threat, several women from Misrata - with communal links to men deployed to combat - mobilize on a part- to full-time basis to cook "meals" for combatants from their city. This dynamic which has been a reoccurring pattern in times of collective social mobilization (notably, against the backdrop of Operation Bungan Al-Marsous against ISIS in 2016 and following Haftar's offensive in April 2019) - implies a degree of social embeddedness that transcends that of most other armed groups, the bulk of which depend on institutionally sourced catering. Though anecdotal in nature, this observation highlights a gendered dimension of mobilization that speaks to a discrepancy in communal cohesion between Libya's armed actors, a dynamic that should be further explored.

## Summary

Over the last nine years, the Libyan security landscape has transformed and fragmented in a way that has mirrored the societal divides that emerged after 2011. Social rifts that came to the fore in the years following the revolution bled into politics and consequently exacerbated the hybridization that characterized Libya's security sector after 2011. Political elites were either powerless to halt the rise of informal security providers in the years that followed the revolution, or actively sponsored this hybridization process by way of co-option or sponsorship. This bottom-up - and, at times, state-funded - process of hybridization led to the institutionalized fragmentation of armed groups into competing proto-state entities (GNA and LAAF). Most of the armed actors that emerged after the revolution gained, in one way or another, an affiliation with the state - a process that legitimized them while delegitimizing the higher authorities they were affiliated with.

The state lacked the capacity - and at times did not attempt - to make its presence felt in many of the armed groups' respective communities, thus deputizing them to provide security. As a result, the level of security provided in certain locales in Libya was not solely dependent upon the competence or internal cohesion of armed groups and their performance; it was also contingent upon the degree of social homogeneity or heterogeneity between armed groups operating in adjacent locales. This partly explains the eruption of conflicts in various locales after 2011, as many of the areas that had not experienced the revolution as an intra-community conflict saw these rifts emerge in the years that followed, often manifesting themselves as altercations between armed actors with varying degrees of social legitimacy. In many cases, these intra-community conflicts - and ensuing hybridization - served to reinforce armed group cohesion as actors often attempted to justify their engagement in conflict as a decision influenced by their desire to "protect" communities (at times their own).

Other factors such as leadership, ideology, organization, battle experience, and proximity to the local community also influenced methods and the extent to which these armed actors could access resources (whether legally or illegally). These factors had a significant effect on the degree to which these actors prioritized security provision, with some using their capabilities in this area as a tool to derive legitimacy and international recognition. The effect of globalization, international priorities (including counterterrorism and migration), and multilateral or unilateral foreign support to Libyan actors also significantly influenced the ability of actors to build and sustain coalitions.

The processes of diffusion and devolution outlined above hybridized the security sector and, more broadly, governance at large. Continuous hybridization is therefore the main feature of the provision of peace and security. Designing centrally orchestrated security apparatuses to reform the security sector will not be effective in the short

term, if only because of the social polarization, rifts, and grievances that will define Libya's society in the years to come. In the short- to medium-term, the state will not be able to exert dominance or control over forces that have infiltrated with the intent of undermining it. While some actors may attempt to manage and reshape some of these armed actors' relationships, interactions, and alignments, these attempts are likely to be partial or short-lived, particularly if they are built on the idea of demonizing or excluding other segments of society.

An implication of the analysis in this chapter is that internationally supported attempts at reforming the security sector that ignore hybridity - or attempt to fight it - will face difficulties in obtaining positive results at the level of security provision. Engaging with communities and non-state affiliated institutions is as important as engaging with state authorities, if only because of the capacity and social legitimacy that these actors have. This should, however, be weighed against the opportunity cost of engagement and consider whether the behaviour of targeted actors enables the establishment of a positive mutual arrangement with the state - one that would be conducive to both security provision and state-building.

# Community Relations, Social Embeddedness, and Patterns of Mobilization

## 2

Libya's armed sector features hundreds of armed groups with diverse backgrounds and natures. The previous chapter outlined the background and subsequent developments that cemented hybridity as a defining feature of the country's security landscape. The chapter also explained the interaction of armed groups with state authorities – as well as the hybrid structures and circumstantial arrangements that have governed these groups' alignment and interaction with other actors and state authorities. The landscape is therefore characterized by oligopolies of violence, where a “fluctuating number of partly competing and partly cooperating actors of violence”<sup>103</sup> co-exist. Yet, while macro-level political developments have influenced the formation and development of these oligopolies, the hybrid nature of armed groups comprising them also feature distinguishing factors. Many of the armed groups that fought during 2011 were structured around particular anchors: geographic areas of influence (for example, certain neighbourhoods in larger cities such as Tripoli's Sug Aljumaa or Tajura); tribal, ethnic or kinship ties (for example, certain groups in Misrata, Benghazi or Fezzan); or ideological anchors (such as revolutionary fervour, political Islam, or even Gadaffism). The shared experience of conflict of armed group members compounded the salience of these anchors. Other groups that emerged in the aftermath of the revolution had similar anchors (for example, Salafism). This dynamic was problematic, as multiple groups sought to use the armed group's affiliation or alignment with state authorities to advance their wider circle's interest (often at the expense of other groups). Nevertheless, the influence of the geographic area of control of a certain armed group, its domestic or foreign support, the quality of its leadership, and its social embeddedness are all factors that differentiate it from its counterparts.<sup>104</sup>

While these idiosyncratic features also account for certain aspects of armed groups' evolution, they also provide key insights into the revenue-generation mechanisms that armed groups can deploy, their effectiveness as security providers, and the range of state or non-state actors involved in overseeing them.

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103 Kasfir, N., Frerks, G. and Terpstra, N., 2017. 'Introduction: Armed Groups and Multi-layered Governance'. *Civil Wars*, 19(3).

104 For a theoretical framework highlighting the influence of geography, social embeddedness, and strategic socio-political developments on armed groups' mobilization and fragmentation in conflict settings, see Lacher (2020).

Despite state policies having had an impact on shaping relationships between armed groups and higher authorities, Libya's security sector has primarily evolved based on localist community-level factors. This is epitomized by the emergence of a panoply of armed groups that transcend the "revolutionary and anti-revolutionary" dichotomy that characterized factions that mobilized in 2011. These new actors have either emerged as a result of the fragmentation of other groups, against the backdrop of other inter-communal conflicts, to address the genuine concerns of their own constituencies, grappling with post-2011 security vacuums, or to implement particular revenue-generation mechanisms. The extent to which these armed groups are socially embedded and, consequently, their relationship with their local communities is paramount in the analysis of their ability to recruit, mobilize popular support, and maintain order by way of enhancing security.

### Armed groups and social embeddedness<sup>105</sup>

Relationships between armed groups and communities vary depending on the practices of these armed groups, as well as broader socio-political developments. Most of Libya's armed groups have no incentive to engage in holistic governance, though some have the capacity and willingness to govern aspects of daily life in their areas of control. In most cases, the interactions of armed groups with local communities in their areas often involve a transaction or payoff to local elites or citizens, be it in the form of security provision, protection services, or the provision of public service.<sup>106</sup>

In cases where armed groups possess a high degree of social legitimacy, they can also act as representatives of the legitimate grievances of populations. In these situations, armed groups are accorded legitimacy by civilian populations based on traditional Weberian charismatic and legal-rational sources. While the charismatic aspect of the legitimacy stems from the social affiliation of armed actors, the legal-rational basis for legitimacy can be developed through armed groups' affiliation with the state and the establishment of local structures (such as military councils), which formalizes links between constituencies and armed actors. Many view these sources of legitimacy as

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105 A structural bias of this publication – written by a male author tackling a male-dominated sector in a highly segregated society – is its limited exploration of the gendered dimensions of relations between armed actors and members of the community due to cultural and religious-influenced access restrictions (as well as time constraints). This is a key research gap that merits further exploration. The gendered dimensions of security provision and Libyan women's perception of armed groups have recently been tackled by Eaton, T. and Ramali, K., 2019. 'How Women are Dealing with Libya's Ever-Present Armed Groups'. Chatham House; though a holistic intersectional account of how gender affects perceptions of security, social embeddedness (and potentially, its implications for SSR programming) still merits further exploration.

106 Armed groups may also represent local communities' levers of leverage over higher authorities, or even brand themselves as protectors of their own constituencies' interests in the face of the threat that opposing communities – and their affiliated armed actors – represent. Armed groups that lack a social constituency have often compensated for it through military alliances that guaranteed their survival and prevented their fragmentation owing to the military support they received.

encompassing a tacit social contract between armed groups and those they claim to represent.<sup>107</sup> This notion may be misleading, however, as it may mistakenly be understood to imply that the relationship of all armed groups with communities in their areas of control is vertical, as ruler and ruled.

The relationship between socially embedded Libyan armed actors and their local constituencies is in fact best visualized as horizontal due to the social backbone from which these armed actors derive their legitimacy. This conceptualization provides a better understanding of local armed groups' position vis-à-vis local communities. It explains why the fluidity of armed actors' alignment with higher authorities may not necessarily disrupt horizontal relationships or worsen the security situation in these locales - even as this realignment occurs. Moreover, this approach explains why oversight may not necessarily be the exclusive purview of higher authorities or its formal institutions, but rather a multi-layered affair that encompasses a wide array of other informal actors - including local community or tribal leaders, as well as customary or traditional authorities.

### **Economic practices that mirror community relations**

Aside from social embeddedness, the revenue-generation mechanisms deployed by armed groups - in conjunction with the broader macro and micro economic landscape - also affect community relations. Indeed, the methods used by armed groups to raise revenue can affect their conflict behaviour, their ability to mobilize support, and more importantly their ties to their local constituency, as well as their relations with other armed groups and adjacent communities. In this sense, analysing the facets of the war economy in certain locales, as well as the funding strategies that particular armed actors have opted to deploy, provides a window into the relationship they may have - or develop - with local communities.

In many Libyan locales (including Bani Walid, the Nafussa Mountains, Sebha, and Zawiya, among others), several armed groups co-exist in adjacent territories owing to *modi vivendi* brokered between them or their respective communities. These agreements generally aim to temper the extent to which armed groups predate civilian populations, but also to limit instances where armed actors are susceptible to directly confronting one another with violence. In Tripoli a similar arrangement between a cartel of armed groups has allowed them to permeate the formal and shadow economy, while weakening the state authorities under which they are aligned.<sup>108</sup>

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107 Zahar, M.J., 2000. 'Protégés, clients, cannon fodder: Civilians in the calculus of militias', *International Peacekeeping*, 7(4), pp. 107-128.

108 Lacher, W. and Al-Idrissi, A., 2018. *Capital of Militias: Tripoli's Armed Groups Capture the Libyan State*, Briefing Paper. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

They have, however, been particularly wary of antagonizing local populations and have ensured that their predation is accompanied by improved security provision in their respective locales. In the case of the Tripoli cartel, the links these armed groups possessed with local communities under their area of control had to be balanced with established relationships of convenience between group leaders and government-affiliated figures and politicians.<sup>109</sup> This proximity to political players – by and large motivated by the revenue-generating opportunities that such a relationship could bring about – forced a degree of detachment between these distinct armed groups and their local communities.

This manifested itself as an increasing degree of self-interest permeating the economic practices of these groups, often to the detriment of the economic well-being of populations in their areas of control. Indeed, the economic practices of these groups contributed to and reinforced a process that saw them gradually attract the ire of neighbouring armed groups and communities, but also grow more distant from their local communities. Depending on the character of the figure(s) at the helm of these armed groups, this social detachment was – in certain cases – mitigated by public ad-hoc efforts that saw these leaders portrayed as accountable to local populations in their areas of control. This took the form of efforts to improve the access of local communities to services, albeit without tempering these armed groups' predatory or parasitic involvement in the war economy.<sup>110</sup> These cosmetic efforts included overseeing the disbursement of salaries, ensuring access to healthcare, and even preventing power cuts from being imposed on constituencies in their areas of control. In this case, a dynamic of influence emerged between these armed actors – not because of their social embeddedness – but because of the sustained interaction and exchange between them and civilian communities. Moreover, several armed groups from neighbouring communities were antagonized by Tripoli's cartel behaviour (*inter-alia*, in Misrata, Zintan, Zawiya and the Nafussa Mountains) and possessed a significant degree of social embeddedness, triggering a counter-process. Indeed, in response to being threatened by socially embedded armed actors, armed groups belonging to the cartel attempted to portray themselves as "Tripoli's armed groups".<sup>111</sup>

In other territories, armed groups that lacked a strong social backbone had to compensate for their deficiencies in local legitimacy by employing higher degrees of coercion against local populations. This was particularly the case with armed

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109 Eaton et al. (2020) *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014 - Community Dynamics and Economic Interests*.

110 Ibid.

111 In doing so, they were essentially attempting to paint themselves as possessing a social base to garner legitimacy – a in response to the threat that other groups represented. This development rendered the cartel groups more responsive to reactions from the social environment and somewhat reliant on civilians for a degree of de-facto legitimacy, particularly in the months that followed the September 2018 war, during which the cartel was attacked by outside factions. See Badi, E., 2019. '[Mergers and assassinations as Tripoli remains under militia control](#)'. Middle East Institute.



actors that sought to monopolize security over entire territories for themselves. In the economic realm, this led many of these forces to deploy revenue-generation mechanisms that completely eluded state control, such as fines, taxation on local businesses and businessmen, smuggling, and trafficking. While a wide array of Libyan actors employs these revenue-generating mechanisms, armed actors that lack a social backbone, and whose geographic area of control enables rent-seeking, are far more inclined to use these methods. This is essentially a symptom of their inability to convert their lack of social legitimacy into access to state-linked revenue-generation schemes. Instead, they leverage their territorial control to derive funds and align with more potent armed groups or coalitions that guarantee them sustained support. These alliances enable them to not only consolidate and retain territorial control, but also, more importantly, to diversify their revenue-generation mechanisms.

A prime example of this approach is the Kaniyat, an armed group from Tarhuna that emerged after 2011. Despite originally wielding only limited social influence within the city, the group used extreme methods to coerce local populations and obtain artificial local legitimacy by way of repression against perceived local opponents. The Kaniyat gradually monopolized territorial control within Tarhuna and its vicinity from 2012 to mid-2020, deriving a portion of their revenues through illicit schemes, such as taxes on shop owners, fines, and smuggling.<sup>112</sup> The group not only expropriated the perceived properties of their local enemies, but also extended their territorial control over a neighbouring water factory and a cement-producing facility to derive funds. Yet the bulk of the group's revenue was derived from salaries transferred by the Tripoli-based MoI and MoD, both of which the Kaniyat had gained an affiliation with as they absorbed local policing and military units.<sup>113</sup> They opportunistically grew their military clout by aligning with Misratan factions, which periodically supplied them with military equipment from 2015 to late 2018. In early 2019 the group aligned with Haftar – a volte-face that put Tarhuna at the centre of the civil war that erupted in 2019, but also increased the Kaniyat's reliance on external funding and weapons transfers for survival. This development worsened the relationship between the Kaniyat and Tarhuna's local community as the group did away with their modicum of community-based legitimacy and grew increasingly more inclined to repress locals. The trend continued as Haftar's offensive faltered, highlighting the extent to which the Kaniyat had grown detached from their own constituency. By 2020, the protracted alignment of the Kaniyat with Haftar had exacerbated pre-existing divides between them and their local communities. The political alliance with Haftar, forged from opportunism, triggered a transition of the Kaniyat's modus operandi – from an armed group that leveraged its territorial control to extract revenues, to a repressive power structure that almost exclusively relied on the economic and military support derived from its military alliance for survival. This detachment – influenced by economic factors

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112 Harchaoui, J., 2020. 'Tarhuna, Mass graves and Libya's Internationalized Civil War', War on The Rocks.

113 Ibid.

- resulted in dozens of Tarhunans being killed by the Kaniyat and cruelly buried in mass graves in and around the city.<sup>114</sup>

The LAAF is another armed faction whose activities showcase how economic revenue-generation capabilities may reflect community relations. Consisting of a panoply of armed actors with varying agendas, the LAAF is the singular Libyan armed coalition whose ambitions for territorial control have led it to directly contend with civilian expressions of governance.<sup>115</sup> This is reflected in the revenue-generation mechanisms that it deploys, the relationship of its leadership with local commanders aligned under its banner, and its relationship with local communities. The LAAF leadership's ambition for authoritarian rule has manifested itself - in the economic realm - as a multi-pronged revenue-generating strategy that has necessitated the establishment of separate LAAF-affiliated institutions designed to generate revenues to finance the armed group's military activities.<sup>116</sup> To say this is a quasi-legal endeavour would be a stretch: the LAAF has routinely abused its leverage over legislative and executive bodies in eastern Libya to issue laws that intentionally blur the lines between legal and illegal practices.<sup>117</sup>

In this sense, the LAAF does not use merely predatory or parasitical revenue-generation mechanisms; unlike most other Libyan armed groups, it also operationalizes extractive methods that see civilian-led authorities increasingly sidelined in favour of LAAF-aligned actors. The strategy has dictated a certain degree of LAAF involvement in social services, arbitration, taxation, and governance in conjunction with civilian authorities. The replacement of democratically elected mayors by military governors in LAAF-controlled areas is a clear example of this strategy.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, while this strategy ensured LAAF involvement in social services, the armed group did not completely overhaul government, but rather controlled the levers of its decision-making. More broadly, despite the overarching revenue-generation strategy deployed by the LAAF leadership, armed groups aligned with the LAAF often use the mantle of legitimacy that this alignment provides to operationalize their own

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114 Ibid.

115 This competition is reflected in the relationship of the LAAF with the eastern-based Interim Government, House of Representatives, and local municipalities, as well as the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord.

116 Foreign support was crucial to the LAAF's revenue generation mechanisms - both because it is where LAAF capacity for coercion originated from, and because foreign support was financial in nature.

117 Much of the LAAF's economic practices - even those operationalized through the establishment of institutions that directly contend with the state - have been ratified in law due to the leverage that the LAAF possesses over legislative authorities and the Interim government, both based in eastern Libya. Both the LAAF's Military Investment Authority and the transfer of Russian banknotes and the sale of bonds - which feature amongst the most prominent revenue-generating schemes that have benefitted the LAAF - are underpinned by a legal framework designed to endow them with a veil of legality. In fact, the establishment of the LAAF and the appointment of Haftar at its helm was itself a by-product of the military leader's leverage over the eastern-based House of Representatives since the "LAAF" had already been "informally" established before the fact.

118 Eaton, T., 2018. *Libya's War Economy: Predation, Profiteering and State Weakness*. Royal Institute of International Affairs.

independent revenue streams. This setup – which affords the LAAF leadership, and affiliated units, the ability to divert sources of revenue from the formal and informal economies – also allows it to scapegoat civilian authorities for governance-related deficiencies. Overall, this model has given the LAAF leadership – namely Haftar and a narrow group of affiliates – the ability to centralize and manage the distribution of patronage, a process complemented with coercion when needed.

The LAAF's separate revenue streams – the centralized patronage networks affiliated with the group leadership and those operationalized by local LAAF-affiliated armed groups and enabled by their alignment with the coalition – also speak to the marriage of convenience between its localist elements and its authoritarian-leaning leadership. Indeed, the LAAF used the legislative capacities of civilian authorities to legalize its extractive revenue streams. It leveraged the executive – namely, the House of Representatives (HoR) and the Interim Government in eastern Libya – to pass laws and decrees that allowed them to raise revenues with a veneer of legality. More broadly, the fact that the LAAF leadership has opted to co-exist with these civilian structures (albeit, at times, uneasily) also reflects the LAAF leadership's awareness of the importance of public perceptions and the attention it affords to maintaining positive relations with local communities.

The fact that the LAAF continuously engages in exercises of perception management – coupled with the degree of coercion deployed in its territory of control – also betrays a degree of distance between its leadership and the communities residing in territory under its control. Indeed, the armed coalition heavily advertises its operations, and some Libyan media channels are entirely dedicated to conveying propaganda that justifies its political and military manoeuvring.<sup>119</sup> While other armed actors and coalitions have engaged in similar efforts, the breadth and extent to which the LAAF mediates its activities outweighs other factions' efforts in this realm.<sup>120</sup> The LAAF's excessive investment in social media also betrays a reliance on these tools to amplify a narrative whereby LAAF's territorial control is synonymous with security, stability, and economic prosperity. The LAAF leadership also navigates its lack of social embeddedness through co-option, coercion, and the sponsoring of groups with “localist” (geographic), “social” (tribal, familial or ethnic), and “ideological” anchors to align under its banner.<sup>121</sup> This arrangement translates into increased coercion and improved human security at the local level – developments that are the by-product of LAAF-aligned groups asserting control over their respective locales – while enhancing the leadership's coercive capacity as more factions align under its banner.

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119 Kirkpatrick, D. 2020. 'A Police State with an Islamist twist: Inside Haftar's Libya', *The New York Times*.

120 For an overview of Libya's social media landscape and trends pertaining to disinformation, see Khadija Ramali's interview with the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020. [A Light in Libya's Fog of Disinformation](#).

121 This allows the LAAF to capitalize on these local groups' degree of cohesion and networks to enable territorial expansion.

Overall, the degree of social embeddedness of an armed actor reflects its relationship with local populations and its economic practices. Armed groups that are not socially embedded tend to focus on operationalizing revenue-generation mechanisms through which they can secure coercive compliance. Through these revenue-generating mechanisms, territorial control can be sustained, thus lowering the armed actor's reliance on a positive relationship with local communities and their dependence on civilian contributions in material terms. In economically disadvantaged locales, the disproportionate ability of socially insulated armed groups to generate revenue can be a factor that enhances recruitment capabilities. Indeed, disenfranchised or economically disadvantaged communities, particularly youth, are far more prone to being recruited by armed actors based on economic – rather than social – reasons. This dynamic creates the illusion that these communities socially align themselves with these armed actors. Access to rent can, therefore, in the case of socially unembedded armed actors, act as a veneer obfuscating the lack of a meaningful relationship with local constituents. In these cases, the litmus test for an armed group's relationship with local constituents is whether it tends to depopulate areas under its control.<sup>122</sup> An inclination towards othering<sup>123</sup> and displacing local communities whose obedience cannot be co-opted or coerced (via rent or otherwise) is indicative of coercive compliance, and the extent to which an armed group engages in these practices tends to be indicative of its social embeddedness.

### Armed groups, social identity theory, and optimal distinctiveness theory

Armed groups therefore possess intricate and complex relationships with the communities they claim to represent or originate from. This relationship – in other words, the degree of embeddedness of the group – has an impact on security provision, as well as on the economic practices deployed by armed actors. Notions of security provision in post-conflict settings are often analysed within the framework of a devolved and tacit social contract between armed groups and local communities. In the context of socially embedded armed actors, however, this vertical approach – influenced by vertical state-society relationship paradigms associated with liberal peacebuilding frameworks<sup>124</sup> – fails to capture horizontal society-society relationships, which are often better suited to analysing the socialized networks that armed groups are frequently part and parcel of.<sup>125</sup>

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122 Libya Herald, 2020. '[UNSMIL concerned about increased kidnappings in Libya](#)'.

123 In this context, this refers to a process of labelling that portrays certain groups as intrinsically different from others.

124 Mccandless, E., Abitbol, E. and Donais, T., 2015. *Vertical integration: A dynamic practice promoting transformative peacebuilding*.

125 The nature and quality of these horizontal relationships have a significant impact on how security governance is experienced by these local communities in their respective neighbourhoods, cities, or regions. More broadly, they also have a substantial impact on whether a national-level social contract can be crafted and what its contours will be.

The nature and resilience of these horizontal relationships is therefore a key determinant of how security sector governance is operationalized at the local level.<sup>126</sup> In the case of socially embedded armed groups – which, in extreme cases, are virtually indistinguishable from the communities they originate from – these horizontal relationships are also the main variables underpinning the relationship of armed actors with local communities. As shown in the sections on social embeddedness and economic practices, conflating social legitimacy with territorial control enabled through revenue-generating capabilities can significantly flaw any assessment of an armed group’s interactions and proximity to local communities.<sup>127</sup>

Opting to analyse armed groups through a social lens entails adopting a more holistic approach that places them as members of a micro-level horizontal network within a wider meshwork spanning Libyan society as a whole. The accepted wisdom with regards to societies in post-conflict transitions is that in resilient states they are brought closely together, whereas in fragile states society is pulled apart. Kaplan<sup>128</sup> emphasizes that “resilient states can work even when their governments fall. Leaders come together to settle disputes in ways that build trust, strengthen ties and lead to the establishment of a new and widely accepted political order. In fragile states, the reverse is often true. During transitions, leaders compete in ways that undermine trust, weaken bonds and yield an unstable political order with low legitimacy”. While true at the wider national and societal level, this analysis can lead to a misconception of social dynamics at the local level. In neighbourhoods and cities where local communities faced a collective threat, emerging local armed group leaders forged identities that welded their respective communities together – in turn, strengthening local ties while establishing new political orders at the local level.<sup>129</sup>

The establishment of these new political orders was, in many ways, the direct result of the establishment of “groups” that mobilized on either side of the Libyan divide of 2011. These new orders were established in the locales that experienced the revolution of 2011 as both a local-level conflict and a national-level revolution. The emergence of these orders can be explained using Social Identity Theory (SIT).<sup>130</sup> SIT is a framework to explain intergroup behaviour, with social identity(ies) stemming from a sense of belonging to a group being the primary deciding factor in this regard. According to SIT, inter-group behaviour is determined by the social categories to which members

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126 The more socially embedded a group is, the more cohesive and dense its network is – a dynamic that reflects positively on its ability to provide security within the territory it stems from.

127 This is even more the case when the framework adopted to analyse armed groups emphasizes their distinctiveness, instead focusing on their organizational capabilities, the territory they control, and the revenues they possess and generate.

128 Kaplan, S., 2014. ‘How to Navigate Regime Transitions – A State’s Greatest Challenge’.

129 For a thorough analysis of the impact of social embeddedness on local orders and patterns of mobilization and fragmentation, see Lacher (2020).

130 Stets, J.E. and Burke, P.J., 2000. ‘Identity theory and social identity theory’, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, pp. 224-237.

belong. An individual's social identity is contingent on membership, and their self-perceived interpersonal interests align with the group's interests. It therefore posits that being a member of a group – and socially identifying as such – can enable or constrict the actions of group members as much as their self-interest would.<sup>131</sup> In the Libyan case, SIT can explain armed group-community relations, recruitment patterns, mobilization patterns, and revenue-generation mechanisms, as well as broader horizontal relationships between communities.

According to SIT, the mere act of joining a group is – in and of itself – a potential source of friction that can lead to conflict. In keeping with the theory, groups that formed as a result of the collective struggle of the revolution and its aftermath crafted a new social identity that portrayed members of the in-group (for example, revolutionary fighters) favourably and those associated with out-groups (for example, regime loyalists who did not partake in the conflict and even defectors) unfavourably. The process of social categorization therein, which occurred almost instinctively as a result of the external threat of repression faced by local communities, created a new local social identity in these locales. This process of social transformation – albeit experienced locally – also led to wide-scale social comparison and stereotyping across Libya's society.<sup>132</sup>

This dynamic was therefore not exclusive to mobilized fighters but permeated society as a whole. It contributed to prejudice and discrimination against members of out-groups within and between communities, thereby creating fragmented landscape at the macro-level but a socially cohesive landscape at the hyperlocal level (including households and neighbourhoods, though not necessarily entire cities). More broadly, groups aligning against the regime also amplified factors that united them (for instance, their anti-authoritarian aspirations), while downplaying factors that divided them (such as their attachment to their local constituencies) – a dynamic intimately associated with the self-esteem hypothesis associated with social identity theory.<sup>133</sup> Nevertheless, the macro-level alliance was short-lived as their attachment to their local constituencies trumped efforts to centralize their leadership. Local ties to patrons, politicians, and businessmen that originated from their local in-group also prevailed over those of the former wider coalition they belonged to, constricting and

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131 See Stets, J.E. and Burke, P.J., 2000. 'Identity theory and social identity theory', *Social Psychology Quarterly*, pp. 224-237; Abrams, D. and Hogg, M.A., 1990. *Social Identity Theory: Constructive and Critical Advances* London: Harvester Wheatsheaf; and for more recent literature; Hogg, M.A., 2016. 'Social identity theory', in McKeown, S., Haji, R. and Ferguson, N. *Understanding Peace and Conflict Through Social Identity Theory*. Contemporary Global Perspectives, pp. 3-17.

132 In an individualist society, the potential violent fallouts of this stigmatization process may have been tempered by an individual's sense of morality; however, in an already collectivist society such as Libya's – where kinship ties and social bonds had become the primary loci of power that individuals centred their group affiliation around – morality was subordinate to in-group ties, thus further fragmenting society and inflicting deep rifts in its social fabric as out-groups were violently exacted revenge upon and cast out.

133 For comments on the motivational status of self-esteem in social identity and intergroup discrimination, see Abrams, D. and Hogg, M.A., 1988. 'Comments on the motivational status of self-esteem in social identity and intergroup discrimination', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 18(4), pp. 317-334.

dictating the choices they subsequently made, as well as their positioning vis-à-vis other armed actors and local communities.<sup>134</sup> The fact that these armed actors' networks often shaped their ability to extract revenues, as well as to garner domestic and foreign military support, also reinforced in-group dynamics, thus contributing to the entrenchment of fragmentation and localism.

The prevalence of localism and iterations of fragmentation can in part be explained using a theory linked to SIT: Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT). ODT is premised on the rationale that individuals belonging to groups intrinsically seek to achieve positive distinctiveness by differentiating themselves from their in-group, primarily out of self-interest.<sup>135</sup> In cases where group boundaries are considered impermeable (such as those associated with kinship ties within Libyan society), this desire for differentiation can manifest itself as social competition and in-group favouritism. In the case of Libya, ODT can be applied to the dynamics between groups, namely to explain the behaviour of revolutionary groups' following the revolution, as well as the fragmentation of several alliances that were formed after 2011.<sup>136</sup>

### Social covenants and patterns of mobilization

Both SIT and ODT help to conceptualize the entrenchment of localism after 2011 and the iterations of fragmentation that ensued. Both approaches rely on a horizontal lens that acknowledges inter-group dynamics and helps shape an understanding of why society-society dynamics are intricately linked with state-society relationships. This is even more salient for socially embedded armed groups, which can sometimes be virtually indistinguishable from the communities they represent. This proximity has an important impact on how relationships between armed actors and communities evolve overtime, particularly since "embeddedness" cannot be acquired artificially.

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134 In *"Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict"*, Lacher directly associates the aftermath of these choices – whether contingent or strategic in nature – to the fragmentation of socially embedded armed groups and coalitions.

135 See Brewer, M.B., 1996. 'When contact is not enough: Social identity and intergroup cooperation', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 20(3-4), pp. 291-303; Brewer, M.B., 2011. 'Optimal distinctiveness theory: Its history and development', in P. AM Van Lange, A. Kruglanski, & E.T. Higgins, *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology: Volume 2*. London: Sage UK, pp. 81-98.

136 There were several instances where diverse armed actors aligned against a common enemy but maintained their distinctive lines of command from one another through their community relationship – primarily out of self-interest. In fact, socially embedded armed actors even feature demobilized "reserve forces", which mobilize through communal links in times of common threat. Diverging interests also emerged within in-groups, fragmenting society, and often splintering armed actors. Moreover, in several post-war instances, the perceived utility of maintaining a high degree of social embeddedness via proximity to local communities and independent chains of command trumped the perceived benefit from forming a cohesive block that would see localist inclinations diluted and local social identities eroded in favour of a more centralized leadership. This was one of the factors that hampered several SSR efforts, including most prominently the plan to establish a Libyan National Guard. See Wehrey, F. and Ahram, A., 2015. *Taming the Militias: Building National Guards in Fractured Arab States*. Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

At the national level, these society-society relationships have an immense impact on whether a social contract can be architected and what its nature may potentially be.

Anderson highlights that countries with strong social cohesion operate based on a concept he labels as an “imagined community”, where society is “able to differentiate between compatriots and outsiders”. The affinitive power of a common national identity and group allegiance channels itself into country development, yielding states that are more stable, better governed, more development-oriented, and better able to deal with crises because common challenges trigger cooperation.<sup>137</sup> This concept can be intimately tied to the idea of a “social covenant”, a framework that is built on the idea of bringing together various ethnic, religious, clan, and ideological groups ahead of the crafting of a national-level social contract.<sup>138</sup> Social covenants are informal and place more emphasis on values and trust - in contrast with social contracts, which arguably require a degree of coercion.<sup>139</sup>

Although the concept is generally applied to societies at the national level to assess their level of cohesion, in the case of Libya, it can be argued that “local social covenants” emerged in locales where groups were socially embedded and displayed a proximity to the population. These were “horizontal compacts” that brought together diverse constituencies within these locales. They came together to agree on frameworks for cooperation - informal agreements that in turn affected security governance, development, and social peace within their respective communities. These covenants are forged informally and contribute to building a common identity, values, and a narrative that defines the ethos of the local community they bring together. While locally contributing to the enhancement of co-existence, the emergence of these covenants also reinforces the in-group and out-group dynamics that armed groups are subject to as per SIT and ODT. This enhances localism but also drives fragmentation as in-groups within covenants splinter and social actors adopt different stances, thus undermining local social cohesion while risking their social legitimacy.

In cases where communities experienced 2011 as a collective struggle, a “new local identity” was forged, one that formed the backbone of the subsequent social covenant therein. In this case, it is theoretically unsuitable to regard armed groups’ relationships with local communities as top-down since they benefit from a degree of popular legitimacy and support that suggests a degree of fit with the local community from which they emerged. In other locales, the social covenants that emerged after 2011 amalgamated different values and ideologies, leading to a reality where differing

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137 Anderson, B., 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

138 Kaplan, S., 2014. *Social covenants and social contracts in transitions*. Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre.

139 Kaplan, S., 2013. ‘[Social covenants must precede social contracts](#)’. Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs.



constituencies – and affiliated armed groups – co-existed locally. The cohesiveness of the community and the resilience of the social compacts therein was subsequently tested as different ideological forces – as well as in-group and out-group dynamics that manifested themselves within local communities – created tensions within these newly formed social circles. With foreign influence acting as a “rift multiplier”, communities that experienced a local conflict after 2011 underwent a transformation that saw their social covenants splinter or mutate as conflict intensified within them – often along tribal, ethnic, communal, or ideological lines. The social covenants of other locales were more cohesive and contributed to tempering internal tensions, preventing the eruption of local conflict and preserving a modicum of social peace despite the differing social forces that these covenants amalgamated.

This social method of analysing constituencies enables a relational approach to elucidate the relationship of armed groups with local communities. In cases where a covenant exists, members of socially embedded armed groups can demobilize in times of peace, remobilizing only if they perceive a threat – and only if the entire “covenant” (in other words, the local community) is under threat. In these cases, armed groups are inherently locally legitimate because they are part and parcel of the covenant and mobilize to protect it. In other cases, armed actors can garner legitimacy as part of the covenant using different means. A utilitarian approach, whereby armed groups draw popular support through service provision, can, indeed, increase empirical legitimacy locally, especially during and in the immediate aftermath of conflict. This approach, however, also reflects a degree of detachment from the local community as civilians will have to maintain a degree of compliance to experience higher degrees of stability. This “performance-based” legitimacy can decline overtime, particularly if it is premised on coercive methods and norms removed from pre-war social orders.<sup>140</sup> This legitimacy will often become increasingly sustained by the cost-benefit calculation of local communities of the utility of armed groups’ service provision in exchange for nominal support.<sup>141</sup> Considering the local ties characterizing the emergence of most of Libya’s armed groups, an overarching factor influencing armed group-community relationships is social ties, which can be underpinned by kinship relations or patronage networks.

The aforementioned dynamics associated with social covenants – in addition to group-related behaviour outlined through SIT and ODT – play into patterns of mobilization, demobilization, and remobilization in Libya. Locally cohesive social covenants constrain the mobilization of local armed actors against local opponents and can lead to their partial demobilization. Indeed, socially embedded armed actors do not need to derive legitimacy through the provision of services or the sustenance

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140 Krieger, H., 2018. ‘International Law and Governance by Armed Groups: Caught in the Legitimacy Trap?’. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 12(4), pp. 563-583.

141 Ibid.

of wartime security order; however, the shared identity, values, and narratives underpinning the covenant catalyse the collective mobilization of a community's constituency - and its armed actors - against perceived external threats and enemies. In these covenants, it is not uncommon to see wide-scale "civilian" mobilization against perceived external threats as the community's social order is quickly converted to a wartime order. As part of this process, social ties within the covenant are collectively activated, a process that enables wide-scale recruitment across the community.

This process of wartime order revitalization was instrumental in the formation of the coalition that countered Haftar following his offensive on Tripoli on 4 April 2019. Several local social covenants considered the offensive an existential threat, rightfully viewing Haftar's blitzkrieg as a coup attempt that would revert Libya back to authoritarianism. In that sense, communities whose collective identities were moulded from a common conflict in pursuit of revolutionary ideals viewed Haftar's offensive as both an affront and an existential threat. This led to wide-scale mobilization that saw constituencies from Misrata, the Nafussa Mountains, Zawiyah, and Zliten, among others, collectively rally towards Tripoli. In line with SIT patterns of cooperation outlined in the section above, these groups expediently aligned with criminal armed groups that lacked the degree of social embeddedness they possessed. In the narratives that surrounded their collective mobilization, the factions amplified the factors that brought them together (including their anti-authoritarian aspirations) while downplaying the divisions that plagued them. They retained a degree of independence from one another - in line with ODT - and most did not mobilize towards the central city of Sirte once the threat of Haftar capturing Tripoli was gone. After Haftar's main forward base in Tarhuna was seized by GNA-aligned groups, the diverging strategic calculations between in-groups and out-groups that formed part of the initial wider coalition revealed divisions within it, thereby instigating its fragmentation.<sup>142</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, armed actors that draw boundaries between them and their local community are able to better centralize the chain of command; however, they face challenges incentivizing individuals to join their ranks, thereby hindering their ability to sustain protracted military efforts. While this can be partially offset through financial incentives, the instrumentalization of patronage networks, and the deployment of coercion, these methods are all time-bound and are subject to the availability of resources. Moreover, the protracted deployment of coercion can become progressively stifling to local communities, thus hindering the legitimacy of these armed actors and affecting the very patronage networks they rely on for mobilization - thereby also driving fragmentation.

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142 This is an ongoing process at the time of writing.

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## Misrata's 301 Infantry Battalion: How social legitimacy eroded over time

The 301 Infantry Battalion was established in 2015 by the General Staff of the Libyan Army in Tripoli following a decision by the Government of National Salvation (formed in the aftermath of the war that pitted Zintan's brigades with the Libyan Dawn Coalition). From 2015 to 2018, the battalion was gradually able to assert control over the south-west of the Libyan capital, Tripoli, and provide security there (the south-west of Tripoli was one of the main targets during the fighting of 2014).

Between 2015 and 2018, the 301 Battalion was considered one of the most active armed groups in combating crime, drug trafficking, and smuggling in the south-western neighbourhoods of Tripoli – an area that suffered from a security vacuum before the 301 Battalion established a foothold there.

Before its establishment as a formal group affiliated with the General Staff of the Libyan Army, the battalion was part of what is now known as the Halbous Brigade – one of Misrata's largest brigades that participated in the Libya Dawn war. The Halbous Brigade was formally led by Misratan General Mohamed Al-Haddad after 2011 and was formed against the backdrop of the collective struggle experienced by communities in Misrata against Gaddafi. Haddad opposed Misrata's mobilization for the 2014 Libya Dawn Operation, preferring mediation instead. Fighters from the Halbous Brigade did, however, subsequently mobilize due to heightened social pressure over the killing of Misratan fighters from Salah Badi's Summoud Battalion in Tripoli. Badi had attempted – and failed – to capture Tripoli International Airport from Zintani-aligned groups, an event that had a knock-on effect on popular sentiment in the merchant city and its constituencies. Haddad's calls for mediation with Zintani groups were ignored,<sup>143</sup> and the 301 Battalion was established following the Libya Dawn Operation as an offshoot of Haddad's force. This is an example of how communal ties and social embeddedness can supersede the “semi-formal leadership” of socially embedded armed actors.

Founded by “irregular fighters” who mobilized from Misrata as an offshoot of the Halbous Brigade, the battalion was led by Abdelsalam Zoubi, one of the most prominent field commanders from the city. After consolidating its control over the area, the 301 Battalion oversaw the return of displaced families from Aziziya to their homes in south-west Tripoli in 2014, and even brokered some local “peaceful coexistence charters” between locals who were involved in either side of the conflict. After 2015 Zoubi, who informally headed the 301 Battalion, restructured it significantly – a development that diminished the group's ability to capitalize on communal ties in Misrata. Zoubi altered both its

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143 Haddad returned to the scene in 2017 as commander of the Central Military Zone under the banner of the GNA's General Staff of the Libyan Army. In August 2020, against the backdrop of heightened tensions between Misratan and Tripoli-based armed groups, Haddad was appointed GNA's Chief of Staff for the Libyan Army.

make-up and its chain of command. Some active combatants from Misrata remained part of the force, while others demobilized and returned to their “civilian activities”. This is a common pattern of mobilization and demobilization with battalions formed along communal lines and members predominantly mobilizing in times of war (for example, against Gadaffi in 2011, during the Libya Dawn War in 2014, against Daesh in Sirte in 2016, and against Haftar’s LAAF in 2019).

The 301 Battalion is considered one of the only armed actors through which Misrata maintained a military footprint in the capital, Tripoli, after 2014; however, the group’s internal structure has shifted since its establishment in Tripoli and it is no longer predominantly staffed by Misratans (though most of its leadership comes from the coastal city). Several other non-Misratan factions were recruited, including from Tripoli. Most notable among the new recruits were Tuareg that assumed both protection and combat roles in the aftermath of the offensive on Tripoli in April 2019.<sup>144</sup> While this change did not significantly diminish the make-up of the leadership of the 301 Battalion, the group’s perceived social legitimacy in Misrata diminished overtime. The decrease was commensurate with the diminished salience of a Misratan footprint within the battalion’s make-up – a trend that highlights the extent to which social embeddedness and legitimacy are inter-linked.<sup>145</sup>

Since its establishment in 2015, Battalion 301 – owing in part to its Misratan leadership and its geographical area of control – has formed part of several conflicts and transformations witnessed by Tripoli’s security landscape. One of the first conflicts was due to tensions between the 301 Battalion and armed gunmen from the Aziziya area of Wersheffana in 2016. These tensions were largely attributed to the fact that the 301 Brigade was in charge of protecting the south-western flank of Tripoli from armed groups that the Libya Dawn coalition had expelled from the city, namely Zintani militias but also their support force – the “tribal army” in Wersheffana.

The battalion subsequently played a distinct role against the backdrop of “security arrangements” implemented – albeit in an incomplete and flawed fashion – as part of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) in 2016. These arrangements took the form of a forced expulsion of “anti-GNA” armed groups affiliated with the Libya Dawn Coalition (several of whom came from Misrata) from the capital, Tripoli. As opposed to other groups, the 301 Battalion welcomed the formation of the GNA after the Skhirat agreement and publicly declared its support for peace and reconciliation – breaking with the trend among most other Misratan groups at the time. Misratan armed groups and several of its politicians, who initially supported the Government of National Salvation, were split over whether to support or oppose the GNA’s establishment.

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144 Badi, E. (2019) Interview with MoI official in Tripoli (July 2019)

145 In this instance, the social embeddedness of the group diluted overtime, affecting both the relational and ideational facets of embeddedness and, in turn, impacting social legitimacy.

Many armed groups also shared an antagonism towards Tripoli-based groups that had a marginal role as part of the Libya Dawn coalition.

In 2018 the 301 Battalion – alongside groups from the “Tripoli cartel”<sup>146</sup> – participated in repelling an attack by the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade from Tarhuna (the Kani Brigade – now known as the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade), which was joined by Al Summoud Brigade (headed by Salah Badi). One of the primary leaders of the 301 Battalion Ali Salim was killed in a verbal altercation between Misratan armed groups (the 301 Battalion and Al Summoud), which prompted the entire 301 Battalion to mobilize against Misrata’s Summoud Battalion and the Kani Brigade. This was one of the only instances where two Misratan groups – with varying degrees of social embeddedness – were mobilized as part of two opposing coalitions, illustrating the rifts that diverging strategic choices taken by armed actors can inflict upon the social fabric – and, more broadly, the social covenant – of their communities.

Nevertheless, by 2018, the 301 Battalion’s focus on operationalizing predatory revenue-generation mechanisms in its area of control south of Tripoli – coupled with its internal transmutation – had severely eroded its legitimacy within Misrata. Several stakeholders in the city no longer considered it a Misratan group. Its loss of legitimacy was the by-product of several factors: a diminished degree of social embeddedness owing to its evolving make-up over time, its protracted remote deployment to Tripoli, and its predatory revenue-generation practices.

In April 2019 the 301 Battalion was one of the first armed groups to take part in repelling the LAAF offensive on Tripoli led by Haftar – thus aligning with the Summoud Battalion. This swift rapprochement can be explained using SIT: local communities in western Libya perceived Haftar’s offensive as a collective threat, thereby triggering a mobilization along social lines. Unlike previous internal rifts, which were influenced by political and economic factors, the offensive represented a collective threat to the common identity of armed actors – and their respective communities. This threat inherently superseded any differences over access to rent or political motivations.

In late 2019, the commander of the 301 Battalion, Abdulsalam Zoubi, was also one of very few Tripoli-based commanders to oversee the deployment of Syrian mercenaries to Tripoli’s frontlines.<sup>147</sup> While this artificially<sup>148</sup> strengthened the 301 Battalion and allowed it to portray itself as a more prominent group, it also caused tensions with other “revolutionary” armed actors and mobilized fighters who perceived the involvement of foreign Syrian mercenaries negatively. Actors whose common communal identity was crafted on the basis of revolutionary ideals – who had refused the participation

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146 Lacher, W. and Al-Idrissi, A., 2018. *Capital of Militias: Tripoli’s Armed Groups Capture the Libyan State*, Briefing Paper. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

147 Badi, E (2019) Phone interview with an MoI official in Tripoli, December 2019.

148 This example highlights how foreign support can artificially compensate for social embeddedness.

of foreign troops in the 2011 uprising to overthrow Gaddafi – saw Syrians’ participation not only as unnecessary, but also as a development that was misaligned with the anchors that shaped the “revolutionary narrative” and common identity that formed the basis of their social covenant. As the secrecy surrounding the participation of Syrian mercenaries dissipated in late 2019, many armed actors that formed part of the GNA-aligned coalition had to rationalize the deployment of Syrian mercenaries as a mere development to counter-balance the LAAF’s use of Russian mercenaries. Some actors and communities even invoked religion, language, and cultural proximity with Syria as a means to reconcile the misalignment of Syrian fighters’ participation with their own values and ideals.<sup>149</sup>

Overall, despite the fact that the 301 Battalion was the only “Misratan group” to remain in the capital after the arrival of the GNA, the group retained a degree of social embeddedness and an ability to activate communal links as part of Misrata’s “social covenant” once acute threats arose; however, owing to its protracted presence in Tripoli’s suburbs and its distance from Misrata, the group nonetheless transformed its make-up, structure, and mobilization patterns. In line with SIT and ODT, the group also developed an idiosyncratic approach to its decision-making, which was dictated by a need to co-exist – and, at times, cooperate – with local groups around Tripoli while also being constrained by its social embeddedness and links with Misratan constituencies. While the group’s decision to mobilize against Misrata’s Summoud Battalion in September 2018 was a strategic choice, which was made despite the common origin of both groups, communal links were the main driver of its mobilization against Haftar following his offensive on Tripoli.

The 301 Battalion also developed alternative revenue-generation mechanisms that aimed to capitalize on the territory it controlled south-west of Tripoli. While merely a speculation, it is difficult to foresee how the group would have operated with a similar modus operandi had it not controlled territory around the capital. Indeed, the 301 Battalion developed relationships with merchants present in the Swani area (a suburb south-west of Tripoli that is, among others, a hub for storing perishable and non-perishable goods as well as the site of several factories and businesses). The battalion’s relationship with these traders was transactional and centred around the provision of protection in exchange for a fee that the 301 Battalion imposed. One of the western region’s largest commercial wholesale markets is located in Swani; consequently, the royalty system developed by the group allowed it to generate a significant amount of revenue. This is another example of how groups that are insulated from local communities from their area of control may develop transactional, coercion-based, or predatory revenue-generation mechanisms that they would not use within their own communities.

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149 Badi, E. (2020); phone interview with a member of the 301 Battalion (February 2020).

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## **Faraj Egaim’s negative phenomena counter agency: A case of truncated social legitimacy**

The NPCA was established in 2019 with a direct affiliation to Haftar’s General Command of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces in eastern Libya. It is primarily staffed by individuals that hail from the Awagir tribe. The group is, by and large, the by-product of its commander’s – Faraj Egaim Al-Abdali, who also hails from the Awagir tribe in eastern Libya – social ties. Egaim benefits from the tribal support of Awagir’s leaders, its social council, and the tribe’s youth and derives much of his influence from the tribal backing of the Abdali clan of the Awagir.

The NPCA’s rank and file is primarily composed of former fighters from the Special Task Forces – Counterterrorism Apparatus, an armed group that emerged in 2014 as one of the most prominent groups aligned with Haftar’s Dignity Operation and whose members were deployed on multiple axis of fighting in Benghazi (including Bouatni, Al-Lithi, Souq Al Hout, and al Sabri). The force also secured the entry point into Bersess, one of the main gates leading to central Benghazi. The Special Task Forces – Counterterrorism Apparatus was established by Egaim. In 2015 the force had received formal recognition and affiliation from the MoI in eastern Libya while Egaim had obtained the rank of lieutenant through the MoI. At the time, his force was officially called “The Special Task and Counterterrorism Force”. The head of the interim government Abdullah Al-Thinni subsequently renamed it the “Special Tasks Force”.

The establishment of the apparatus in its current form, however, was subject to the addition of other gunmen who did not belong to the tribe.<sup>150</sup> The LAAF Central Command added these new recruits, seeking to diminish the threat that Egaim – and, more broadly, the Awagir – represented to Haftar and the LAAF Central Command; however, these additions failed to dilute the tribal influence over the force, which today represents one “armed wing” of the Awagir in Benghazi,<sup>151</sup> and most former militants of the Special Task Force are once again aligned under Egaim’s leadership.

The Awagir tribe is the largest tribe in Benghazi. During the Gadaffi era, the tribe’s area of control was colloquially known as “the Green Belt”, due to the fact that its geographic area of presence and control forms a crescent around Benghazi (from the area of Tokra in the east to Al-Abyar, Soluq, and the coastal city of Gamins). This belt is essentially considered an area of influence of the Awagir, though the cities it comprises are not solely populated by its constituencies. Nevertheless, the Awagir, along with other historically influential Bedouin tribes in Cyrenaica such as the Bara’asa, the

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150 Badi, E. (2019); phone interview with a Benghazi resident (August 2019).

151 Other Awagir-affiliated units include the Awliyaa al Dam, led by Iyad Al-Fsay, the Benina Airport Protection Force under Ezzedine Al-Wakwak Al-Barghathi, the Military Intelligence Force under Salah Bulghib, and the Saiqa Special Forces, which, in the wake of Wanis Bukhamada’s passing in November 2020, is now reportedly under the command of another Awagir figure, Abdelmunim Al-Abdali.

Magharba, the Obeidat and the Hasa, had pre-existing localistic proclivities influenced by their collective struggle against Italian colonial rule.

Aside from having over time structured their own local covenants along tribal lines, these groups tended to jockey for territorial control and influence in eastern Libya, particularly in Benghazi. In line with SIT, some factions within these groups also shared a perception that non-Bedouin constituencies in eastern Libya were to be regarded (and treated) as out-groups – a perception that politically manifested itself during the Gaddafi era, and more prominently after 2011, as a desire for federalism at best, or secession at worst. The Dignity Operation launched by Khalifa Haftar in 2014 was viewed as an opportunity to act on these localistic inclinations under the guise of a foreign-supported counterterrorism operation. While Haftar found his new *raison d'être* in the Dignity Operation after his failed coup against the GNC in February 2014, the diverse currents that mobilized as part of his operation did so in part to take advantage of the foreign support he benefited from in order to violently act on their own localistic goals.<sup>152</sup> This manifested itself as the displacement of “out-groups” from eastern Libya, including thousands of former residents of eastern Libya originating from western Libya, those who did not hail from Bedouin tribes, those who opposed Haftar, and those who possessed links with extremists that had also mobilized as part of the anti-Dignity coalition.

The displacement of these local communities was indicative of the type of relationship that armed groups aligned under the LAAF would develop with local communities in eastern Libya in that it augured its intention to secure coercive compliance. The fact that the LAAF Central Command has not committed to facilitate the return of those displaced also speaks to its willingness to accommodate the agenda of social constituencies aligned under its banner in order to secure their alignment.

In the aftermath of the Dignity Operation, the Special Task Force was renowned, particularly in 2016, for being one of the Awagir-linked armed groups heavily involved in human rights violations, illegal arrests, and detention.<sup>153</sup> Several other Awagir-commanded units, most notably *Katibat Awliya Al-Dam* (the Avengers of Blood), were involved in extrajudicial killings.<sup>154</sup> With several separate units affiliated with the Awagir,<sup>155</sup> nominally aligned under the “LNA”, a tug of war ensued over securing the

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152 Badi, E. (2019); interview with an internally displaced member from Benghazi, in Istanbul (November 2019).

153 This was further enabled by the fact that the force had control over the area of Bersess (and controlled the checkpoint at the entry point to the area, as well as the detainment camp of Bersess). It also controlled the prison of Kweyfiyah, which was locally known as one of the largest prisons of eastern Libya where detainees and prisoners were routinely subjected to torture. See: Human Rights Watch, 2015. ‘[Libya: Widespread Torture in Detention](#)’.

154 Human Rights Watch, 2017. ‘[Libya: Mass Extra-Judicial Execution, Need for Investigation, Accountability](#)’.

155 This includes groups outlined in footnote 135 (except for the Saiqa Special Forces, which was not commanded by an Awagir figure).



tribe's loyalty. Egaim was central to this, as was Mehdi Al-Barghathi, commander of the 204<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion that participated in Operation Dignity. Al-Barghathi's tribe, the "Baraghtha", are considered a *bayt*<sup>156</sup> of the Awagir tribe, much like Egaim's "Abdali" *bayt*. Tensions sored between Egaim, Al-Barghathi, and Haftar.

Al-Barghathi, who was close to Egaim, was appointed in January 2016 as the GNA's Defence Minister in a bid by the then-newly founded government to establish a footprint in eastern Libya and undermine Haftar. On 4 June 2016 the Minister of Interior of the Interim Government in eastern Libya, Mohamed Al-Madani Al-Fakhri, issued a ministerial decision to dismantle Egaim's Special Task Force, stipulating that all of its assets should be transferred to the MoI. The MoI also called for the force's officers and soldiers to be "disbanded". Volunteers working with the Special Task Force were reassigned to the MoI, which stated that it would seek to regularize them by looking into their status on paper. Given the tribal dimension of Egaim's force, and the fact most of its members were from his own clan, a collective decision was made by the armed group's members not to respect the orders of the MoI. This further strained relations between the Barghathi-Egaim duo and Haftar. The latter opted to undermine Al-Barghathi's 204 Battalion by rebranding it as "the 298 Battalion" and appointing another Barghathi figure at its helm.<sup>157</sup> Haftar's ability to derive foreign support enabled him to co-opt most of the other Awagir-aligned units, thus paving the way for him to then sideline Al-Barghathi – stripping him of his armed group in the process. In broad terms, Haftar's success in this endeavour was predicated on his ability to capitalize on intra-Awagir factionalism and a lack of cohesion within the tribe.

In July 2017, the GNA in Tripoli took advantage of this dispute and appointed Egaim as undersecretary of the MoI. This was essentially Egaim's strategy to reassert his influence in eastern Libya after Haftar had sidelined his ally Al-Barghathi. The move was welcomed by Egaim's Abdali *bayt* (from which he derived his forces), and the GNA seemed poised to extend its influence in eastern Libya through him. Nevertheless, although the Supreme Council of the Awagir tribe – along with the sheikhs, notables, youths, and leaders of the axis of fighting of the Awagir tribesmen – issued a statement<sup>158</sup> to voice support for Egaim on 5 September 2017,<sup>159</sup> several Awagir-linked units and constituencies still preferred to align under Haftar.

Haftar responded to GNA's decision by preventing GNA officials from issuing any decrees that would affect "liberated areas" under his control in eastern Libya. Haftar shared this decree, issued in September 2017, with the Chief of the General Staff, chiefs

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156 This is essentially a "family" of the Awagir tribe. Other "families" include Al-Fawaress, Al-Amarna, Al-Abdalis (from which Egaim hails), Al-Fsayat, and Al-Gatran.

157 Libya Herald, 2016. '[Benghazi's 204 Tank Battalion renamed as another Barghathi takes over](#)'.

158 Alwasat, 2017. '[Awagir conditionally welcome Egaim's appointment as GNA's Deputy Interior Minister](#)'.

159 This followed a meeting held in the Bersess area east of Benghazi, the Abdali's (Egaim's *bayt*) area of control.

of staff of the armed forces, the Head of the Control Authority, and the commanders of the military zones, as well as all of the commanders of units in his armed forces. They were ordered to carry out these instructions and use force, if necessary, against those that would not respect them.

However, despite Haftar's manoeuvring, Egaim defected nonetheless. As soon as he was assigned the role of deputy MOI by the GNA, Egaim headed to central Benghazi to carry out his duties, challenging Haftar's decision to prevent the GNA from operating in his area of control. In October 2017, Egaim announced the activation of a plan to secure Benghazi in cooperation with units inside the city, which increased tensions between him and other local allies of Haftar. In November 2017, Egaim was subject to an assassination attempt, which he survived. His main headquarters in the area of Budzira were also targeted by mortar shelling that killed one and wounded eight members of his Special Task Force. Egaim publicly accused Haftar of being behind the assassination attempt. He also gave Haftar an ultimatum and a deadline to withdraw from Benghazi, simultaneously calling on the Awagir and the commander of Saiqa, Wanis Bukhamada, to participate in a meeting where they would jointly agree on a format to secure the city of Benghazi.

The event was considered an explicit threat to Haftar since Egaim was effectively proposing to replace him with another figure. This escalated the situation further and culminated in a raid on the Awagir-controlled area of Bersess by Haftar's forces that forced Egaim to surrender himself, though his arrest was negotiated by Saiqa's commander Wanis Bukhamada with a promise to members of the Awagir that he would not be harmed. Haftar's raid – which did not trigger any form of large-scale mobilization by the Awagir – once again illustrated the factionalism that permeated the tribe, and the extent to which the foreign support that Haftar benefitted from allowed him to profit from fragmentation within the tribe as well as the greed (and grievances) of some of its elites.

Egaim's detention lasted for several months before he was released in August 2018. Pressure from members of Egaim's constituency – which blocked the roads east of Benghazi to put pressure on Haftar – illustrated the truncated social legitimacy of Egaim and intra-Awagir divisions. Indeed, only a narrow group of Awagir tribesmen demanded his release. Haftar ultimately responded to calls to release him, fearing that instability would ensue, particularly since the pleas came against the backdrop of a planned operation to capture the Fezzan, preparations for the Tripoli offensive, and heightened tensions between groups loyal to him<sup>160</sup> and other Awagir-linked units. The event, once again, illustrated the LAAF's reliance on a delicate balance between co-option and coercion to retain control over territory it nominally controlled. It

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160 This primarily manifested itself as tensions between other Awagir-linked groups (see footnote 135) and groups directly loyal to Haftar, including the 106<sup>th</sup> and Tarek Bin Ziyad Brigade.

demonstrated that, despite having been aligned with the LAAF for years, the Awagir's relationship with the LAAF was merely a transactional arrangement. The arrangement was predicated on the fulfilment of the perceived interests of a narrow clique of Awagir elites claiming to represent their tribe, but ultimately more than willing to put their own interests above those of the tribe.

Egaim returned to the limelight by a decree from the LAAF Central Command issued on 12 August 2019 – almost a year after his release. The decree assigned him a new unit to lead – the NPCA. The force had a large mandate, which ranged from fighting crime; demolishing random buildings; securing Benghazi's hospitals and facilities; supporting the municipal guards in controlling factories, shops, and local companies; and providing support to other local units. The force was also entrusted with combating crime, as well as arresting members of armed criminal organizations and gangs. Its mandate also included intelligence gathering, investigations, confiscating weapons and ammunition, preparing induction records, liaising with the MoI and the public prosecutor, and participating in the implementation of security arrangements in the administrative area of Benghazi that were supposed to be implemented by the MoI. Its broad remit reflected Haftar's degree of dependence on the Awagir – whose influence he was unable to dilute through coercion alone.

Nevertheless, the NPCA did not solely include members of the Awagir tribe. Haftar also infused it with members of other units that were loyal to him to mitigate the risk that a force exclusively associated with Egaim-aligned Awagir tribesmen would mean to his leadership. This move highlights the tension between Haftar's approach to centralizing military leadership and the localistic inclinations of a force such as the NPCA – which primarily deploys, mobilizes, and makes strategic choices based on the interests of Egaim-aligned Awagir. More broadly, Haftar's strategy for dealing with Egaim – and the Awagir – also demonstrates the limits of his ability to capitalize on intra-tribal divisions to establish command and control. This strategy ultimately allowed him to co-opt and coerce multiple Awagir-aligned forces – each possessing a degree of social legitimacy – through divide-and-rule tactics.

Indeed, the tribal backing that Egaim benefitted from explains his ability to retain relevance as part of Benghazi's security sector, and at the helm of an armed group, despite his previous overt challenge to Haftar. Egaim would have been exiled, imprisoned, or killed had it not been for tribal pressures and the risk of Haftar losing an important ally in the Awagir tribe. Yet a careful balance was crafted between coercing Egaim and those aligned under him and co-opting other Awagir-linked units whose leaders benefitted from their alignment with Haftar.

More broadly, the NPCA did not mobilize for the Tripoli offensive as a unit (though some members of the Awagir did mobilize towards Tripoli in the early days of the offensive), preferring instead to take advantage of the situation to consolidate territorial control

in Benghazi. Indeed, most of the Awagir preferred to use this time period to increase their leverage over the LAAF's Central Command. This led to heightened tension between the NPCA – which aims to advance the interests of the Egaim-aligned Awagir – with other Benghazi-based groups, such as the Tarik Bin Ziyad brigade – which is primarily staffed with Salafis that are more inclined to be loyal to Haftar, as well as the 106<sup>th</sup> Brigade.<sup>161</sup> Nevertheless, these local tensions and rifts, which highlight the social boundaries and localistic inclinations of the groups that have carved Benghazi for themselves, have been obfuscated by the urgency of prioritizing mobilization and military build-up in the central city of Sirte where the threat of Turkish-backed, GNA-aligned forces making territorial headway towards eastern Libya represents a threat to both Haftar's Central Command and the groups aligned under its banner. At the time of writing, the NPCA (and the Awagir more broadly) had not mobilized towards Sirte. In the case of the NPCA, this is partly owing to its “protection mandate”, as well as escalating tensions between Egaim – and the Awagir in general – and the leaders of other armed groups that deployed to Sirte (including the Saiqa Brigade, the 128<sup>th</sup> Brigade, the Tarik Bin Ziyad Brigade, and the 106<sup>th</sup> Brigade,<sup>162</sup> among others).

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161 The 106<sup>th</sup> Brigade is one of the best equipped brigades of the LAAF and is informally led by Haftar's son Khaled.

162 These groups have all deployed units to the coastal city of Sirte and are supported by Wagner and Sudanese (Darfuri) mercenaries. The 128<sup>th</sup> Brigade – led by Hassan Alzadma – and the Tarek Bin Ziyad battalion – led by Omar Morajea El Megerhi – were granted a “Reinforced brigade” rank by LAAF General Command decree in September 2020. The status is reminiscent of the Gadaffi-era's 32<sup>nd</sup> Reinforced Brigade” led by Gadaffi's son Khamis.

## Summary

This chapter has sought to shed light on idiosyncratic features that account for the diverging trajectories of armed actors after 2011, many of which transcend the dichotomy of revolutionary and anti-revolutionary factions. While security sector governance was characterized by different typologies of hybridity across the country, local factors significantly affected how these initially manifested themselves and subsequently evolved in different locales. The level of proximity of armed groups to their community, as well as the geographic territory they controlled, shaped, among other things, their choice of revenue-generation mechanisms, their practices as security providers, their ability to centralize military command, and their patterns of (de)mobilization.

Both SIT and ODT account for the social embeddedness of armed groups and cycles of fragmentation that war-time coalitions have often experienced in Libya. They also explain the emergence of “social covenants” in different Libyan locales. In these places, instead of forging top-down “social contracts” with local communities in their areas of control, armed groups “co-existed” with varying degrees of social embeddedness. Depending on the degree of cohesiveness therein, their aspirations, and the broader socio-political and economic context, these armed actors either secured the cooperation or compliance of local communities. The typology of the relationship with local communities often dictated wartime orders: armed groups that possessed a degree of social embeddedness and shared positive relationships with local communities were able to translate this cooperation into improved organization, recruitment capabilities, and cohesiveness. Actors whose relationship with local communities was transactional or who insulated themselves from constituencies under their geographic areas of control were more inclined to use co-option or coercion as a means of retaining the ability to recruit and rein in social discontent through repression.

These group dynamics explain the current impending fragmentation of both the LAAF in eastern Libya and the GNA-aligned alliance in western Libya. In- and out-group dynamics are already manifesting themselves as local level tensions and political manoeuvring between armed actors and politicians nominally aligned under the broader banner of the two wider coalitions. The collective threat of Haftar’s offensive to social covenants in western Libya is already fading away, with armed groups from the city of Misrata representing the bulk of the forces mobilized towards Sirte, where a stalemate with LAAF-aligned forces has solidified at the time of writing. Meanwhile, other GNA-aligned groups – along with members of the political elite – are instead manoeuvring to cement their presence as part of the post-war security architecture and political order. On the LAAF side, the social reverberations from the fallout of Haftar’s offensive are being tapered by the perception of a collective threat from Turkish-backed, GNA-aligned forces in Sirte’s vicinity. This has manifested itself as an

artificial and momentary cohesion amongst LAAF-aligned forces, with some groups with localistic inclinations that did not mobilize for the Tripoli offensive – such as the Saiqa Brigade, which remained in Benghazi – aligning with groups directly loyal to Haftar – such as the Salafist Tarik bin Ziyad Battalion – and collectively mobilizing towards Sirte.

Recognizing these disparities in social embeddedness and typologies of community relations across armed groups (despite their nominal alignment under broader recognizable coalitions) is particularly important within the context of SSR. The groups explored in the various case studies presented in previous sections illustrate how these have affected their choice of revenue-generation mechanisms, their practices as security providers, their ability to centralize military command, and their patterns of (de)mobilization.

Situating these armed actors within the broader socio-demographic landscape not only accounts for hybridity in security sector governance and the political economy, but also provides a more holistic understanding of the methods through which they could be engaged, as well as potential oversight actors. Indeed, the logic through which armed groups capitalize on their social clout and embeddedness within their respective covenants to enhance their ability to mobilize for war can be reversed. Instead, their respective communities and constituencies can be engaged to rein them in, constrain their actions, and exercise oversight over them. This approach can prove particularly instrumental within the context of a ceasefire and ensuing interim security arrangements, which can be regarded as a transitory phase when social wartime orders are converted into systems that can be built upon to usher in a more sustainable peace. Given the current focus on the consolidation of a nationwide ceasefire and the establishment of a demilitarization zone in central Libya following announcements by the GNA's Prime Minister and the Speaker of the House of Representatives on 21 August 2020, the role that community-level actors could play – as part of oversight structures, stabilizing vectors and SSR enablers<sup>163</sup> – will be explored in the next section.

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163 Megirisi, T., 2020. 'How New Street Protests can help Libya diplomacy succeed, European Council of Foreign Relations'.

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## **Disparities in social embeddedness and legitimacy**

The CTF stands out as one of the most socially embedded forces, with an ability to collectively mobilize by activating social links – particularly within its cadre of support forces. The 301 Battalion – despite the Misratan origins of its leadership – has gradually lost its status as a socially embedded force owing to its protracted deployment in Tripoli. This dynamic led the group to both alter its internal make-up (with several recruits from outside Misrata) and develop predatory revenue-generation mechanisms based on its area of territorial control. The disparity between the CTF, a socially embedded force, and the 301 Battalion, whose social legitimacy has gradually waned, illustrates that even if group leadership originates from the same locale, trajectories affecting social embeddedness and legitimacy differ based on idiosyncratic features.

Egaim's NPCA, despite being predominantly staffed by members of the Awagir tribe, barely qualifies as a socially embedded force. Indeed, the group and its leader have been unable to secure the loyalty of wider Awagir constituencies or to encourage other Awagir-linked armed groups to mobilize as part of a tribally structured Awagir coalition to defend the wider tribe's interests. The truncated social embeddedness of the NPCA can be attributed to intra-Awagir rivalries and to the disproportionate ability of the LAAF Central Command to co-opt or coerce Awagir elites owing to foreign support. The ability to derive influence through the LAAF's "centre" has also proven instrumental for other LAAF-aligned actors, notably Masoud Jeddi's Battalion 116, which instrumentalized its alignment with Haftar to rise to prominence in Sebha despite the force's contested social legitimacy amongst members of his tribe.

# Oversight of Informal Security Providers

## 3

The previous chapters illustrated the extent to which Libya's security governance is hybridized, and the varying patterns of social embeddedness possessed by armed groups. The form of security governance in Libya is therefore not uniform and varies significantly at the local level. The prevalence of hybridity as a defining feature of security provision implies that this "service" is rarely, if ever, the sole remit of the state. Instead, local stakeholders, networks, and government entities effectively substitute, compensate, or subvert central authorities. In doing so, these informal stakeholders impinge on the traditional role of government and its formal institutions. As part of this encroachment, they continuously negotiate their relationship with Libya's authorities, effectively hindering the establishment of a legitimate monopoly on violence.

As the "centre" and these local stakeholders may conceptualize security starkly differently, this poses a dilemma. In theory, the state - commonly viewed as the "supplier of security" - perceives security through the lens of maintaining particular social and political orders through exercising power. The institutional approach to consolidating security is also tailored towards normative approaches that focus on optimizing formal arrangements between the state and its security and justice sectors. In the view of local stakeholders, however, security is perceived through the lens of protecting their constituencies from violence and other existential risks.

The underlying societal realities underpinning this perception shapes a vernacular discourse on security, one that is inherently informal. More often than not, the aforementioned "protection lens" through which these communities view security has prompted them to "exercise security" themselves, creating a discrepancy between the state's vision of security provision and the actual security architecture these actors deploy to secure themselves and their constituencies.

This "rule of the intermediaries"<sup>164</sup> has important implications on contemporary SSR practices that are, by and large, state centric. The dominant perspective within SSR frameworks is that violence is best organized by folding it under centralized state monopoly, and that this approach is best achieved through democratic systems of

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164 Baker, B. and Scluye, E., 2007. 'Multi-layered justice and security delivery in post-conflict and fragile states: Analysis', *Conflict, Security & Development*, 7(4), pp. 503-528.



governance.<sup>165</sup> The tangible policy goals that are identified as part of this framework, including in Libya, have generally focused on ad-hoc institutional reform by way of formalizing the armed sector, public financial management, training, and professionalization, as well as broader police and judiciary reforms.

In post-2011 Libya, the more significant focus has been to amalgamate armed actors, with several efforts and attempts to remould some components of the country's existing security architecture. Rather than clashing with the supply-side of "security", and the institutions they sought to support, the actors spearheading these efforts often failed since informal stakeholders considered these SSR endeavours to deviate their own priorities and needs.<sup>166</sup> The discrepancy between "local" and normative institutional understandings of what security entails therefore needs to be considered reforming Libya's security sector.

### Defective SSR

Efforts to reform Libya's security sector have been selective – and often politicized. By design, SSR is supposed to tackle three dimensions of security governance: transforming and optimizing overarching regulatory frameworks within the security sector, introducing institutional-level accountability structures and principles, and enhancing the technical and operational capabilities of security actors towards responsive security provision. None of the efforts made by external actors towards reforming Libya's armed sector have holistically tackled these dimensions in a meaningful fashion. Instead, local actors have sought to selectively adopt certain facets of these goals to enhance their local, national, and international legitimacy.

The LAAF, for instance, has nominally incorporated a degree of organizational structure into its hierarchy while upgrading its technical capacities through foreign support; however, this has not translated into improved institutional practices or better command and control over most LAAF-aligned forces,<sup>167</sup> many of which have aligned under Haftar for expediency. Indeed, the LAAF has operated more as a franchise,<sup>168</sup> with an affiliation to the General Command of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces and its affiliated institutions translating into an increasing remit of armed groups. This nominal affiliation afforded them an operational umbrella under wide

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165 Willems, R.C., 2015. *Security and Hybridity after Armed Conflict: The Dynamics of Security Provision in Post-Civil War States*. Routledge.

166 Al-Shadeedi, H., Van Veen, E. and Harchaoui, J., 2020. *One thousand and one failings Security sector stabilisation and development in Libya*. Clingendael CRU Report.

167 Several LAAF-aligned groups are nonetheless directly controlled by Haftar and his close associates, and benefit from preferential access to revenue and military support. These groups include the 106<sup>th</sup>, the 166<sup>th</sup>, 155<sup>th</sup> 128<sup>th</sup> Brigades, and the Tarek Bin Ziyad Brigade.

168 In Megirisi- Megerisi, T. 2019, *While you weren't looking, General Haftar has been taking over Libya*. Foreign Policy. – the LAAF's process for territorial consolidation is aptly referred to as a ponzi scheme.

mandates that blur the functions of security provision and combat roles. It also increased their chances of benefiting from foreign technical and operational support funnelled through Haftar, and allowed them to diversify their rent-extraction opportunities - including in the shadow economy.

The alignment with the LAAF was not, however, predicated on the enforcement of any accountability mechanisms, an adherence to a particular code of conduct, or the respect of any human rights standards. This dynamic is particularly problematic considering the backdrop of socio-political rifts against which the LAAF was formed and the mobilization of its “support forces” in 2014. The subsequent integration of these units - formed along communal and tribal lines - into the LAAF hierarchy has led to the militarization of policing functions<sup>169</sup> and made civilian oversight impossible. The process of militarizing policing and diminishing civilian oversight - which was essentially the by-product of the establishment of a warlord structure with centralized command - was deliberately spearheaded by Haftar. While many mistakenly consider this an “SSR” process, the aims and practices of LAAF-aligned groups contradict this. Moreover, since these armed are associated with the LAAF either by direct affiliation to the General Command, the Ministry of Defence (Mod), or the Mol, tribal and communal tensions often translate into security vacuums as day-to-day policing becomes difficult. In more acute cases of communal divides, intra-communal flashpoints result in violent clashes between LAAF-aligned units.

Similarly, the GNA-aligned Mol has attempted to seemingly import international norms into the domestic legislative framework, while the abusive practices of actors affiliated with it continue. In addition, the Mol failed to alter organizational structure and enhance capacities in ways that would translate these new rules into substantive changes in security governance. The multiplicity of state-affiliated security apparatuses at the local level has constrained security governance, almost dictating how the Mol’s policing units operate.

The bulk of the Mol’s policing capabilities reside within “security directorates” - local structures that retain a presence across all of Libya’s municipalities. These structures have integrated, among others, the Gaddafi-era Criminal Investigations Department (CID), which has been overstaffed by revolutionaries since 2011. Despite nominal efforts to improve the policing capacities of security directorates, the local architecture of security governance has severely constrained their ability to conduct their work. Indeed, local CID branches now cooperate with far more actors than they did in the Gaddafi era, when they conducted arrests and seizures by themselves, or in cooperation with other policing units.

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169 Wehrey, F., 2018. 'Libya's Policing Sector: The Dilemmas of Hybridity and Security Pluralism', in *POMEPS Studies 30: The Politics of Post-Conflict Reconstruction*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Currently, however, the number of actors that CID units coordinate their deployment with largely depends on the territory they operate in and the number of armed groups in the vicinity. For instance, in Tripoli, it is rarely possible for the CID to conduct arrests without encroaching on territory controlled by other armed groups. This operational handicap has meant that investigations and arrests are therefore delegated to other armed groups affiliated with the MOI, such as the Special Deterrence Force.

In both of the cases outlined above, the measures introduced towards remoulding the security sector are flawed and hardly qualify as SSR. The ceremonial structuring of the LAAF resulted in capacity improvements for a minority of its new core units but not for the bulk of its remaining forces. Moreover, access to capacity improvement and professionalization was commensurate with the proximity and fealty to Haftar. The capacity improvement of LAAF's core units was therefore the by-product of a commitment to reject democratic norms, in turn, contradicting the very definition of SSR. Similarly, the conformity of the GNA with international standards on the surface did not translate into parallel behavioural changes or holistically improved organizational capacities.<sup>170</sup> Instead, both these iterations of security remoulding merely served to convey the image that domestic security governance had been improved.

More broadly, the hybridity permeating Libya's armed sector also prevents the establishment of a clear-cut distinction between the local and the institutional. Indeed, the fact that formal state structures have been hybridized implies a degree of reconfiguration of formal state authority and governance in ways that mirror social realities on the ground. Security apparatuses across the country have been (re)moulded to reflect this trend, with armed actors infiltrating and staffing them to varying degrees.

The fact that the state was unable to deliver basic rule of law and security has further exacerbated this development, as wide security and policing gaps were gradually laid bare to be filled by informal and local providers. These sought to either fill a genuine security vacuum, derive rent, or enhance their legitimacy as security providers - if not a mix of all three. The nature of the security architecture that therefore materializes at the local level is bound by the local understandings of security, justice, and legitimate authority but also shaped by the socio-political and institutional setups present within these local communities.

Another hybridity-related dynamic preventing a clear delineation between formal and informal is the fact that hybridized security is characterised by its fluidity, with governance arrangements constantly morphing and adapting depending on

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170 According to Schroeder et al. (2014), political and armed groups may selectively adopt aspects of SSR, a measure that, in hybrid settings of security governance, can lead to three distinct results: normative shells (where orthodox principles of SSR are adopted but not implemented), ceremonial structures (where institutions are created but are merely symbolic) and capacity improvements (where strength is effectuated without democratic standards being applied).

socio-political and economic factors. Indeed, formal and informal stakeholders, networks, and institutions do not merely graft together different entities to form new apparatuses, but rather establish a security governance blueprint centred around loosely coordinated and changing processes that enable a degree of co-existence between formal apparatuses and informal ones. Indeed, key stakeholders that can contribute to the provision of security enjoy differing levels of power and authority, be they derived from formal (state affiliation) or informal (such as social, tribal, ethnic or ideological affiliations) channels. In addition, key stakeholders often simultaneously occupy positions from which they can influence both the formal and informal political orders, in turn, further hybridizing security governance by design.

The process of hybridization within the security sector has also, in certain cases, led to the emergence of hyper-local hybrid approaches to regulating security governance. These forms of oversight, regulation, and authority elude the traditional governance arrangements and instead often rely on informal modes of authority that are more attune with local realities. Built as part of “co-governance” arrangements that blur the lines between state and non-state, these alternative modes of oversight render the focus on state-based oversight mechanisms redundant. Indeed, the effective oversight of legislative, judicial, and executive authorities – which are split across the country due to institutional and political divides – is almost meaningless.<sup>171</sup> Instead, varying patterns of local oversight have emerged, with informal networks reconfiguring the approach to security governance in ways that combine elements of institutional and organic bottom-level security governance.

### The inception of community-level security provision and oversight

Most, if not all of Libya’s formal military, security, and justice institutions have experienced some form of comprehensive hybridization. As such, their official mandates are almost irrelevant to the activities they actually implement,<sup>172</sup> and they tend to suffer from dysfunction, lack of discipline, and intra and inter-conflict. Even before 2011, most security institutions had been permeated by networks of patronage and social hierarchies, and their activities were, by and large, informally overseen by domestic political actors and stakeholders that could influence the respective apparatus’ activities.

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171 Wehrey, F., 2018. ‘Libya’s Policing Sector: The Dilemmas of Hybridity and Security Pluralism’, in *POMEPS Studies 30: The Politics of Post-Conflict Reconstruction*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

172 For instance, the Libyan MoI and MoD have arguably become merely institutions representing different budget streams for armed actors, and different incentives structures for factions to wrestle control over.

The emergence of “new” political players and influential communal stakeholders after 2011 further exacerbated these pre-existing trends. This led to three simultaneous and inter-linked developments that had a significant impact on security governance, as well as oversight. First, while the informal dimension of oversight over existing apparatuses was present before 2011, after the revolution it became the prevalent medium through which to govern security. Secondly, depending on the locale, the role played by formal military and security apparatuses transformed, adapting to the policing and protection functions assumed by some former revolutionaries and newly established armed groups. Thirdly, the organizational structures and oversight mechanisms governing security and military apparatuses’ protection and policing functions were no longer homogeneous across institutions, but were instead shaped by local developments and experiences of conflict in 2011 and thereafter.

The fact that formal security institutions operated within political and security spaces where non-state actors were more active and influential drastically diminished their sway and weakened their capacity. The establishment of Supreme Security Committees after 2011 only compounded this trend, as self-proclaimed revolutionaries converted from combatants to security providers. Envisioned as a top-down initiative by the National Transitional Council, self-proclaimed revolutionary fighters (*thuwwar*) were enrolled – without limited capacity building – under the MoI.<sup>173</sup> The initiative, which failed to dilute the prevalent localistic inclinations of those enrolled, institutionally cemented hybrid security orders onto several locales of the Libyan landscape. Another bottom-up initiative, the Libya Shield Forces (LSF), was co-opted<sup>174</sup> by revolutionary leaders to create an entity that would directly supplant the formal armed forces.<sup>175</sup> The latter were, by and large, perceived as affiliated with the Gaddafi regime. Both the SSC and the LSF, among others, epitomize a post-revolutionary dynamic whereby hollowed out formal apparatuses were now forced, in several Libyan locales, into a de-facto or de-jure cooperation with powerful armed actors that lacked clear mandates and oversight.

In multiple Libyan cities, the MoI’s Security directorates, established as local policing structures under the Gaddafi regime, were overshadowed by the military power of armed groups that were supposed to assist them in carrying out their policing, investigative, and protection activities. The strength of MoD-affiliated armed forces

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173 There were also multiple cases of double- and triple-dipping, with individuals receiving one salary from their brigade via the MoI, another from the Supreme Security Committee they were affiliated with and, at times, a third salary through the police.

174 This was not the initial rationale behind the LSF, which was originally envisioned by Misratan Gaddafi-era army officer Salim Joha as a reserve force made up of integrated individuals that would essentially act as stop-gap measure while a standing army would be rebuilt; however, hardline revolutionary factions from Misrata derailed his plan, integrating entire brigades into the LSF without diluting their localistic inclinations.

175 Lacher, W. and Cole, P., 2014. *Politics by Other Means: Conflicting Interests in Libya’s Security Sector*. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

and units – which had deserted, defected, or mobilized on Gadaffi’s behalf – also paled in comparison with revolutionary groups endowed with weaponry, legitimacy, and financial compensation from Libya’s transitional authorities.

### Pro-forma institutional oversight

The institutional divisions stemming from the post-2014 political split further weakened formal oversight over these entities – thus exacerbating the reliance on informal forms of cooperation between military and security personnel with local hierarchies.

To highlight the discrepancy between formal and informal norms of oversight across Libyan locales, it is useful to outline the stakeholders that are supposed to exercise oversight over the country’s panoply security apparatuses. In theory, the governing authorities (the executive branch of government) spearheads the strategic direction for managing the security sector, and can introduce changes to security governance to optimize the delivery of responsible and responsive security. Cross-ministerial management and coordination is also the purview of the executive, which oversees the expenditures of different portfolios.

The legislature is also supposed to exercise oversight over the armed forces by determining a legal framework for security policy but also aligning the legislative framework for oversight with international standards and approving budget proposals. In Libya, the legislature is also involved in the appointment of figures to senior military and security portfolios to diminish political interference.<sup>176</sup>

The Public Prosecutor’s Office is responsible for maintaining the boundary between military and civilian jurisdictions in the legal realm and the subordination of military courts to the civil justice system; the office also has the authority to prosecute security sector personnel for infringements.<sup>177</sup> Libya’s MoD and MoI also possess internal oversight mechanisms embodied respectively by the Military Police and the General Administration for Inspection and Follow-up, both of which are supposed to ensure the adherence of MOD and MOI-affiliated bodies to their respective segmented responsibilities.<sup>178</sup>

Only one independent governmental oversight agency in Libya – the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) – has a specialized monitoring mandate, though not specifically tailored to overseeing security sector governance. Established against

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176 Badi, E. (2019); interview with an MoI official from Tripoli in Tunis (December 2019)

177 Badi, E. (2020); phone interview with a Libyan Prosecutor in Tripoli (February 2020)

178 Badi, E. (2020); phone interview with a Libyan MoI official in Tripoli (March 2020)

the backdrop of heightened tensions within Libya's executive in February 2014,<sup>179</sup> the NACC was, in theory, to be headquartered in neutral territory in Sebha. Its mandate revolves around investigating crimes of corruption, such as money laundering, illicit revenue generation, the diversion of public funds, and "economic crimes" as defined within Libyan law. It therefore has a purview over financial crimes committed by armed actors,<sup>180</sup> and the potential improve security sector governance.

### Local coordination of security provision and "hybrid" oversight

The fact that the political institutional split resulting from the civil war of 2014 did not directly entail widespread insecurity across the country illustrates the extent to which security is managed - to a large degree - locally. Different blends of formal and informal patterns for security governance (and oversight) have, however, developed across the country. Indeed, post-revolutionary security provision (and oversight) in Libya was context-dependent and subject to socio-political developments.

Libya's executive authorities - namely the GNA and the Interim Government in eastern Libya<sup>181</sup> - exercise little to no oversight over the armed actors aligned under their banner in practice. Their respective MoI, however, coordinate with local security directorates whose general aim is to establish pockets of effective security provision within their respective areas of territorial control. Patterns of security provision vary; however, municipalities that benefit from a degree of social homogeneity - or where local leaders informally cooperate as part of social covenants to maintain a mutually acceptable degree of security - have sought to complement the formal state mechanisms of security provision with the deployment of local hybrid armed actors whose potential abuse towards the local population is constrained by social factors.

The next sections explore the different blends of formal and informal mechanisms that have governed security provision and policing - and, as a result, oversight - in eastern Libya, Fezzan, Misrata, and Tripoli, (in particular, the LAAF). The chapter also highlights the impact of Salafi groups involved in policing and security provision on oversight.

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179 General National Congress of Libya. 2014. [Law No. 11 of 2014 on the establishment of a National Anti-Corruption Commission](#).

180 Badi, E. (2020); phone interview with a Libyan consultant employed by NAAC in Tripoli (September 2020).

181 The de-facto executive authority in eastern Libya can be considered the LAAF leadership, which does exercise varying forms of oversight over LAAF-aligned units; however, functional security sector governance requires the security sector to be overseen within a framework of democratic civilian control, rule of law, and respect for human rights, all of which contradict the LAAF's approach to oversight.

### **Tripoli: A kaleidoscopic security architecture that betrays centralization**

Tripoli's landscape has evolved to become a distinctive case of hybridized security order where formal oversight mechanisms have become ineffective. Owing to the wide geography and population density of Tripoli, the city has been split into 13 municipalities: Abu Salim, Ain Zara, Alsbeaa, Garabulli, Gasr Ben Ghashir, Hay Andalus, Janzur, Sidi Alsayeh, Sug Aljumaa, , Sug Alkhamis, Swani, Tajura and Tripoli Centre. An overarching municipal body represents the Greater Tripoli Area. The Tripoli Security Directorate's area of jurisdiction, however, only comprises the municipalities of, Abu Salim, Ain Zara, Hay Andalus, Sug Aljumaa and Tripoli Centre (which happen to coincide with the territories formerly monopolized by the Tripoli cartel). Other municipalities' territories – though viewed as part of the greater Tripoli area – fall within the area of jurisdiction of Security Directorates outside of the capital's centre (namely the security directorates of Al Nawahi Al Arbâa, Garabulli, Janzur, Sahl Jfara and Tajura).<sup>182</sup> The setup for security governance betrays a tendency towards centralization, but also the influence of the manoeuvring of armed actors within the capital, seeking to affiliate themselves with the MoI and, more importantly, with Tripoli's Security Directorate.

The conversion of a select group of armed actors into “security providers” can be traced back to the arrival of the GNA to Tripoli in 2016. The quartet of militia, known as the “Tripoli cartel”, sought to exploit the interim security arrangements that were outlined as part of Libyan Political Agreement. Indeed, the latter had specified that “armed formations” and “conflicting forces” would have to vacate cities and residential areas, and that units of the army and the police would deploy under the GNA's banner in order to maintain security and order in these locales. Tripoli's quartet scrambled to align themselves with the GNA and brand themselves as MOI-affiliated policing structures, in turn, entrenching themselves within the capital as de-jure partners for security provision, protection, counterterrorism, and anti-criminal law enforcement. This, however, obfuscated the fact that little to no oversight was exercised on these armed actors, who used the mantle of legitimacy they had obtained to elude scrutiny. The Tripoli Security Directorate's capabilities were dwarfed by those developed over time by these armed actors. Overtime, the directorate grew increasingly dependent on the acquiescence of armed groups to conduct its work as it routinely coordinated the deployment of its policing and investigative units with actors that controlled the territory where it intended to operate. Some armed groups, such as the Special Deterrence Force, developed their own policing, investigative, and SWAT-like capabilities, deploying in locales where the security directorate's criminal investigative divisions and policing units could not.

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182 Information on the security setup and operationalization of oversight in Tripoli was collected through fieldwork conducted from July to August 2019; updates regarding the setup were collected through phone interviews with MoI officials in September and October 2020 respectively.



Despite having been MOI-affiliated structures for over three years, the Ministry's General Administration for Inspection and Follow-up has virtually no oversight over Tripoli's quartet of armed groups. The latter have – to varying degrees – focused the bulk of their efforts on enhancing their policing and security provision capabilities using MoI funding, as well as other avenues of illicit rent extraction. Overtime, but particularly after the September 2018 war that pitted them against Tarhuna's Kaniyat and Misrata's Summoud Brigade, Tripoli's quartet have also ramped up their efforts to establish or infiltrate armed structures that are geared towards combat roles.

Indeed, the Tripoli's Revolutionaries Brigade staffed Infantry Brigades 28 and 92 with its own members in 2018 and 2019 respectively. The two brigades share an affiliation with the MoD and the Chief of Staff of the GNA. Similarly, the Nawasi had already staffed the bulk of the "Special Operations Force" – an MoI unit that benefited from a broad mandate, a significant degree of funding, and sophisticated equipment from the MoI. The SDF had opted to leverage the GNA's dependency on its protection of Tripoli's Mitiga airport to pass a decree that institutionalized it as an independent formal security structure – the Deterrence Apparatus for Combating Organized Crime and Terrorism,<sup>183</sup> which had little to no oversight exercised upon it. It also strengthened its own combat capabilities by establishing SDF's "Division 2020" – which subsequently mobilized against Haftar's offensive in June 2019 and was integrated into the MoD's forces the following year

Tripoli's quartet groups virtually managed to leverage their territorial control within Tripoli to obtain new MoD affiliations to manoeuvre outside the purview of the MoI and enhance their combat capabilities. For oversight, Tripoli's residents rely primarily on informal relationships and communal mobilization (notably through social media or, more recently, protests<sup>184</sup>) to exert pressure on armed actors. In some cases of extrajudicial or arbitrary detention, legal pressure is exerted through prosecutors and legal avenues in order to highlight the irregular nature of armed groups' practices, though the success of these efforts on tempering armed groups' abusive behaviour has a contingent nature. Media and civil society have on occasion also exerted pressure on armed actors by influencing public opinion;<sup>185</sup> however, the fact that Tripoli's armed groups rely on institutional legitimacy by way of affiliation to the state rather than social legitimacy garnered from Tripoli's residents implies that their responsiveness to these mediums of informal oversight is also minimal. Their degree of nominal detachment also explains their recent suppression of anti-status quo protests in the capital with violence.

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183 Amnesty International, 2018. 'Libya: Decree integrating Radaa forces into a new security apparatus overlooks need for accountability'.

184 Human Rights Watch, 2020. 'Libya: Armed Groups Violently Quell Protests'.

185 One of the many examples is the case of the arrest of journalist/activist Rida Fahil Al Bom by Tripoli's Nawasi-affiliated Special Operations Force, which led to wide-scale condemnation by international and local civil society organizations, including CPJ and even UNSMIL. It is worth noting, however, that this is the exception – not the norm – to informal oversight of armed actors by civil society.

### **Misrata: Collective revolutionary struggle translates to better oversight**

The coastal city of Misrata's security governance is less hybridized owing in part to the nature of the conflict it experienced in 2011. While the bulk of the city's army officers, former military cadre, and policing units defected to the rebel side in 2011, the city also witnessed a degree of social mobilization commensurate with the perceived threats and expected fallout from its taker by Gaddafi-aligned forces. The battalions organically formed against the backdrop of this conflict – formed in large part by volunteers – subsequently registered with the local military council and the local revolutionaries' union, which functioned as an administrative entity. The latter eventually oversaw the enrolment of several of these very battalions' members into the Libya Shield Forces (LSF) the following year. The Military Council also organized the deployment of Misratan LSF-affiliated units to central and southern Libya in 2012.

Though the LSF brand had been abandoned across the country by 2014 owing to the public backlash that discredited the polarizing initiative, Misratan units drawn from the LSF – including influential brigades such as Al Halbus, Al Marsa, Al Mahjub, Al Tajin, and Al Hatin battalions – still retain a degree of influence and cohesion. In times of collective threat, these groups are still able to coalesce and collectively mobilize based on shared interests, political, and ideological alignments, as well as their social embeddedness within the social fabric of the city of Misrata. For instance, even after state funding to the LSF was halted in August 2014, local businessmen continued to fund it. The Military Council of Misrata has arguably also succeeded in exercising a modicum of formal oversight over the city's armed units, having formerly centralized certain administrative and organizational procedures – including the cantonment of heavy weaponry under collective oversight, though without successfully amalgamating the city's brigades under collective centralized military leadership.

The fact that the bulk of the city's former security and military cadre defected also meant that, internally, security governance was not completely overhauled. Misratan brigades – and the volunteer members forming them – did not, for the most part, convert themselves into security providers within the city by aligning with the MoI, unlike armed groups from other locales. The city was, however, engaged in an exercise of power projection, which saw several of its units align under the MoD and mobilize on its behalf towards Tripoli, central Libya, and the Fezzan. Individuals from other units – tied by shared values and experiences of conflict – demobilized after the revolution but retained informal links that could be activated in times of acute social threat. Coupled with the administrative, organizational, and momentary (de)mobilizing role played by the Military Council and other informal actors (such as the Council of Elders) in the city, Misrata has a clearer delineation and lines of oversight between actors concerned with security enforcement and those that mobilize for combat.

Nevertheless, the operational and institutional oversight over the Security Directorate in the city is not appropriately exercised by the MoI. While the relative cohesion of the city has afforded it better security, irregularities and security incidents are often remain unaccountable, unless attention is drawn to them through informal social channels. In September 2020, an incident that saw formal forces affiliated to the Security Directorate of Misrata cracking down on a local photographer stirred public opinion after the latter took to social media to denounce the abuse.<sup>186</sup> Shortly afterwards, the Misratan Minister of Interior, Fathi Bashagha, gave a personal statement, vowing that the Ministry would investigate the incident.<sup>187</sup> While being an isolated incident, this dynamic illustrates the extent to which “formal oversight” is lacking, especially since the personalized approach to handling the event arguably reflected a desire to project power rather than to exercise formal oversight over security directorates. More broadly, the episode also shows that social dynamics – and, more importantly, public opinion – can influence informal and institutional oversight on armed actors.

### **Fezzan: Informal oversight constrained by socio-demographic factors**

Southern Libya’s security governance experienced fragmentation and militarization after 2011, owing in part to the region’s wide geography and remoteness from the “centre”, but also the social heterogeneity that characterizes the sparsely populated region. Much like other regions, the Fezzan also witnessed the establishment of military councils in 2011, though these had a less pronounced role in organizing armed actors that mobilized along communal lines. Elected local governance bodies – municipalities and local councils – were also established in the Fezzan in the two years that followed, tasked with implementing the rule of law and providing services to the local communities. This governance blueprint was, however, somewhat alien to the multi-ethnic Fezzan, which had historically relied on traditional approaches to governance centred around coordination between tribal and ethnic notables and elites.

As early as 2012, sporadic local armed conflicts broke out in the south due in part to inter-competition between political factions associated with ethnic and tribal groups over control of resources, territory, and access to state revenues. Armed groups scrambled to obtain affiliation with umbrella structures affiliated with the state through which they could derive revenues. More importantly, rivalries over cross-border trade and monopoly over smuggling routes were reignited, notably fuelling two major conflicts in Kufra between the ethnic Tebu group and the Arab Zway tribe. Sebha also experienced clashes between Tebu and Arab tribes (such as the Awlad Sulayman), thus

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186 218TV, 2020. ‘GNA’s MoI investigates police’s assault against Libyan artist Walid Busala’.

187 218TV, 2020. ‘Misrata – Photographer turns police assault incident into a public opinion issue’.

fracturing the revolutionary alliances that had brought these groups together in 2011. Minor incidents often triggered wide-scale tribal and/or ethnic mobilization and led to outbreaks of inter-communal violence. Such small-scale incidents often obfuscated the underlying issues driving the conflagrations, which included political, legal, and social marginalization, as well as inter-tribal and communal tensions.<sup>188</sup> These were, at times, also fuelled by deficiencies in service delivery or lack of representation at the level of local government – a dynamic that, in turn, made the reliance on informal actors for security and oversight a more practical *modus operandi*.

Yet, since 2011, councils of elders and social councils have also experienced an overhaul. Within tribes and local communities, representational and decision-making power was redistributed; as a result, many dominant individuals and influential families were side-lined across the Fezzan. Intra-tribal and tensions also existed as internal representation grew increasingly disputed, with individuals and councils claiming to speak in the name on behalf of their tribe, ethnic group, or constituency, while often representing a far narrower circle. Over time, several actors that had lost decision-making power and influence during the revolution reasserted their dominance, rewriting their past to downplay their links with the former regime while often capitalizing on the failures of their peers to usher in stability and security for local communities.

Informal structures such as local “social” and “elders” councils gained an increasingly prominent role in coordinating service delivery, security governance, justice, and oversight. These compensated for – and at times almost replaced – the formal structures, which lacked the social capital (and at times the internal representation) to carry out these tasks. The oversight, coordination, and deployment of the units in southern Libya was managed informally. The proliferation of local conflicts also resulted in greater tribal entrenchment and reliance on social actors for conflict resolution. Mechanisms for conflict resolution, consensus-building, and oversight were by and large based on centuries-old customary law and practices, known as “*urf*”. Local social councils and influential stakeholders also had to adapt their approach to informal governance and oversight to the fact that they now had to interact with non-state armed groups and the newly founded municipal councils, which they had to navigate around as they respectively possessed *de-facto* and *de-jure* authority.

In practice, the influence of councils of elders and social councils over security governance is by and large commensurate with the degree of social legitimacy they possess. They primarily contribute to security and justice provision through social control and punishment, by settling disputes in conjunction or outside the purview of formal courts and judicial actors and by collaborating with the armed actors affiliated

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188 Wehrey, F., 2017. *Insecurity and Governance Challenges in Southern Libya*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

with their tribal constituencies to enforce tribal rulings. In certain cases, councils of elders and social councils may also lift social protection<sup>189</sup> from individuals or factions that consistently display criminal or abusive behaviour, in turn, paving the way for justice to take its course without exacerbating intra-communal or ethnic tensions. The councils have also brokered and informally contributed to overseeing ceasefires in post-conflict situations, drawing on their ability to influence the groups they claimed to represent.

Yet, while this informal system of oversight can ensure a minimum degree of stability, the fact that it primarily relies on “social” mediums of control is a double-edged sword. Indeed, informal oversight based on *urf* is constrained by social council and elders’ willingness and ability to act on their commitments.<sup>190</sup> It is also difficult to integrate oversight effectively with the role municipalities are supposed to play, particularly in locales that do not display a degree of social homogeneity, where ethnic and tribal groups are not represented within local governance structures, and in instances of acute social tensions. Moreover, the system has also proven increasingly weak,<sup>191</sup> particularly as the intergenerational gap between leaders and members of armed groups has eroded the authority of elders over the youth. As time has elapsed, the authority of elders and notables – derived in part out of respect for their seniority – has eroded, particularly since leaders and members of armed groups – which are predominantly youth – have increasingly shown a tendency to challenge what they perceive to be an outdated and overly traditional system.

### **Eastern Libya’s LAAF: A warlord structure with a stovepiped oversight architecture**

As a security actor branding itself as a military organization, the LAAF’s Central Command rise to power has by and large been achieved through the co-option or subordination of existing political institutions and power centres. The pro-forma oversight over the LAAF is best deciphered by analysing its relationship with the House of Representatives (HoR). By leveraging a counter-terrorism narrative and centralizing military authority through foreign support, Haftar successfully gained legitimacy from the east Libya-based HoR by being promoted General Commander. In practice, however, the HoR’s civilian oversight over the LAAF is rarely applied. Instead, the Central Command of the Armed Forces has leveraged the legislative, co-opting

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189 This would essentially be a public acknowledgement that specific individuals are no longer protected by their tribe, ethnic group, or constituency, thereby overtly acknowledging that any actions taken against said individuals will not result in retribution acts by their kin.

190 Cole, P. and Mangan, F. 2016. *Policing Libya: Form and Function Of Policing Since The 2011 Revolution*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.

191 Collombier, V., Favier, A. and Narbone, L., 2016. *Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya*. European University Institute.

economic and political roles by using HoR-passed legislation to obviate any potential legal impediment it could face in its endeavours. This dynamic entrenched the LAAF as an independent security structure in eastern Libya, one that largely functioned without being subordinated to any civilian entity or any formal oversight body.

Foreign support is key to the LAAF's core strategy, which has been to present itself as the nation's military institution by centralizing military leadership and portraying itself as an actor able to establish a monopoly on violence within its areas of control. The allure of sophisticated weaponry, national aspirations, and trademark of an internationally recognized institution allowed the LAAF leadership to subsume several local groups with promises of rank, riches, and weaponry. In this sense, the LAAF has operated somewhat more as a franchise, with a diffuse and ever-growing patronage network, manifesting itself to the casual observer as local armed groups aligning under the LAAF's banner. This alignment, coupled with the extensive foreign support that the LAAF has benefitted from, has enabled Haftar to deploy a significant degree of violence against actors who contest his leadership.

The Central Command of the LAAF has also jettisoned any attempt to place LAAF-aligned units under any significant institutional oversight - aside from Haftar's. The political split experienced by Libya in 2014, coupled with the eruption of civil war, enabled Haftar to "shape" oversight in a way that rendered formal mediums of oversight irrelevant. Indeed, both the eastern-based legislative (the HoR) and Executive (the Interim Government), as well as other sovereign institutions, did not have any leverage to exercise significant formal oversight over the LAAF. They were, however, instrumental mediums for the LAAF to create a narrative whereby it could portray itself as a "national army" that is subordinate to civilian authorities.

Nevertheless, despite having significantly subordinated, infiltrated, and taken over civilian authorities, the fact that the LAAF leadership has opted to co-exist with these institutions reflects an awareness that upending them may lead to a significant shift in international and domestic perceptions of the LAAF's legitimacy, as well as its purported goals and aims. For instance, the LAAF did not opt to jettison civilian local governance structures, but chose instead to militarize them by appointing military governors<sup>192</sup> that could effectively extend the influence of the General Command into service-based duties within municipalities.

In practice, local "support forces" that aligned with Haftar after the launch of his Operation Dignity had formed against the backdrop of insecurity and social polarization in Eastern Libya. After the war, they were rewarded with an affiliation to the eastern-based MoI or the Central Command of the LAAF itself. Converting

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192 Libya Herald, 2016. 'Another military man takes over from mayor in the east'.

themselves into policing structures, these unruly local armed actors organized security governance based on communal and geographic factors. They focused on deploying within the geographic delimitations of the neighbourhoods, or areas where their tribes hailed from, or where they resided, thus encroaching on the role that formal MoI-aligned policing structures were supposed to ensure. To retain influence in an increasingly hybridized and pluralistic<sup>193</sup> security landscape, MOD-affiliated structures, such as the Saiqa Special Forces, also recruited “support forces” that were deployed with policing functions, in turn, blurring lines of authority and militarizing security sector governance.<sup>194</sup>

Yet, while the LAAF seemingly operates as one military entity with a quasi-legal revenue-generation machine, the multiple LAAF-aligned local armed groups have leveraged their brand to dominate their local areas and pursue their own agendas and rent-extraction opportunities. At the micro-level, however, local armed groups aligned under LAAF command have been engaged in communal and tribal conflicts over territorial control – tensions that have been tempered by their common alignment with the LAAF. The latter often intervenes to mediate between these armed actors, at times going as far as disbanding armed units to dilute their localistic inclinations and avoid flashpoints.

Overall, the LAAF claims to be building a national army, based on military rules and discipline, which will eventually supersede localized interests. At a superficial level, certain developments in eastern Libya – and more recently in the Fezzan – underscore this claim. Indeed, the centralized nature of military leadership has incentivized regular army officers and even police members to resume their security work. In some locales, army recruits even receive expedited training (three to six months-long in military academies) as part of what is marketed as SSR.<sup>195</sup> Nevertheless, both regular army members and police officers must contend with local irregular armed actors and support forces well-entrenched in their neighbourhoods.

Despite the LAAF leadership attempting to merge groups of different tribal backgrounds to curtail tribal loyalties, it has not ultimately been able to exercise the oversight necessary to dilute localistic inclinations. It has, however, focused on building a professionalized, foreign-supported loyal core of units that abide by the decisions of the General Command (in other words, Haftar) and mobilize to defend its interests. Yet the LAAF’s territorial expansion is itself predicated on and enabled by alliances with tribal armed actors who have their own *modus operandi* and agendas.

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193 Wehrey, F., 2018. ‘Libya’s Policing Sector: The Dilemmas of Hybridity and Security Pluralism’, in *POMEPS Studies 30: The Politics of Post-Conflict Reconstruction*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

194 Akhbarlibya24, 2020. ‘Saiqa Spokesperson: the General Command will deputize a support force to protect state and citizens’ properties’.

195 Badi, E. (2019) Interview with MoD official in Tripoli (July 2019)

While alignment with the LAAF endows them with legitimacy and creates avenues to develop their capacities, they are objectively no different to the “rogue” armed actors the LAAF claims to oppose. More broadly, moderate efforts in SSR and disbandment of armed groups have been arguably part of a larger process of power consolidation, with the primary aim of the LAAF’s Central Command being to create an entity that possesses traits of a regular army and whose different components can be co-opted or coerced into enabling a broader goal of territorial expansion. By design, this marriage of convenience is conducive to a loose, artificial, and reactive approach to exercising oversight over these armed actors.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the LAAF does consider public opinion, media, and civil society’s informal oversight of its behaviour, particularly in cases where its decisions and actions are susceptible to generating wide-scale popular uproar. Indeed, thanks to journalists and civil society actors’ mobilization, the LAAF had to effectively backtrack on a decision prohibiting women from travelling without a chaperon (though it subsequently issued a decision requiring all travellers – male or female – to obtain military authorization).<sup>196</sup> The relationship between the LAAF and civil society in Eastern Libya is, however, mired in distrust, particularly as the LAAF often stigmatizes activists and NGOs as destabilizing and foreign-influenced actors.<sup>197</sup> This approach has allowed the LAAF to police civil society work, effectively constraining the role and space these stakeholders can play as informal oversight actors.

### Salafi-Madkhali security providers: Eluding oversight

Following 2011, but even more pronouncedly in the aftermath of the 2014 civil war, Libya witnessed a rise in the influence of Salafi Madkhalis across its security and institutional landscape. Often misleadingly described as “quietist”, followers of the ultraconservative Sunni Muslim doctrine originating in Saudi Arabia infiltrated religious institutions in eastern and western Libya, but also established armed factions that have since garnered sizeable influence within both the GNA-aligned and LAAF-aligned coalitions. The ideological agenda of Libya’s Salafi Madkhalis set them against other Islamists groups and religious currents, such as members of the Muslim Brotherhood and networks affiliated with the defunct LIFG, but also extremist groups such as Ansar Sharia, Al Qaida, and IS.<sup>198</sup> Fatwas issued by Sheikhs in Saudi

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196 Eaton et al. 2020. *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014: Community Dynamics and Economic Interests*. Royal Institute for International Affairs.

197 Badi, E. (2019) Interview with Libyan activist, Tunis (March 2019).

198 Libya’s Salafi Madkhalis have primarily mobilized against these different opponents following doctrinal deliberations and debates. Even Salafis’ alignment with Haftar’s Operation Dignity only occurred after support forces from neighbourhood youth had already joined the ranks of his then-Libyan National Army. The pattern of deliberating mobilization based on ideological factors – rather than social factors – amongst Libya’s Salafi Madkhali groups distinguishes them from other actors which may rely on more localistic, communal, or even economic rationales for their mobilization and engagements in conflict.



Arabia – notably one from Sheikh Rabee Al-Madkhali himself in 2016 – have explicitly encouraged and urged them to align with Haftar’s Operation Dignity.

This dynamic partly explains why they form a sizable and influential contingent of his LAAF. It is worth noting, however, that Salafists are not entirely impermeable to tribal allegiances as some hail from Eastern tribes. Their alignment with Haftar is therefore not dictated by ideology alone, if at all. While the bulk of the eastern-based Salafists regard Haftar as the “ruler” and therefore primarily obey him, other Salafi Madkhalis view Agila Saleh as embodying the authority that supersedes him. Nevertheless, this dynamic explains why Haftar – erroneously portrayed as a “secularist”<sup>199</sup> – has increasingly referenced notions of jihad and religious connotations in his speeches to galvanize Salafis under his banner.<sup>200</sup>

In eastern Libya, this alignment has, however, not translated into increased formal or informal oversight capabilities over Salafi-dominated armed actors by the HoR. Aside from retaining a nominal degree of command and control and ability to instrumentalize their intra-national network to enable territorial expansion, tactical coordination, or to mobilize for combat, Haftar has been unable to exert meaningful control over the combat behaviour of Salafist armed groups, which have proven to be particularly susceptible to perpetrating war crimes.<sup>201</sup> They have also entrenched themselves as indispensable actors in the policing and criminal investigation apparatuses in eastern Libya, often instrumentalizing their infiltration of eastern Libya’s endowments authority to crack down on perceived opponents<sup>202</sup> (in particular, issuing fatwas and directives that enable them to conduct attacks on sites of Sufi heritage). To dilute their prominence within the LAAF cadre, Haftar has momentarily attempted to “dismantle” exclusively Salafist armed actors, embedding the aggregated individuals forming the bulk of these forces into other units. This strategy has not, however, meaningfully tempered their influence, particularly since Haftar has grown increasingly dependent on these stakeholders for security provision and territorial expansion.<sup>203</sup> Indeed, the alignment of Salafist units with the LAAF proved instrumental in the capture of Fezzan in January 2019, the launch of the Tripoli offensive in April 2019, and the capture of Sirte in January 2020. Nevertheless, these dynamics also betray the fact that Salafists’ alignment with Haftar is not exclusively subject to ideology, but also

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199 Kirkpatrick, D. 2020. ‘A Police State with an Islamist twist: Inside Hifter’s Libya’, *The New York Times*.

200 This was particularly salient in his speech [announcing](#) Operation Flood of Dignity to capture Tripoli, where the mobilization of Salafist actors from western Libya (notably those in Zintan and Sabratha) was critical to the LAAF’s initial blitzkrieg plans. In a subsequent [announcement](#) during the holy month of Ramadan of 2019, Haftar also directly called for jihad through his spokesperson.

201 The assumption that Haftar does not discourage or coerce perpetrators of war crimes may be contradicted in practice by him granting a rank promotion to ICC-wanted Saiqa Commander Mahmoud Al-Werfalli.

202 Wehrey, F. and Boukhars, A., 2019. ‘Salafism and Libya’s State Collapse: The Case of the Madkhalis’, in *Salafism in the Maghreb*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

203 Wehrey, F. and Badi, E., 2019. ‘Libya’s Coming Forever War: Why Backing One Militia Against Another Is Not the Solution’. War on the Rocks.

opportunistic and transactional. Indeed, being part of the LAAF has allowed them to significantly expand their footprint across the territories he controlled.

Yet the Madkhali footprint has not been limited to eastern and southern Libya. In a development that mirrored dynamics in eastern Libya, Madkhali Salafists have also infiltrated the GNA-aligned religious endowments authority in western Libya,<sup>204</sup> following the civil war of 2014. Moreover, predominantly Salafi-Madkhali armed groups in western Libya – including the formerly renowned Al Wadi Brigade in Sabratha, the Oqba Bin Nafa Brigade in Zintan, the 604<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Sirte, and the SDF in Tripoli – have gained prominence in their respective locales. In many ways, this shared ideology has allowed the brigades to transcend regional and tribal divides; many of them have cooperated with Madkhali Salafist counterparts in eastern Libya – overtly aligning with Haftar following his Tripoli offensive in April 2019.

The SDF in Tripoli is the sole predominantly Salafi Madkhali force in western Libya that belatedly mobilized a contingent of its forces against Haftar in June 2019. This suggests that the alignment of Salafi armed actors with broader coalitions is not solely governed by ideology, but also dependent on perceived self-interest and contingent on the opportunity cost of mobilization. Nevertheless, overtime, most of the Salafi brigades – most notably the SDF – have garnered a degree of popularity among local communities owing to their efforts in counterterrorism activities, security provision, and their self-advertised integrity. This has obfuscated their often underplayed anti-democratic views, as well as their inclination to challenge Libyan cultural and social norms by enforcing Salafi mores on personal conduct and freedoms.<sup>205</sup> To many Libyans, the behaviour of some hard-line Salafi-Madkhalis is reminiscent of the *modus operandi* of IS.<sup>206</sup> More broadly, their nominal alignment with either of Libya's warring factions is utilitarian, and the GNA has proven particularly incapable of exercising a modicum of oversight over Salafi-leaning forces located within areas that it nominally controls.

The differentiating factor between predominantly Salafi armed groups and Libya's other factions is that the former are able to lessen their reliance on social embeddedness for legitimacy, using ideology as a means of recruitment, organization, and mobilization. They are, in turn, able to elude, to a certain extent, some of the traditional forms of oversight that are exerted through informal social actors. In doing so, they are able to transcend many of the national-level divides characterizing Libya's conflict, though they are simultaneously constrained by tribal and communal ties in their manoeuvring. Their opportunism, coupled with the degree of influence exerted upon them from fatwas issued beyond Libya's borders, distinguishes them as an actor over whom both formal and informal modes of oversight are only minimally effective.

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204 Ibid.

205 Joffé, G., 2018. 'The Trojan horse: the Madkhali movement in North Africa', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 23(5), pp. 739-744.

206 Ibid.

# Conclusion: Implications for SSR & Recommendations

## 4

### Implications of hybridity on security provision, ceasefires, and SSR

- The hybrid nature of the security sector makes the typical dichotomies of SSR practices – such as state versus non-state, formal versus informal – impractical in reality as the delimitations between these dimensions have collapsed overtime.
- The degree of localism and politicized control over the security sector in Libya, coupled with the blurred lines of responsibility between formal and informal actors, illustrates that through loose coupling, formal structures can mask the reality of who really controls the security sector in practice, highlighting the need to better identify whom to engage with.
- Expressions of hybridity and arrangements between armed actors and formal state forces often differ, affecting the quality of security provision across the country. The political economy and social embeddedness of armed groups also affect the nature of security provision and the purpose behind its consolidation. These patterns and typologies should be studied to determine the best course of local engagement as part of a broader SSR vision.
- Given the hybrid nature of the security landscape, focusing solely on strengthening formal institutional structures and practices of security and justice provision may lead to purely cosmetic changes<sup>207</sup> in security sector governance as actors selectively adopt measures and narratives that benefit their legitimacy while disguising this manoeuvring as SSR.
- To establish effective governance structures in the security sector, hybridity should be factored into the framework of a longer-term security sector governance vision. This would help to address immediate security issues and arrangements, particularly during the transitional phase when it would contribute to trust-building and a broader process of stabilization. Without a broader vision, outlining tangible processes built on shared understandings of necessary interim security arrangements, a relapse into conflict is highly likely.

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<sup>207</sup> This would see the establishment of a “ceremonial structure”, which as per Schroeder, Chappuis and Kocak (2014), would see “domestic actors transform the organizational structures of the security sector, without the new security architecture having a substantive effect on security governance because it is not supported by operational capacities, or fully legitimated through a set of overarching norms”.

### **Implications of the political economy of armed groups on security provision, ceasefires, and SSR**

- Analysing the political economy of armed actors and factors influencing their ability to deploy particular rent-extraction modalities is key to understanding the underlying rationales behind their relationship with local communities, and the extent to which they have a vested interest in navigating reform efforts.
- The overreaching of armed actors into the economic spheres implies that a security-centric or purely institutional conceptualization of SSR processes, which distances the process from wider socio-economic and political factors, will be inadequate by design.
- Several of Libya's influential armed groups rely on Libya's informal economy, as well as state-disbursed revenues, for their revenue-generation mechanisms. An economic overhaul that tackles avenues of corruption (in formal or informal realms) can therefore lessen their ability to spoil SSR efforts.
- A security-centric process of integration into the formal security sector that does not factor in armed actors' alternative revenue-generation mechanisms (both formal and informal) may result in the further institutionalization of corruption at the state level as armed actors integrate while retaining their revenue streams.
- Multiple armed groups legitimize their overreach into economic spheres by partnering with international actors to address their security goals (for example, counter-migration or terrorism). A holistic SSR process should therefore limit such unilateral partnerships.

### **Implications of social embeddedness on security provision, ceasefires, and SSR**

- When focusing on diffusing conflict or consolidating a ceasefire, it is useful to establish a dual-track approach that combines a top-down process, involving formal negotiation between warring factions (such as the 5+5 committee) with a bottom-up process that supports and engages informal stakeholders to exercise communal oversight over ceasefires. This complementary track could include social actors representing the warring coalitions, as well as “neutral third parties”, civil society actors (including women and youth organizations), human rights organizations, municipalities whose geographic delimitations border the conflict, as well as local protection units affiliated with the security directorates in the vicinity.

- The degree of social embeddedness of armed actors in Libya's security sector implies that an effective SSR process depends on the buy-in of Libyan constituencies that would prefer to see security providers professionalized and regularized under state purview.
- When considering the issue of local oversight of ceasefire arrangements, particularly as far as armed groups upholding such arrangements is concerned, this could play out in different ways depending on the actual degree of community oversight over armed groups, which itself is based on the degree to which armed groups derive social legitimacy from the community. Within the context of the current ceasefire, and particularly in the case of Sirte, interim security arrangements need to differentiate between armed actors mobilizing along community lines or ideological lines (in the case of Salafi groups), and those aligned with the two broader coalitions. The degree of proximity of the armed actor to the community is positively correlated with expressions of communal oversight. This should be taken into account in ceasefire arrangements, as some groups may be more prone to being overseen by local communities than others.
- The functionality of security sector governance and the quality of human security at the local level is largely predicated on the type of relationship that exists between formal forces and institutions (such as security sector directorates) and quasi- or informal ones (local armed actors). Aside from being an important consideration for SSR programming, this type of relationship must also be factored into interim security arrangements, particularly as it pertains to the functionality of joint policing or patrols in buffer zones (such as Sirte).

## Recommendations

- Efforts should focus on complementing macro-level institutional SSR programming with local level community engagement through devising conflict-sensitive and contextually congruent initiatives that acknowledge the hybrid nature of security governance and enhance human security for local communities (for instance, through community policing initiatives where permissible). The solutions put forward to enhance human security should be based on an analysis of existing patterns of cooperation (or lack thereof) between formal and informal actors in certain locales, harnessing the beneficial facets of hybridity with the goal of diluting its salience in the long-term.
- An effective SSR process needs to be conflict sensitive and context specific. Harnessing Libyans' preference for state-provided security justice and institutions<sup>208</sup>

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208 Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2018. *The Libyan National Conference Process - Final Report*.

- as well as their discontent with the status quo - is key to pushing for a reform of the security sector that professionalizes and regularizes genuine security providers. This could be done through local consultative processes that incentivize local actors and establish a degree of communal buy-in to plans for interim security arrangements, stabilization initiatives, and SSR processes.
- Local-level initiatives should be complemented with “conventional” institution-focused SSR efforts that harness discontent with the status quo and promote local buy-in to programmes that contribute to the professionalization of forces and promote their ability to provide security to all Libyan citizens in an inclusive manner.
  - When approaching ceasefires and interim security arrangements (as currently seen in Sirte), it is useful to complement national-level initiatives (such as the 5+5 committee) with micro-level engagement that supports the establishment of local mechanisms capable of consolidating ceasefires, exercising a degree of oversight, and paving the way for interim security engagements. An analysis of local dynamics would help to devise practical blueprints that could potentially involve independent stakeholders (such as community leaders, tribal notables, and civil society actors), governance structures (such as municipalities, local, and social or elders’ councils), and relevant security directorates (through which joint operation rooms could be established and joint policing patrols coordinated).
  - Strategic support should be provided to oversight institutions, such as the National Anti-Corruption Authority, and should constructively tackle armed groups’ engagement in the illegal economy and the corruption of stakeholders that possess a significant degree of influence within the realm of security governance.
  - Support should be provided to strengthen the role of existing oversight mechanisms and institutions within the MoI and MoD, particularly the Military Police and the General Administration for Inspection and Follow-up.
  - The support of internal oversight institutions - particularly those that can tackle corruption and illegal revenue-generation avenues internally - can enhance the ability to limit the engagement of armed actors in the war economy, thereby creating a space to incentivize armed actors to participate in various reform or disarmament efforts, notably by leveraging oversight capabilities if and when needed.
  - The opportunity cost of foreign states partnering and empowering local actors to achieve short-term security-centric policy goals must be weighed against the risks of reinforcing hybrid security orders, which can in turn create an exploitable climate of instability and undermine a broader SSR process. Policy goals should be underpinned by coherent and coordinated holistic political transition strategies, of which SSR should be a core component.

- One by-product of the hybridity analysed throughout this publication is an increasing reliance on localized forms of security provision. SSR programming should complement large-scale institutional reforms with local, small-scale engagements that enhance human security and contribute to the success of wider scale reforms. This could be assessed on a case-by-case basis with “targeted SSR” initiatives developed based on factors such as geography, opportunities for rent-extraction, the magnitude of security pluralism, and typologies of hybridity within particular territories. These targeted initiatives would serve to accommodate disparities in context on the ground but should, however, feed into a broader vision of macro-SSR reform applicable nationwide.
- An oft-omitted benefit of armed actors’ social embeddedness is the influence that local stakeholders can informally possess over armed actors. As part of both interim security arrangements and broader SSR processes, the awareness and capacity of informal stakeholders (such as community leaders, civil society organizations, journalists, women, and youth) should be raised to improve communal capacity for informal oversight over the security sector. Within this context, local stakeholders should also ensure that the specific security needs of women, youth, and minorities are addressed by security providers.
- As parliamentary oversight remains elusive in the Libyan context, regulatory frameworks remain unevenly implemented across the country’s territory. So long as parliamentary functions remain unexercised on a national scale, smaller-scale initiatives pertaining to regulatory frameworks – such as clearly delineating ministerial mandates, implementing codes of ethics across institutions and targeted legal reforms (for example, revising pre-existing police reform laws and laws governing the provision of security at the level of security directorates) – provide the most viable avenue for the provision of technical support towards greater institutional accountability.
- Taking into account existing obstacles to the proper functioning of traditional parliamentary oversight mechanisms and supporting municipal or community-level oversight can – in the short-term – provide an effective stop-gap measure that moves away from pro forma governance in a way that can subsequently be folded under parliamentary purview.

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