

# Briefing Paper

June 2018



Security Assessment  
in North Africa



## CAPITAL OF MILITIAS

### Tripoli's Armed Groups Capture the Libyan State

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## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank their interlocutors for agreeing to interviews for this report. Fiona Mangan, Mary Fitzgerald, and Tarek Megerisi provided useful comments on an earlier draft of this report, as did Nicolas Florquin, Alaa Tartir, and Matt Johnson at the Small Arms Survey.

## Front cover photo

An armed guard outside the Abu Sitta naval base, the seat of the Presidency Council, in Tripoli, Libya, April 2016.  
Source: Ismail Zitouny/Reuters

## Overview

Since the arrival of the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli in March 2016, four large local militias have gradually divided up the capital between themselves. Though nominally loyal to the government, they now exert a degree of influence over state institutions and resources that is unprecedented in post-Qaddafi Libya. This Paper examines the rise of a militia cartel in Tripoli, and concludes that the situation is untenable, as it risks provoking a major new conflict over Tripoli fought by those who have been excluded from access to the state and impedes efforts to establish a meaningful unity government.

## Key findings

- Since state institutions split in two in mid-2014, the armed groups in Tripoli have undergone far-reaching changes in their financing patterns. Protection rackets and large-scale fraud, which are both contributing to a deepening economic crisis, have replaced state salaries as their principal source of income.
- Over the past two years, the large Tripolitanian militias have transformed into criminal networks straddling politics, big business, and the administration. They have infiltrated the bureaucracy and are increasingly able to coordinate their actions across different state institutions. The government is powerless in the face of militia influence.
- For the average citizen, security in Tripoli has improved substantially, as clashes between rival forces have receded and the cartel has focused on controlling the administration and the economy. But this state of affairs is fuelling resentment among powerful forces in the capital and beyond. It could provoke a new war over the capital.
- UN and Western policies have contributed to the current situation in Tripoli. They encouraged the GNA's Presidency Council (PC) to move to Tripoli under the protection of the militias, then tacitly supported the expansion of these militias.

## Introduction

On 30 March 2016, the Presidency Council (PC) of the Government of National Accord (GNA) arrived at Tripoli's Abu Sitta naval base by boat from Tunisia. The PC was created in December 2015 by the Libyan Political Agreement, which was signed in Skhirat, Morocco (ICG, 2016). From its creation, the PC was pressured by its external backers—the UN and Western governments—to relocate to Tripoli, even though it did not command any regular forces that could offer protection. By the time it arrived in Tripoli, the PC could rely on promises from a handful of armed groups in the capital that they would support it. A range of other militias<sup>1</sup> were explicitly hostile, while most armed groups in Tripoli were non-committal.

From 2011, Tripoli's security landscape was a highly fragmented and unstable patchwork of multiple armed groups. But in the year that followed the PC's arrival, four militias that had associated themselves with the PC from the outset divided up the capital between themselves. These four militias—the Special Deterrence Force (SDF), the Tripoli Revolutionaries Battalion (TRB), the Nawasi Battalion, and the Abu Slim unit of the Central Security Apparatus—expanded their control across central, southern, and large parts of western Tripoli, gradually displacing rival armed groups during a series of heavy clashes. In parallel, they converted their territorial control into political influence and financial gain, consolidating into a cartel.<sup>2</sup>

This Briefing Paper analyses the implications and the risks associated with this evolution. The first part traces the rise of the Tripoli militia cartel and frames this development against historical struggles for power within Libya's capital. The second part analyses changes in the financial basis of Tripoli's armed groups over the past few years, their move towards capturing state institutions, and the implications of this development for conflict dynamics and the prospect of a wider political settlement. The Paper is based on 55 interviews with leaders of armed groups, government officials, and local observers in Tripoli and Misrata, which were undertaken during March and April 2018. It also draws on the authors' previous interviews and observations during regular research visits made since 2011.

## From free-for-all to oligopoly: Tripoli's security landscape, 2011–18

The struggles over control of Tripoli since 2011 are closely linked to the wider struggle over the post-Qaddafi political order. The capital's takeover by revolutionary forces in August 2011 was chaotic. As it fell, revolutionary armed groups from Misrata and different towns in the Nafusa Mountains began competing for influence in the capital, both among themselves and with militias that emerged from Tripoli neighbourhoods thereafter. Because no single group was able to control the capital, successive transitional governments had to include the representatives of multiple factions. These factions, in turn, used state resources to strengthen their respective armed groups and enhance their legitimacy by turning them into officially sanctioned units. As a result, power struggles within the transitional institutions were closely linked to rivalries over territory in Tripoli, and eventually escalated into open conflict starting in May 2014. From the beginning, armed groups equated physical control of strategic locations and government facilities with influence over government decisions. This calculation continues to drive the ongoing struggles over the capital.

### Multilateral rivalries —August 2011 to July 2014

In the months following the capital's fall, multi-sided rivalries developed. Revolutionary armed groups from Misrata and Zintan were among the strongest factions in the capital. Armed revolutionaries from Amazigh towns in the Nafusa Mountains also established themselves in Tripoli, primarily in western districts. Other important actors included several armed groups that had formed and fought in towns in the Nafusa Mountains but whose membership was diverse, coming from the mountains, from Tripoli itself, or from elsewhere. Two of those groups—the 17 February Battalion and the Martyrs of the Capital Battalion—included a large proportion of Islamist-leaning fighters, some of whom were former members of the defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG).<sup>3</sup> A third group—the Tripoli Revolutionaries Battalion—had a more diverse and less ideologically marked membership. These and other groups of fighters

from the capital had been based in Nalut, Rujban, and Zintan during the war (Cole and Khan, 2015a; Lacher and Labnoui, 2015).

In Tripoli itself, militias drawing their membership from particular neighbourhoods emerged. A number had developed out of former clandestine revolutionary cells—examples included the armed groups in the Suq al-Jum'a area led by Abd al-Latif Qaddur and Abd al-Rauf Kara, as well as the group led by Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli, who is widely known as 'Ghaniwa'.<sup>4</sup> Others were wholly post-revolutionary formations. By early 2012, perhaps 30 armed groups could be categorized as militarily significant in Tripoli, many of which comprised battle-hardened revolutionary fighters. Countless smaller groups also competed for territory; some were vigilante groups while others were mere criminal gangs. Small-scale clashes were an almost daily occurrence in late 2011 and early 2012, although larger confrontations remained rare (ICG, 2011).

All attempts at gathering these rapidly multiplying groups under a single authority failed. Two early attempts were the Tripoli Military Council, headed by former LIFG leader Abd al-Hakim Belhaj, and the Supreme Security Committee (SSC), which was formed as a direct challenge to the former by officials of the National Transitional Council (NTC). With the formation of the government of Abd al-Rahim al-Kib in November 2011, these attempts gave way to the creation of rival militia conglomerates by representatives of competing factions in the government. Various officials began according official status and salaries to existing armed groups or tasked their allies with establishing new ones (Lacher and Cole, 2014).

Leading actors in this process included the Zintani defence minister Usama al-Juwaili; his deputy, al-Siddiq al-Mabruk al-Ghithi, a former LIFG member; the Misratan interior minister Fawzi Abdelali; his deputy Omar al-Khadrawi, a Muslim Brother from Zawiya; and the chief of staff Yusef al-Mangush. Many Tripoli militias entered the umbrella of the SSC, which was technically an institution of the interior ministry—though there were effectively two parallel administrative structures within the SSC, and most units acted independently. Others, such as the Zintani-led Qa'qa' and Sawa'iqa Battalions, were officially units of the defence ministry, from which Juwaili supplied those groups with substantial funds and equipment. Libya

Shield Force was another umbrella organization that provided armed groups with funds and an official status. These units operated under the authority of the chief of staff and included the Central Shield, the largest Misratan force in Tripoli. The headcount of all these units rapidly increased, as a result of both large-scale recruitment and the vast inflation of membership figures as commanders sought to capture additional salaries (Lacher and Cole, 2014).

The new militia economy spawned rivalries that intensified after the July 2012 elections to the General National Congress (GNC) and the formation of the government of Ali Zeidan in November 2012. Tripoli was the epicentre of these rivalries. Armed groups adopted increasingly brazen methods to exert pressure on state institutions, and this in turn drove a spiral of escalation. In April 2013, revolutionary hardliners from within and outside the capital began a siege of ministerial buildings lasting several weeks. The ostensible aim of the siege was to force the passage of legislation banning former regime officials from holding public office. But when that law was passed by the GNC—despite rather than because of the siege—the blockade continued. The siege became about physical control of the ministries themselves, and associated influence on appointments and decisions (Lacher and Cole, 2014). The besieging forces coordinated themselves into the Libyan Revolutionaries Operations Room (LROR), which included groups from Misrata, the Nafusa Mountains, Sabratha, Tripoli, and Zawiya. LROR leaders negotiated with Zintani representatives over control of the ministerial buildings, and were successful in the cases of the Foreign Affairs and Justice ministries.<sup>5</sup>

After the ministerial blockades, remaining inhibitions to the use of force in Tripoli fell rapidly. In June 2013, Zintani-led armed groups attacked the seat of the Petroleum Facilities Guards (PFG) in a dispute over jobs and salaries, provoking heavy fighting with an Abu Slim-based PFG unit led by Salah al-Burki.<sup>6</sup> The following month, the same Zintani-led groups attacked the main Ministry of Interior building on the airport road, holding and ransacking it for over a week (Lacher and Cole, 2014). During Ramadan alone, various groups forced their way into the prime minister's office and pressured Zeidan into paying out almost LD 2 billion (USD 1.5 billion) to the newly established state-sanctioned militias.<sup>7</sup> In October,



armed men affiliated with the LROR kidnapped Zeidan before releasing him the same day (Gall, 2013). Following that incident, Zeidan moved into the Islamic Call Society compound controlled by the Zintani-led Sawa'iq Battalion, thereby clearly associating himself with one faction in the struggles over the capital.<sup>8</sup> In November, the Zintani forces controlling Tripoli International Airport briefly kidnapped the deputy head of Libya's intelligence service (BBC, 2013). The Zintanis' political adversaries increasingly avoided travelling via the airport.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, armed groups from Tripoli sought to exploit growing public anger in the capital to demand that groups from outside Tripoli leave the city. In November 2013, Tripoli's Local Council, the self-appointed municipal administration in place since 2011, whose members had close connections to some Tripolitanian armed groups, organized a demonstration in front of a base controlled by a Misratan militia. The militia opened fire, triggering clashes in which 43 people, mostly protestors, were killed (Human Rights Watch, 2013). All Misratan units then withdrew from the capital in response to what that city's leaders saw as a demonization campaign. Several large Tripoli-based militias—including the three largest Zintani-led units—organized ceremonies during which they ostensibly handed over their bases to the authorities. In reality, however, they remained in place, and during the following months Zintani-led groups used the departure of the Misratans to aggressively expand their influence over the capital (Lacher and Cole, 2014).

During this period, many armed groups in Tripoli reinvented themselves in order to shed labels that had become increasingly infamous or gain better access to state funds. The interior ministry slowly dismantled the SSC during late 2013 and early 2014, and its units sought new institutional cover, such as in the military intelligence apparatus or in newly formed 'special intervention forces'—including Abd al-Rauf Kara's Special Deterrence Force, which was based in Mitiga airport. Other units were integrated into the army and were thus identifiable by numbers—Brigades 121 and 155, for example. Yet others joined a new Zintani-run Special Operations Force, which was technically part of the interior ministry.<sup>10</sup>

The rivalries between armed groups in Tripoli were increasingly intertwined with escalating political tensions. In Feb-



Members of the Presidential Security Force outside the Rixos Hotel, the seat of the General National Congress in Tripoli, Libya, May 2014. Source: Ismail Zitouny/Reuters

ruary 2014, the two largest Zintani-led groups in Tripoli issued an ultimatum to the GNC, giving it five hours to hand over power—it was not clear to whom—or face its forced dissolution. The Zintani militias eventually relented after UN envoy Tarek Mitri intervened (Mitri, 2015). In March, the same militias looted an army base in southern Tripoli and repeatedly attacked the Chief of Staff's office, forcing its relocation. That same month, a Zintani armed group seized a major weapons shipment from Belarus at Tripoli International Airport that had been destined for Misratan forces in southern Libya (Lacher and Cole, 2014).

Both in Misrata and among the armed groups affiliated with the LROR, Zintani expansionism and the ostentatious display of new equipment such as armoured personnel carriers provoked growing anxiety.<sup>11</sup> In May, in coordination with the start of General Khalifa Haftar's campaign in Benghazi and his creation of a rebel army leadership, the Qa'qa' and Sawa'iq attacked the GNC while it was in session, killing two staffers, abducting several members, looting the legislature's archives, and declaring it to be dissolved (Elumami and Laessing, 2014). At the national level, the attacks by Haftar and the Zintani-led forces were key to the split of state institutions and the eruption of full-scale civil war two months later. In Tripoli, these attacks prompted a return of Misratan armed groups and, after the June elections to the House of

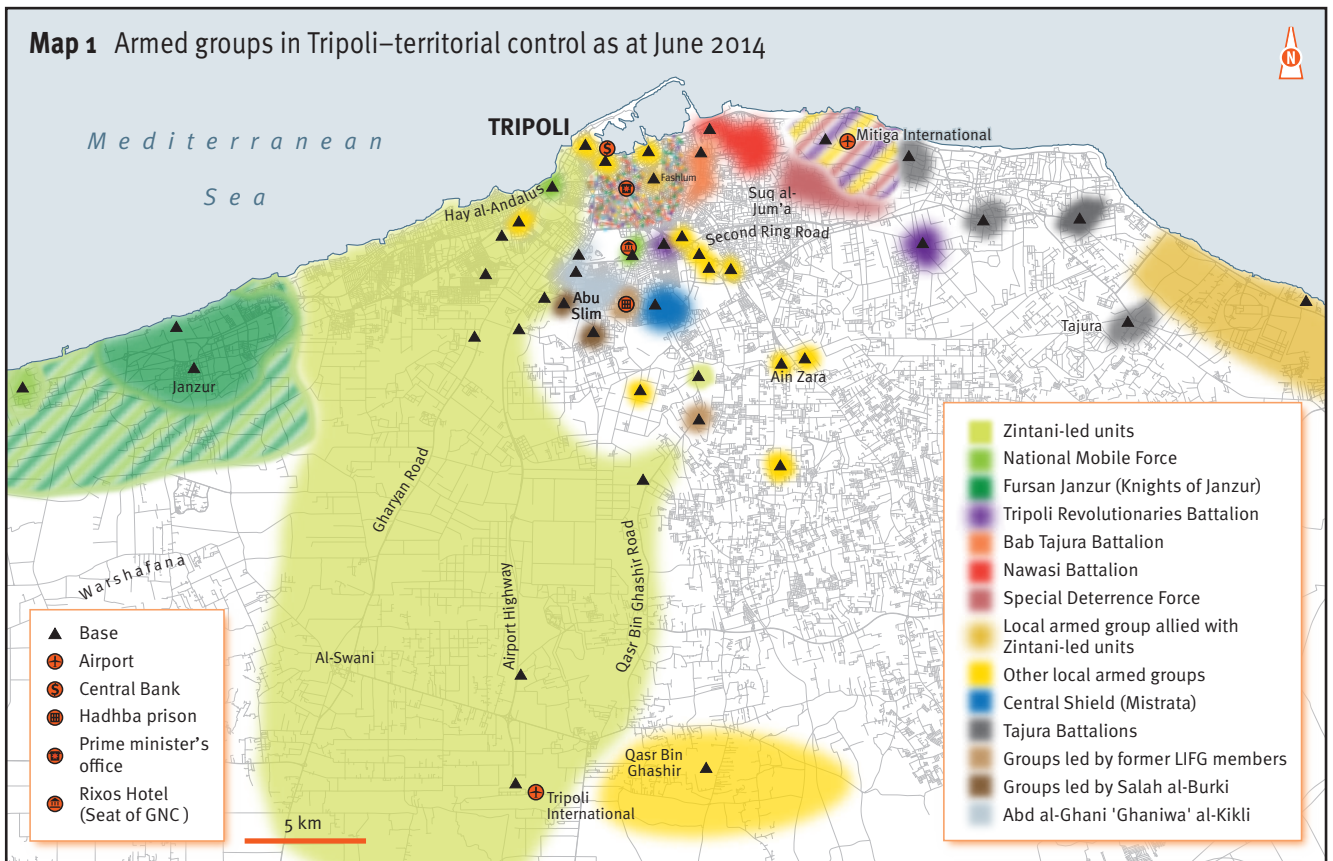
Representatives (HoR), the formation of an alliance determined to expel the Zintanis from the capital.<sup>12</sup>

## Capital without government —July 2014 to March 2016

On 13 July 2014, a loose alliance of armed groups began attacking Zintani positions in Tripoli (see Map 1, p. 6). The coalition, which subsequently became known as Libya Dawn, was largely made up of Misratan forces but also included Ghaniwa al-Kikli's forces (from Abu Slim), the 'Knights of Janzur' (who had already clashed with the Sawa'iq during the preceding week), the National Mobile Force (a group whose members mostly hailed from Amazigh towns), and armed groups from Zawiyah (Lacher and Cole, 2014). In contrast, several large Tripolitanian militias, while supportive of the operation, refrained from participating—examples included Haitham al-Tajuri's Tripoli Revolutionaries Battalion and Abd al-Rauf Kara's Special Deterrence Force. Others, including groups from Tajura and Fashlum, were suspected by Libya Dawn leaders of harbouring sympathies for the Zintanis, even though they did not move to support them.<sup>13</sup>

After Libya Dawn forces successfully expelled the Zintanis from the capital in late August—destroying Tripoli's International Airport in the process—wide-ranging changes in Tripoli's security landscape

**Map 1** Armed groups in Tripoli—territorial control as at June 2014



began. Groups from Misrata took over former Zintani positions along the airport road, as well as the Islamic Call Society compound formerly held by the Sawa'iq. Other components of Libya Dawn also significantly expanded their influence in the capital. Forces suspected of retaining ties to Haftar or the Zintanis were gradually driven out, with armed groups from Tajura and Fashlum withdrawing from the capital by as late as April 2015 after heavy clashes. Misrata's Mahjub Brigade deployed a force to the prime minister's office in central Tripoli, where Omar al-Hassi headed a self-styled 'National Salvation Government' relying on remnants of the GNC to retain the appearance of legitimacy.<sup>14</sup>

Leaders of armed groups who had participated in Libya Dawn exercised substantial influence on the composition of the Hassi government. Examples include the defence minister, Khalifa al-Ghwell—who had been nominated by Misratan leaders—and the interior minister, Muhammad Shaiter—who represented the armed groups from Benghazi who fought against Haftar's forces and were allied with the Libya Dawn coalition. Commanders from the Amazigh-dominated National Mobile Force nominated the ministers of Labour,

Local Government, Planning, and Telecommunications, as well as several deputy ministers. As Hassi sought to accommodate figures supported by the armed groups, the number of deputy ministers grew, by one count in January 2015, to 106.<sup>15</sup> After Ghwell replaced Hassi as prime minister in 2015, he appointed a leader of the Suq al-Jum'a-based Nawasi Battalion, Abd al-Latif Qaddur, as interior minister.

These newly appointed ministers in turn reconfigured the institutional arrangements for armed groups in Tripoli. During his time as interior minister, Muhammad al-Shaiter appointed Omar al-Khadrawi, who had been deputy interior minister in 2011–13, as head of the newly created Central Security Apparatus (CSA).<sup>16</sup> Khadrawi oversaw the integration of armed groups into the CSA: this provided these groups with an institutional affiliation they had lacked since the SSC's dissolution. Tajuri's Tripoli Revolutionaries Battalion (TRB) became the CSA's First Security Unit; the Abu Slim SSC unit, led by Kikli, became the CSA's Abu Slim Unit; and the Suq al-Jum'a-based Nawasi Battalion became the CSA's Northern Tripoli Unit.<sup>17</sup> Salah al-Burki, a militia leader in Abu Slim who had distinguished himself in the battle over the

airport in 2014, was appointed head of the interior ministry's General Investigations Apparatus. The National Mobile Force fragmented as its representatives in the Hassi (later Ghwell) government built up their own units.<sup>18</sup>

In their attempts to refashion the loyalties of armed groups using financial incentives, the Tripoli authorities under Hassi and later Ghwell lacked two critical features of a government. Firstly, the Tripoli government was ostracized internationally, after the failure of its plan to translate the Libya Dawn alliance's control over the capital into international recognition. Secondly, and this was also partially attributable to its lack of international recognition, it lacked regular access to budgets. The governor of the Central Bank, al-Saddiq al-Kabir, decided which expenditure items of the rival governments in Tripoli and the eastern city of al-Bayda he would fund. This effectively meant that Kabir continued to allow payments of salaries based on pre-2015 payrolls, and allocated subsidies in accordance with the Central Bank's own budgeting process, while refusing to fund the expansion of government payrolls and other expenditures (ICG, 2015).

The two rival governments were therefore forced to find other ways of

mobilizing resources to allocate to the armed groups. In the case of the Hassi (later Ghwell) government, this mainly meant using funds left over from the 2014 budget of the Zeidan government and commandeering cash from state-owned enterprises such as the Post and Telecommunications Company (UNSC, 2017, pp. 230–31). Hassi, Ghwell, and their ministers probably raised somewhere between LD 2 billion (USD 1.4 billion) and LD 3 billion (USD 2.1 billion) in this manner, but their purchasing power nevertheless lagged far behind previous governments. The Hassi (later Ghwell) government was unable to accommodate the demands of key constituencies. For example, after the Misratan-dominated Central Shield's temporary contracts ran out in August 2014, the Hassi government could not find a new arrangement that would have allowed former Central Shield members to continue receiving salaries.<sup>19</sup> Ghwell did, however, cut the salaries of the two largest Misratan groups—the Halbus and Mahjub Brigades—after they entered into local ceasefires in the Warshafana area, south-west of Tripoli, in April 2015. When leaders of the two brigades visited him in November 2015, Ghwell offered not only to resume but to increase the payments if they renounced the ceasefire agreements.<sup>20</sup>

While disruptions to the financing patterns of armed groups reshaped the financial strategies of Tripoli militias, political rifts within the former Libya Dawn coalition also fomented tensions in and around the capital. The ceasefire negotiated by the Halbus and Mahjub Brigades in Warshafana reflected the emergence of a strong alliance of Misratan brigade leaders, politicians, and notables who supported the end of the war and the formation of a unity government. They faced opposition from rejectionist politicians and militias from Misrata, Tripoli, and Zawiya who were associated with the Ghwell government or the GNC leadership, and opposed the UN-led talks over a unity government. Halbus and Mahjub leaders also negotiated with the Zintanis, and in the summer of 2015 came close to an agreement that would have returned Zintan to the capital in support of a unity government. This raised the risk of open conflict with rejectionist elements in Tripoli. Such a confrontation was ultimately avoided because Misratan and Zintani negotiators failed to conclude a deal. Meanwhile, leaders of some armed groups from Misrata and Tripoli kept visiting UN officials in Tunis to express

their support for the Skhirat negotiations and the formation of a unity government. In some cases, these leaders faced dissenting voices from their own ranks, leaving internationals guessing as to which elements would support or oppose the establishment of a unity government.<sup>21</sup>

Uncertainty over whether a deal could be reached and whether the government could assume office in Tripoli prevented such tensions from escalating into open confrontation. When the Skhirat agreement was signed in December 2015, there was no detailed understanding over the arrangements needed to secure Tripoli for a unity government representing all key factions. Indeed, no serious talks had been held with or between the armed groups. The agreement established a nine-member Presidency Council under the leadership of Fayed al-Serraj that would—its Western supporters hoped—soon relocate to Tripoli to establish the 'Government of National Accord' (GNA). But several members of the Presidency Council (PC), including the eastern representative Ali al-Qatrani and the Zintani representative Omar al-Aswad, rejected a move to Tripoli while it remained under the control of armed groups, many of which had supported Libya Dawn in 2014 (ICG, 2016).

Against the backdrop of this resistance, Serraj and the Misratan representative in the PC, Ahmed Maitig, engaged a narrow range of armed groups in order to prepare for the PC's relocation to Tripoli. Serraj's advisors primarily engaged with the Suq al-Jum'a-based Nawasi Battalion, as well as with Kara's Special Deterrence Force (SDF), which controlled the capital's only functioning international airport, Mitiga, along with the detention facilities within its perimeter. Kara signalled to the PC's security advisors that he would support the body but could not guarantee its arrival via Mitiga due to threats from Tajura-based factions that they would target the plane. Maitig reached arrangements with some Mahjub and Halbus leaders, including with Brigade 301, a Halbus offshoot that had been established by a decree from Ghwell in his days as defence minister.<sup>22</sup>

Most armed groups in Tripoli refused to commit their support to the GNA or remained overtly hostile towards it. In mid-March 2016, only two weeks before the PC's arrival in Tripoli, Haitham al-Tajuri led an armed convoy through central Tripoli to oppose the GNA and proclaim his support for re-establishing the monarchy, thereby cementing his reputation

for unpredictability (Ewan Libya, 2016a). When, on 30 March, Serraj and five other PC members arrived by boat from Tunisia at the Abu Sitta naval base in central Tripoli, with the exception of the Navy unit there and the Nawasi Battalion that controlled base's perimeter, there was no detailed understanding on security arrangements in place.<sup>23</sup>

## Towards a militia oligopoly —April 2016 to date

On the night after the PC's arrival, a confrontation between armed groups affiliated with the Ghwell government and the Nawasi Battalion was only narrowly avoided. Various influential figures worked intensively to dissuade PC opponents from escalating the situation. Senior Misratan figures engaged with a key former Libya Dawn commander from their city, Salah Badi.<sup>24</sup> During the same night, an armed group commanded by Haitham al-Tajuri attacked al-Naba TV, the leading voice of the PC's adversaries in Tripoli, after it had screened Tajuri's previous declaration of opposition to the PC, creating the (incorrect) impression the declaration had been issued that same day. Tajuri therefore aligned himself with the pro-PC camp by default.<sup>25</sup> The PC began working in Tripoli, though Serraj rarely ventured outside the naval base. Many armed groups in the capital initially maintained their ambivalence towards the body.

The PC's initial association with the Suq al-Jum'a-based SDF and Nawasi Battalion derived from necessity and was due to the fact that the naval base fell within these two groups' area of influence. Tajuri's alignment with the pro-PC forces was (as noted above) the result of his spontaneous attack on al-Naba TV during the night of the PC's arrival. But the GNA's entrance into Tripoli under these circumstances had far-reaching consequences for the perception of the GNA among political factions, and has defined the divides within Tripoli's security landscape ever since. The GNA's adversaries seized on the fact that the government placed itself at the mercy of the militias controlling Tripoli. The Zintanis, in particular, were furious. Influential actors in Zintan had supported the Skhirat agreement and appointed Omar al-Aswad as their representative in the PC, in the expectation that an agreement on new security arrangements in Tripoli would either allow Zintani forces to return or enable



neutral forces to assume control. This would have, in turn, established the basis for the return of around 20,000 civilians of Zintani origin who had fled the capital during the 2014 war.<sup>26</sup> The PC's acquiescence to the status quo meant that there was no prospect of the armed groups who had fought the Zintanis in 2014 relinquishing their control.

In Tripoli itself, the lines of conflict were partially structured along the divide between principled opponents of the new government and its supporters, who were frequently more opportunistic (see Map 2). Many opponents regarded the PC and the Skhirat agreement as a foreign imposition. These included Badi's largely Misratan forces, several local armed groups in the eastern district of Tajura, parts of the Amazigh-dominated National Mobile Force, armed groups led by former members of the defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), and members of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC) who found refuge in Tripoli.<sup>27</sup> Many members of such groups continued to respect the religious authority of the Mufti, al-Sadeq al-Gharyani, who fiercely opposed the PC.<sup>28</sup>

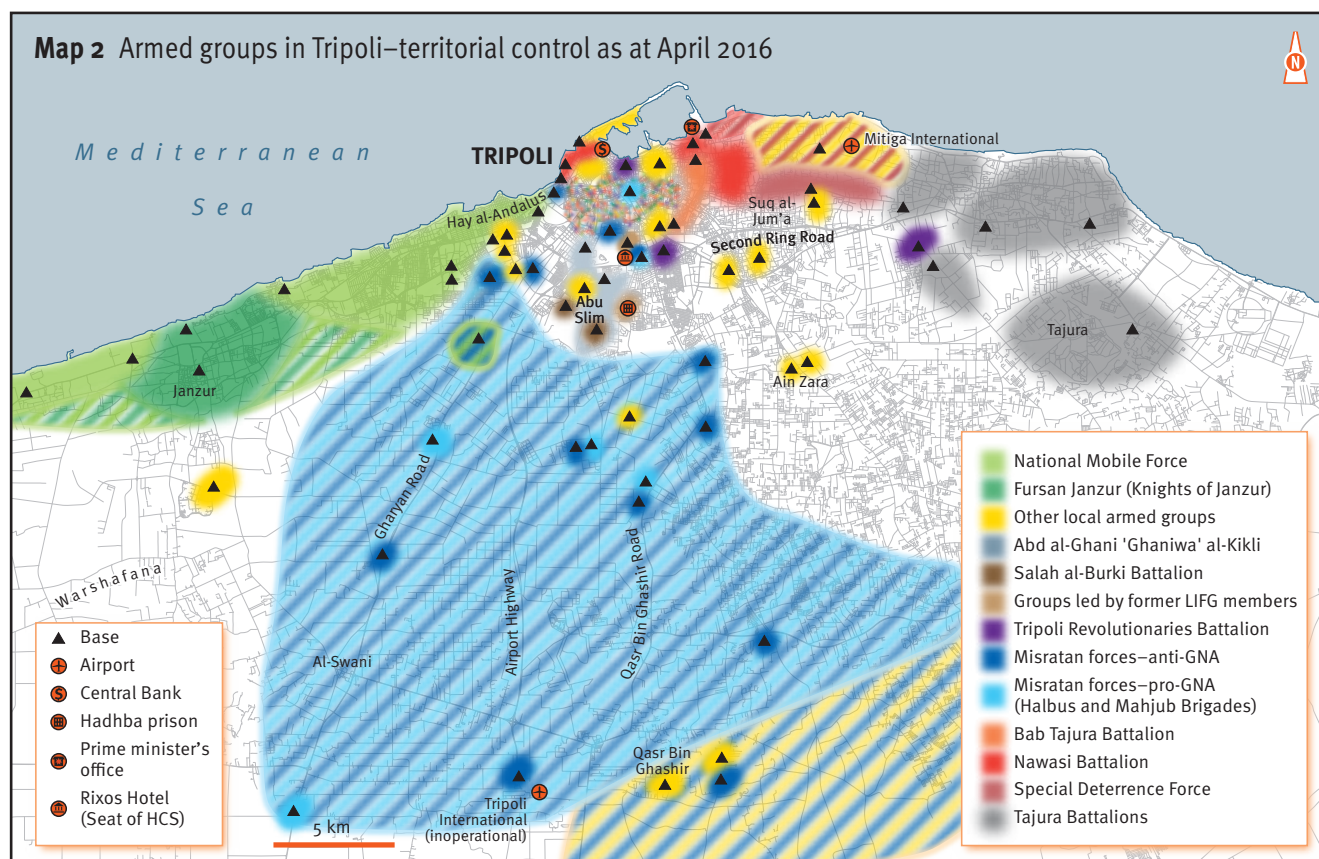
This fault line was hardened by an ideological divide. The Nawasi Battalion and Kara's SDF included followers of the Saudi Salafist preacher Rabi' al-Madkhali—the

so-called Madakhila—who considered political Islamists ranging from the Muslim Brotherhood to jihadi currents to be apostates.<sup>29</sup> As a result, the SDF and Nawasi were declared enemies of the BRSC, former LIFG members, and the Mufti. These rifts were further exacerbated by suspicions among some Tripoli factions that Kara, Kikli, and Tajuri were secretly in talks with Haftar, which could allow him to gain a foothold in the capital.<sup>30</sup> Haftar deliberately exploited these fears by making seemingly offhand comments about his willingness to cooperate with the three militia leaders (Al-Marsad, 2016).

Even armed groups that were open to engagement with the government were driven into opposition. This was often because they were competing with pro-PC militias for territory and economic assets (banks in particular). In southern Tripoli, for example, Kikli's forces in Abu Slim competed for territory with various Misratan armed groups and the local Salah al-Burki Battalion. As Kikli sought Tajuri's support against Misratan groups, he associated with the pro-PC militias; the Burki Battalion, in turn, found itself on the opposing side almost by default. A similar dynamic occurred in western Tripoli, where Kara and Tajuri sought to encroach on areas controlled by armed groups that were affiliated with the National Mobile

Force. As a result, the latter joined the GNA's opponents. The PC made little effort to engage such groups.<sup>31</sup>

With rivalries developing along these ideological, political, and territorial lines, the arrival of the PC ushered in a period of intensifying confrontations. The Rixos Hotel and its adjacent Hospitality Palaces, which were the seat of the GNC, provided a key focus for these rivalries. Shortly after the PC entered Tripoli, Misratan GNC member Abderrahman al-Sweihli persuaded a majority of GNC members to join him in establishing the High Council of State (HCS)—the GNC's new incarnation under the Skhirat agreement—and elect him president of this body. The HCS initially met at the Radisson Hotel, as the Rixos was controlled by units that were loyal to the GNC, including factions from the Misratan Mahjub and Marsa Brigades. Three weeks after the PC arrived, Sweihli engineered the defection of these groups, which operated under the label of Presidential Security Force, and moved the HCS to the Rixos, ejecting the remnants of the GNC.<sup>32</sup> In October, these same armed groups switched sides again, allowing GNC loyalists and Khalifa al-Ghwell—who continued to claim to be heading Libya's legitimate government—to return to the Rixos (Al-Wasat, 2016).





# “Even armed groups that were open to engagement with the government were driven into opposition.”

The struggle over the Rixos Hotel was compounded by conflict along ideological lines, between the Madakhila and their enemies. Shortly after Ghwell's and the GNC's return to the Rixos, Nader al-Omrani, a moderate religious scholar and a member of the Mufti's Fatwa Authority, was kidnapped in Tripoli. By late November, reports spread that Omrani had been murdered. Although his body was never found, a suspect in the case confessed, alleging that Kara's SDF and a Madkhali preacher from Egypt were implicated in the killing (Howiya Press, 2016). Escalating tensions pitted the Madkhali-dominated SDF and its allies against a diverse range of armed groups who were opposed to growing Madkhali influence. In early December 2016, Kikli and Tajuri attacked the Ihsan Battalion, which was based in the Nasr park adjacent to the Rixos Hotel, accusing it of plotting terrorist attacks. The group was led by former LIFG member Tareq Durman and included some BRSC elements; it had ties to individuals from Benghazi that had been imprisoned by Kara's SDF as terrorists and was therefore staunchly opposed to the Madakhila. There was a widespread perception in Tripoli at the time that the operation had at least the tacit backing of the PC, which remained silent over the aggressive expansion of the armed groups affiliated with it. After heavy clashes, mediators brokered a deal that resulted in Durman's group leaving the area.<sup>33</sup>

Tensions escalated again in February 2017 after a convoy carrying Sweihli came under fire near the Rixos, allegedly from elements of the Presidential Security Force (Al-Marsad, 2017a). The following month, Kikli, whose territory directly bordered the Rixos, joined with Tajuri to dislodge the remnants of the GNC, the Ghwell government, and affiliated armed groups from the area. Several days of heavy fighting ensued (Al-Wasat, 2017a). By that point, Kikli had, subsequent to several rounds of heavy fighting, emerged victorious from several confrontations with

the Burki Battalion in al-Hadhba and a number of Misratan armed groups along the airport road. Meanwhile, Tajuri and Kara had gradually prevailed over smaller armed groups affiliated with the National Mobile Force in the western district of Hay al-Andalus.<sup>34</sup>

By March 2017, militias affiliated with the Presidency Council dominated central Tripoli. The overwhelming perception on both sides of this struggle was that the aggressive expansion of pro-PC militias enjoyed at least the tacit backing of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and Western governments.<sup>35</sup> Militia leaders and officers associated with the PC even actively promoted the notion that this expansion was unfolding in accordance with the planned designs of UNSMIL's senior security advisor, the Italian General Paolo Serra.<sup>36</sup> According to one senior international official, hands-on backing for the militias' expansion did not come from UNSMIL but from the Italian government.<sup>37</sup> At the very least, there was a widespread sense that, as a former senior security official in the GNA observed, UNSMIL tacitly approved of these operations.<sup>38</sup>

In May, Misratan armed groups affiliated with Ghwell and led by Salah Badi twice tried to advance into the southern districts controlled by Kikli. The second such attempt, in late May, provided a pretext for Tajuri and Kikli to remove the only major remaining obstacle to their dominance in the capital—the Hadhba prison, which was controlled by former LIFG leader and former deputy defence minister Khaled al-Sharif, who was the prison's director. Sharif had no links with Badi's operation and had cooperated with the GNA's general prosecutor in releasing inmates who had served their sentences or were never convicted.<sup>39</sup> But he was critical of the aggressive expansion of militias affiliated with the PC. Tajuri, in turn, coveted the Hadhba prison's highly-prized inmates, who included Qaddafi's son (Saadi) and intelligence

chief (Abdallah al-Senoussi). Tajuri and Kikli attacked the prison, captured it after heavy fighting, and then forced Sharif's family to leave their private home before razing it to the ground (Afrigatenews, 2017). A triumphant PC openly celebrated the operation, which it said had been carried out by 'forces belonging to the government's security institutions' (Presidency Council, 2017).

With the capture of Hadhba prison, an oligopoly of four large militias emerged in Tripoli: Tajuri's, Kikli's, and Kara's forces, as well as the Nawasi Battalion. A number of smaller armed groups that were closely allied with at least one of these four large militias remained active in central Tripoli; notable examples include the Misratan-led Special Operations Force and the Bab Tajura Battalion in Suq al-Jum'a. In the capital's west and south, the four large militias maintained cordial relations with the Misratan-led Brigade 301 (in southern Tripoli) and the Knights of Janzur (in the eponymous western district). The eastern district of Tajura was the only area that continued to host armed groups with an ambivalent or hostile attitude towards the four militias.

By May 2017, central Tripoli, with its state institutions, banks, businesses, and the capital's only functioning airport, was divided between four large armed groups, clearly contrasting with the previous situation, in which a plethora of armed groups had directly competed for influence. This complex patchwork of contested spheres of influence increasingly consolidated into discrete and clearly identifiable areas in which particular armed groups exerted exclusive control.

## The political economy of Tripoli's militia cartel

Since early 2017, this consolidation has established the basis for a functioning cartel. Although tensions between the four factions do exist, they have shown solidarity when their territorial control has been challenged by other armed groups. Within areas under their control, the four militias have, to an unprecedented extent, tightened their grip over economic assets and state institutions (see Map 3). While this evolution has improved security for the average citizen, it has also impeded a growing range of powerful forces that seek to access the levers of the state administration and its associated economic resources.

“The armed groups that dominate the capital in 2018 have expanded in inverse proportion to the state budgets allocated to them.”

people, all at the same time. When your competencies no longer have limits, we have a problem.<sup>41</sup>

### The decline of state funding

In the boom era of Libya’s post-revolutionary armed groups, from 2012 to early 2014, the primary source of finance was funds specifically allocated to these groups via the defence and interior ministries, as well as the army—including through umbrella institutions such as the Supreme Security Committee (SSC) or the Libya Shield Forces (LSF). Not only did these funds cover the salaries of individual militiamen; more importantly, by vastly inflating payrolls and operating expenditures, they allowed militia leaders and their political allies to accumulate wealth, which was then partially reinvested into heavy weapons and other capital-intensive equipment (Lacher and Cole, 2014).

The schism of state institutions in mid-2014 disrupted the arrangements that underpinned this mode of financing. The Central Bank blocked demands for new budgets from groups on both sides of the divide. While the Bank initially continued to pay salaries on the basis of existing payrolls, these were gradually scaled down during 2015–16, as a national ID

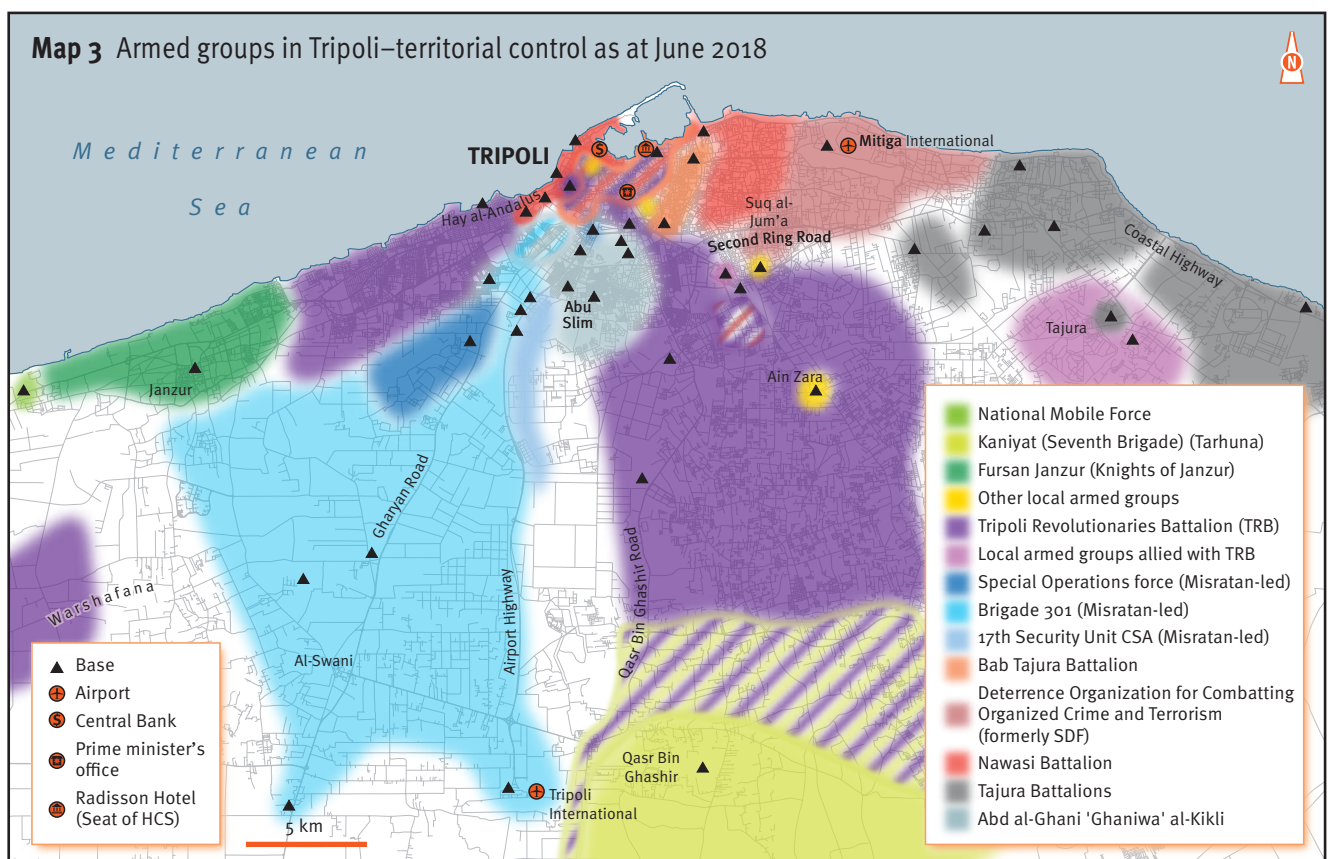
### The changing economic basis of Tripoli militias

The armed groups that dominate the capital in 2018 have expanded in inverse proportion to the state budgets allocated to them, which have contracted. Security officials and commanders affirm that the funds groups such as the Special Deterrence Force or Nawasi receive from the interior ministry cannot explain their rapid expansion since 2016. All four of the capital’s largest militias—most notably the SDF—have recruited among the former regime’s intelligence officers, acquired expensive new equipment, and extensively integrated foot soldiers in the areas they have taken over.<sup>40</sup>

Changes in armed groups’ financing patterns are key to understanding the

territorial expansion of Tripolitanian militias, along with their proliferating roles. The profits armed groups made from controlling banks during deepening crisis were particularly important. To a certain extent, their expansion sustained itself, as seizing control over new bank branches provided greater access to resources. Moreover, as the armed groups infiltrated the administration and the banking sector, they became ever more deeply enmeshed with business and political networks. In the words of one former SDF commander, who is critical of these developments:

A given militia now acts as an intelligence service, a state security force, a private security company, and a service provider to ordinary



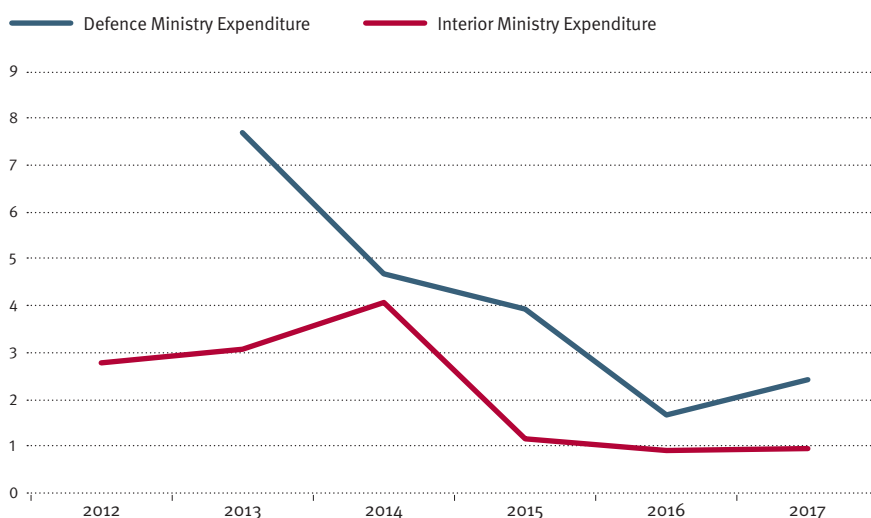
number was introduced with the intention of reducing the duplication of salary payments to the same individuals. This further diminished the resources available to armed groups (Al-Wasat, 2017b; see also Figure 1). Schemes used by officials in the Hassi and Ghwell governments to appropriate unspent budgeted funds or state-owned enterprises could only compensate for a fraction of the losses armed groups incurred through these developments.

As state funding contracted, armed groups searched for other ways to finance themselves. Kidnappings soared in Tripoli during 2015 and 2016, with the vast majority being financially motivated.<sup>42</sup> During the same period, ‘protection rackets’ emerged, with armed groups ‘taxing’ local markets or businesses in exchange for ‘security’. Over time, these rackets have become institutionalized: in the Abu Slim district, for example, the municipal council taxes market traders and businesses with the ‘returns’ being reinvested in public works. Local residents say that such taxation is enforced by Kikli, who has close ties with the municipal council and ultimately controls tax revenues and their distribution.<sup>43</sup> Brigade 301—whose leaders came from Misrata’s Halbus Brigade but whose membership is largely non-Misratan—operates in the Al-Karimiya market in south-western Tripoli. It taxes each of the market’s parcels at an amount of LD 100 per month, which adds up to a monthly revenue of between LD 500,000 and LD 750,000 (USD 364,000–546,000 at the official exchange rate). The members of the unit who patrol the market receive part of these funds as an incentive, which supplements their defence ministry salaries.<sup>44</sup> It is now standard practice for major state institutions or state-owned facilities, including office towers in central Tripoli or the National Oil Corporation (NOC), to remunerate the armed groups that control the areas surrounding their facilities.<sup>45</sup>

## Thriving on crisis

From late 2014 onwards, armed groups in Tripoli seized opportunities emerging from the widening gap between the official and black market exchange rates as well as the worsening cash shortages in banks. In both cases, the actions of armed groups significantly deepened the crisis they exploited. The root causes of these crises lay first and foremost in the collapse of oil export revenues from

**Figure 1** Security spending by Tripoli governments in billions of LD



Source: Libyan Audit Bureau, 2018, pp. 519, 527

2013 and the division of state institutions between two rival governments since 2014. Both developments eroded trust in Libya’s currency, the dinar (Harchaoui, 2018). Growing inflation discouraged people from keeping their money in banks. This predisposition was exacerbated by measures that tightened access to hard currency at the official exchange rate for imports, as well as widespread suspicions that bank employees were colluding with kidnapping gangs.<sup>46</sup>

As the black market exchange rate diverged from the official rate, opportunities for fraudulent schemes increased. Well-connected businessmen obtained hard currency at the official rate by acquiring letters of credit (LCs) for imports, then imported less than they declared—or even nothing at all—before exchanging their foreign currency against dinars on the black market. They thereby depleted Libya’s foreign exchange reserves and further accelerated the dinar’s downward spiral, which in turn made fraud even more lucrative. Credit cards issued by Libyan banks also offered opportunities for profiting from the gap between the official and the black market rates, albeit on a smaller scale (Zway, 2017, pp. 18–23; Eaton, 2018, pp. 21, 27–28).

The deepening currency and cash crises caused Tripoli’s armed groups to become more deeply involved in the banking sector and this in turn further exacerbated these crises. Armed groups began competing over the physical control of banks—that is, over the ability to threaten bank employees and protect them from the threats of others—in order to profit from credit card schemes and

extort letters of credit from bank officials. These rivalries also framed struggles between armed groups that supported and opposed the Presidency Council.<sup>47</sup>

As tensions over access to cash increased, banks sought protection from armed groups to manage cash distribution. Armed groups profit directly and indirectly from their new relationship with bank branches. The branches pay the groups ‘guarding’ the branches monthly fees, supplementing the salaries those same militiamen receive from the interior ministry or the army. Control over the distribution of cash at banks has also placed armed groups in a wholly new position of power and economic privilege. While ordinary citizens face major difficulties accessing their salaries and savings, members of armed groups are able to withdraw their salaries in cash as soon as banknotes arrive at banks. Armed groups also profit from the use of cheques, which is increasingly widespread as the liquidity crisis has deepened. To exchange their cheques for desperately needed cash, Tripolitians will accept a discount of around 20 per cent of the stated value. Leaders of armed groups that control bank branches buy the cheques at a discount and can then covert them into cash at their full value.<sup>48</sup> The aggregate effect of these practices has exacerbated cash shortages for the average citizen. At the same time, commanders can offer preferential access to cash, thereby establishing themselves as patrons of clientelist networks.

The profits to be made through the control of access to cash, however, pale



# “Control over the distribution of cash at banks has placed armed groups in a wholly new position of power and economic privilege.”

in comparison to those derived from fraudulent schemes involving letters of credit.<sup>49</sup> The branches of commercial banks are key cogs in the bureaucracy governing the award of LCs to access foreign currency at the official rate. From early 2015 onwards, the Central Bank reduced the amount of foreign currency available for LCs and progressively tightened oversight. In 2015 and 2016, armed groups in Tripoli became renowned for using brute force, including kidnapping bank branch managers and Central Bank officials, to obtain LCs for front companies or accomplices.<sup>50</sup>

Since then, further administrative layers have been added to the approval process for LCs. After the Presidency Council appointed an economy minister in April 2017, he established another committee that approved or rejected demands for LCs, though the Central Bank retains final authority (Sada, 2017). The Audit Bureau has also increased surveillance of LCs, and its interventions caused hundreds of such letters to be suspended during 2016 and 2017. Obtaining LCs for fraudulent purposes thus required increasing coordination across and within different institutions.<sup>51</sup> This has driven the formation of criminal networks that operate at the intersection of the administration, political actors, influential businessmen, and armed groups.

When coordination fails, armed groups adopt more coercive means. In one case, a Nawasi Battalion leader known as ‘Sunduq’ (‘Treasury’), whose influence extends over an area that includes the Bulaila office tower and the headquarters of the Central Bank, paid an unannounced visit to the Audit Bureau while accompanied by a bank branch manager. During his visit, he engaged the chairman and demanded that the Bureau lift its suspension of LCs for companies linked to the Nawasi. An altercation with the Bureau’s security personnel resulted in the temporary abduction of the Bureau’s head of security by the Nawasi. (The LCs

remained suspended.)<sup>52</sup> Criminals have also abducted and held senior Central Bank officials, including the chief operating officer and the governor’s office director. Despite these pressures, the governor claims that the Central Bank has not yielded to extortion.<sup>53</sup>

The actors that engage in these practices are not simply armed groups using brute force. Rather, their operations are sustained through complex webs of complicity, mutual benefit, and coercion. Some commanders claim—not implausibly—that branch managers were not always victims in such schemes and had actually approached them to collude in LC fraud.<sup>54</sup> Powerful businessmen across Tripoli associate with particular armed groups to gain access to LCs and then, in return, reinvest a share of the profits into these same groups.<sup>55</sup> Such networks have been central to the emergence of the militia cartel in Tripoli. The knowledge and connections of influential businessmen and political operators gave Tripoli’s militias access to the resources they needed to expand across the capital.<sup>56</sup>

## State capture

Massive fraud through letters of credit was part of a broader trend in which the large militias in Tripoli divided state resources among themselves. To a much greater extent than before, profits derived from the capture and misappropriation of state resources are now concentrated within a small group of actors who are mostly from Tripoli itself. The influence of armed groups within the administration is more pronounced now than at any point since 2011. The large militias controlling Tripoli are not loyal to the government, which is entirely at the mercy of these armed groups. In interviews, leaders in the main armed groups consistently described the GNA as a ‘façade’ whose decrees were dictated by the militias. An SDF commander defended the group’s

practice of arresting people first, then obtaining the corresponding arrest warrants from the general prosecutor:

The government cannot take decisions. Serraj’s decrees are not made by Serraj. The interior minister’s decrees are not made by the interior minister. We cannot act as if the government was in a position to give us orders.<sup>57</sup>

The physical location of an institution plays an important role in an armed group’s ability to exert influence over that institution, whether through direct threats against senior officials or the infiltration of the administration. A leader in the Nawasi Battalion summed it up: ‘[I]f you control an area, you control the ministries in that area, and you issue the orders there.’<sup>58</sup> The Nawasi Battalion, Tripoli Revolutionaries Battalion (TRB), and Special Deterrence Force (SDF) control the areas of central Tripoli in which most ministries, major state institutions, and headquarters of state-owned companies are located. Commanders within Brigade 301, the largest Misratan-led militia based in Tripoli, are the most influential non-Tripolitanian stakeholders—but the peripheral districts they control host few important bodies.<sup>59</sup>

Since 2011, it has become common practice for armed groups based in Tripoli to threaten officials in order to pursue their demands. But formerly, the presence of armed groups from a wide range of geographical and political backgrounds ensured a balance of power; officials might enjoy protection from one faction against the others and, in general, the benefits from extortion were more evenly distributed. Under the cartel, the four large militias can extort officials at will. In October 2017, two notorious TRB commanders briefly kidnapped the transportation minister, only releasing him after he agreed to sign over part of an Italian company’s EUR 78 million contract for the rebuilding of Tripoli International Airport to a company owned by a well-connected Misratan businessman.<sup>60</sup> In February 2018, one of the two commanders unsuccessfully tried to extort a senior official in the National Oil Corporation (NOC) to force him to sign a contract. The following month, the same commander forced the chief executive of the state-owned Afriqiyah Airways to sign an insurance contract for the company’s aircraft.<sup>61</sup> Kikli’s men, the SDF, and TRB all arrested senior Afriqiyah executives at various

points in 2017, holding their captives for months seeking to force the appointment of their allies to senior positions in the company or obtain other favours.<sup>62</sup> The SDF also detained the chief executive of the other main state-owned carrier, Libyan Airlines, for eight months, in contravention of a release order by the general prosecutor. He was eventually freed in April 2018, though the price of his release remains unclear.<sup>63</sup>

As in the case of letters of credit, the use of force by armed groups is only their most obvious form of influence. They can also increasingly rely on accomplices within state institutions. From the GNA's establishment, the top security positions were dominated by officers from Tripoli's Suq al-Jum'a district with close ties to the Nawasi, SDF, or TRB. Examples of such representatives include: Abd al-Rahman al-Tawil, who played a key role in negotiating the entry of the PC to Tripoli and later became chief of staff of the army; the head of the Presidential Guard, Najmi al-Naku'; and the interior minister, Aref al-Khuja, who was dismissed in February 2018. Since then, however, accounts from bureaucrats, politicians, and leaders of armed groups consistently claim that the large Tripolitanian militias are placing a large number of allies in the top and middle ranks of the government. The vast majority of these agents are from Tripoli. One career bureaucrat said:

I'm against thinking in terms of geographical background. But these groups are stuffing the ministries with *Trabelsia* [Tripolitanians]. You cannot operate a national unity government like this.<sup>64</sup>

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is particularly affected. Postings to embassies abroad are attractive for their high salaries. Some postings also offer significant influence due to the administrative procedures they control, such as the position of consul in Tunis. The Consul is currently a former TRB leader, an arrangement clearly attesting to the group's aggressive infiltration of the MFA. In May 2017, when foreign minister Mohamed Siala described Haftar as the 'head of the army', the TRB and Nawasi Battalion protested by deploying tanks and heavy weapons around the MFA and the seat of the PC. The foreign ministry building is controlled by a TRB unit, which has a large base just behind the ministry; a Tajura-based group allied with the TRB also has a presence in the ministry. The 'protest'

was only resolved after Siala agreed to appoint more than two dozen militiamen to embassies abroad.<sup>65</sup> Since then, TRB leaders have placed even more allies and clients in Libyan embassies.<sup>66</sup>

Other ministries offer more significant prizes, including positions that offer influence over the disposition of state assets, allowing for their misappropriation. The health supplies administration, for example, imports medicine and has an annual budget of around LD 700 million (USD 510 million at the official exchange rate). In mid-2017, TRB leaders emerged victorious from their struggle with a Misrata-based political lobby and placed their candidate at the head of the body.<sup>67</sup> And the corrupt networks associated with Tripoli's armed groups are increasingly able to defraud the state by coordinating their actions across different state institutions. Nawasi Battalion leaders, for instance, allegedly placed agents in both senior and mid-level positions in the finance ministry and the civil registry office, allowing them to inflate salary payments and invest the difference in their armed group.<sup>68</sup>

In sum, the degree of state capture by Tripoli's armed groups is unprecedented, and the group of people benefiting from fraud and embezzlement, while also occupying legitimate administrative positions, is drawn from a narrower section of society than ever before. The situation subverts the notional purpose of the 'Government

of National Accord'. Should the political deadlock be broken anytime soon, it has the potential to present a major challenge to the installation of any meaningful unity government. It is also unsustainable due to the military balance of power in the greater Tripoli area: in Tripoli's outskirts and western Libyan cities that host powerful military forces, discontent over the state of affairs in the capital is rising fast.

## The cartel's future: negotiated settlement or violent collapse?

Internal rivalries within the militia cartel and violent opposition by those who are excluded from it pose serious threats to the cartel's survival. A combination of factors has prevented military action against the cartel. A few selected power-brokers from cities such as Misrata and Zintan have stakes in the Tripoli government, and most actors in the Tripoli area fear that an open conflict over the capital would present an opportunity for Haftar to gain a foothold in the area. But the likelihood of a violent collapse of the cartel increases in equal proportion to its stranglehold upon state institutions. It appears now that only a negotiated settlement regulating territorial control over key locations and facilities in Tripoli might avert another war over the capital.



Militiamen guard a queue outside a bank in Tripoli, Libya, February 2017. Source: Mahmud Turkia/AFP Photo

# “The likelihood of a violent collapse of the cartel increases in equal proportion to its stranglehold upon state institutions.”

## Tensions within the cartel

Leaders of the armed groups that are part of the cartel acknowledge that tensions are increasing both within and between these groups. On the one hand, the competing local political networks associated with each of the four groups risk drawing the militias into their rivalries. Kikli and TRB leaders, in particular, are increasingly alarmed about the SDF's investment in intelligence and surveillance capabilities, as well as the role of Madkhali ideology in driving its actions.<sup>69</sup> One TRB commander described the SDF as a 'dangerous extremist organization' that had eyes and ears in all state institutions. While fully acknowledging the scale of the criminal activities of fellow TRB commanders, he stressed that the threat from the Madakhila was far more serious.<sup>70</sup> An advisor to Kikli said that the problem in Tripoli 'is with Haitham and Kara—particularly with Kara, who is trying to grab it all'.<sup>71</sup>

On the other hand, the rapid enrichment of some militia leaders is fuelling animosities among different leaders of the same group and between these leaders and their former brothers-in-arms. During interviews, several current and former TRB and SDF commanders expressed their dismay at what they described as brazen acts of extortion, pillage, and self-enrichment by their former colleagues. Several pointed to evidence presented by the UN Panel of Experts on Libya that Tajuri had extorted LCs worth dozens of millions of dollars.<sup>72</sup> An influential businessman who was formerly closely aligned with the SDF expressed alarm over the unchecked power of the large militias in general, and the SDF in particular which, he maintained, detained many innocent people in its Mitiga prison, including businessmen whom it would only release in return for ransom payments.<sup>73</sup>

Tripolitanian armed groups are not tightly structured and neatly bounded organizations. The core leadership and

founding members of groups such as TRB, SDF, and Nawasi are linked by strong social ties forged in the 2011 conflict, often on the basis of pre-existing neighbourhood or family ties. Social ties also connect several of these groups, such as the Suq al-Jum'a-based SDF and the Nawasi Battalion, and they link leaders of these groups to businessmen and politicians.<sup>74</sup> But the rapid ascent of a handful of militia leaders and their changing political alliances is testing the cohesion of these groups.

The majority of these militias' members are now foot soldiers whose affiliation with the group owes more to salaries than to loyalty or longstanding ties. As the economic crisis has deepened over the past three years, a pool of unattached labour for militias developed in the greater Tripoli area. Cartel militias and those excluded from the cartel can and do recruit among former members of armed groups which were pushed out of Tripoli. Other recruits include internally displaced persons from eastern Libya, Tuareg and Tubu soldiers from southern Libya, and fighters from Chad.<sup>75</sup> The emergence of this 'militia proletariat' increases the potential for sudden and dramatic shifts in the balance of power between the groups.

## An alliance of the excluded?

Around Tripoli, anger and discontent are building up among powerful political and military forces which are currently excluded or disadvantaged in their attempts to access the state institutions the cartel controls.

The eastern district of Tajura hosts nine major armed groups that have mostly watched the formation of the cartel from the sidelines. Several of these groups explicitly opposed the entry of the PC in 2016 and the PC's security advisors subsequently made limited attempts to engage with the groups' concerns. Relations with the armed groups that support the PC also deteriorated over

the issue of detainees held by the SDF in its Mitiga prison. The prison houses an estimated 2,600 prisoners and is notorious for arbitrary detention, torture, and deaths in custody.<sup>76</sup> While the SDF maintained that these prisoners were 'terrorists', leaders in Tajura instead celebrated them as 'revolutionaries'.<sup>77</sup>

In January 2018, the Tajura-based 33<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade led by Bashir Khalfallah attacked Mitiga airport after an SDF unit killed two of its members in a raid on one of the brigade's positions in Tajura (Elumami and Lewis, 2018). Khalfallah, who is also known as 'al-Bugra' ('the Cow'), did not receive the anticipated support of other Tajuran groups. The SDF repelled his offensive and arrested dozens of the attackers. In the period since, the PC has extended recognition to Tajuran armed groups by formalizing the establishment of a 'joint security operations room'. Khalfallah's unit was integrated into the Central Security Apparatus (CSA). But tensions persist over the SDF's detention of Tajuran fighters and the PC's perceived neglect of this large district.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, some Tripolitanian militias that the cartel drove from central Tripoli have found refuge with Tajuran armed groups.<sup>79</sup>

To the west of Tripoli, Zawiya hosts various armed groups unhappy with the state of affairs in Tripoli but whose capacity to bring about change is limited by the latent struggle within Zawiya itself. If Zawiyan groups joined an operation against the Tripoli cartel, they risk being forced out of their own city by local rivals. More importantly, Zawiya hosts a substantial force from Sabratha that was forcibly expelled from that city in October 2017, with the PC extending its support to the Sabrathan victors. The exiled fighters, who perceive themselves to be 'revolutionaries', have engaged in talks with potential allies from Tajura and Misrata with the intention of changing the balance of power in Tripoli.<sup>80</sup>

The bulk of Misratan armed groups gradually withdrew from Tripoli following the PC's arrival. Many groups left to join the offensive against the Islamic State (IS) group in Sirte that began in May 2016. Over the course of the following year, others left as pro-PC militias expanded. Those that remained had either entered into arrangements with the PC or supported it from the outset. They also shed the original names of their groups in a deliberate effort to downplay the extent to which their leadership—and therefore the control of their heavy weapons—remained dominated by Misratans. The most power-



ful of these units is Brigade 301, which emerged from Misrata's Halbus Brigade. It and two other Misratan-led units—the 14<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade and the CSA's 17<sup>th</sup> Security Unit—are based on the airport road. Brigade 301 also holds strategic positions at Tripoli International Airport and at the border of the Warshafana area.<sup>81</sup> While Brigade 301 is allied with the TRB, the interior ministry's Special Operations Force is a Misratan-led unit that is closely intertwined with the Nawasi Battalion: it absorbed Nawasi men under its umbrella and maintains a presence in areas of central Tripoli that are considered to be Nawasi territory.<sup>82</sup>

In Misrata itself, the rapacity of the Tripoli militia cartel has stirred growing anger. Since November 2017, there have been recurrent efforts to assemble a coalition of forces to advance on Tripoli. Interventions by UNSMIL officials twice (in December 2017 and March 2018) narrowly averted the launch of such an operation.<sup>83</sup> The question of whether a Misratan advance will eventually take place is partly contingent upon the efforts of some Misratan politicians and militia leaders to lobby the PC for negotiated changes in Tripoli security arrangements. In April 2018, these leaders put forward a plan under which the Misratan-led Anti-Terror-Force would deploy in Tripoli. They argued that this force would form a counterweight to the large Tripolitanian militias, and at the same time placate Misratan figures who are threatening to enter Tripoli by force.<sup>84</sup>

To date, the PC has failed to respond to the proposals and on 7 May, Serraj issued a decree that effectively re-named the SDF as the 'Deterrence Organization for Combatting Organized Crime and Terrorism' (Presidency Council, 2018). In addition to according wider-ranging competencies to the SDF and establishing it as an institution with a nationwide remit, the decree gave the SDF a formal counter-terrorist mandate that appeared designed to pre-empt the Misratan plan for deploying the Anti-Terror-Force in Tripoli. In Misrata, the move plays into the hands of the growing group of leaders who are pushing for military action against the large Tripolitanian militias.

The return of Misratan forces to Tripoli also depends on the ability of Misratan groups to reach an understanding with potential allies over any offensive. In addition to groups from Tajura and Sabratha, these potential allies include forces from Tarhuna and Zintan.

Tarhuna is today the only city in western and southern Libya that is controlled by a single armed group. The 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade, which is more commonly known as the 'Kaniyat' in acknowledgment of the three brothers from the al-Kani family who lead it, was virtually unknown before mid-2015. In the years since, its rise to prominence was swift. Since mid-2017, the Kaniyat has aggressively expanded towards the outskirts of Tripoli. The group is likely to claim a veto right on security arrangements around Tripoli International Airport, which is expected to reopen in June or July 2018. The Kaniyat also hosts fighters from several armed groups that were driven out of Tripoli by the cartel—fighters eager for 'revenge'.<sup>85</sup>

The Zintanis are also stakeholders in the struggle to secure the international airport, after they were forcibly dislodged from there in 2014, losing several hundred fighters in that conflict. Zintani leaders also argue that the absence of regular security forces requires the return of Zintani fighters to the capital to guarantee the security of civilians of Zintani origin. (In 2014, around 20,000 civilians fled to Zintan, although most have returned to Tripoli over the past two years.)<sup>86</sup> Since November 2017, the Zintanis have progressively closed in on Tripoli. That month, Zintani forces deployed in the Warshafana area, south-west of Tripoli under the leadership of Usama Juwaili, who was appointed by the PC as the western region military commander. In March 2018, the Special Operations Force led by Emad Trabelsi expanded the Zintani-led presence in the area further, moving to within a few kilometres of the international airport. In contrast to the Misratan-led force of the same name in Tripoli, Trabelsi's Special Operations Force officially reports to the government in the eastern city of al-Bayda and does not recognize the authority of the PC. In his operations on the ground, however, Trabelsi appears to have aligned himself with Juwaili, who fiercely opposes Haftar.<sup>87</sup> In an effort to prevent a confrontation with the Zintanis, the PC accommodated Trabelsi by appointing his second-in-command as deputy interior minister. Shortly afterwards, Trabelsi's forces withdrew from their most advanced positions along the coastal road between Janzur and Zawiya (Al-Motawaset, 2018). But core Zintani interests in Tripoli remain unresolved, and it is clear that this appointment does not even begin to satisfy Zintani ambitions.

All of these groups in the greater Tripoli area are engaged in complex posturing and alliance-building among themselves, as well as with the militias in Tripoli. Zintani and Misratan leaders have been negotiating the terms of an understanding that would change territorial control in Tripoli. They held two reconciliation ceremonies that brought together the two cities, seeking to endow a prospective alliance in Tripoli with 'moral legitimacy' (Al-Wasat, 2018; Bobin, 2018). To date, these efforts have not yielded an agreement on the respective deployments and the partition of influence within Tripoli's districts.<sup>88</sup> But, as resentment of the cartel's capture of state institutions continues to accumulate, it becomes increasingly likely that some of these groups will build a powerful alliance with the intention of forcibly altering the balance of power in the capital.

## The Haftar threat

The fear that Khalifa Haftar would be the main beneficiary of a war in Tripoli—widely shared by groups in the area—is one of the factors that have helped avert escalation in the capital. Currently, Haftar commands no forces in the greater Tripoli area. Juwaili's November 2017 advance into Warshafana and his actions against Haftar loyalists in the area further weakened Haftar's position in the west. The precedent of Haftar's actions in eastern Libya, where he progressively marginalized or eliminated former allies, makes it unlikely that militia leaders in the Tripoli area will fight a war on his behalf. In a situation where the outbreak of major fighting creates an existential threat to these leaders, however, some would probably be willing to ally with Haftar and seek his support.

Haftar is quietly preparing the ground for such a scenario. He has sent officers to Tarhuna, Bani Walid, and Zawiya, with the intention of building up loyal forces, although he has enjoyed little success in this regard to date. In Sabratha, Sorman, and western Zawiya, Haftar can rely on the support of several armed groups, most notably those dominated by Madakhila.<sup>89</sup> He also retains support among allies in Zintan and Rujban. A war over Tripoli would create an opening for these groups to enter the conflict, enabling Haftar to mobilize popular support behind his stated intention to establish control with an 'iron fist'.



Ruins of the main building at Tripoli International Airport, Tripoli, Libya, August 2014. Source: Hazem Turkia/AFP Photo

## Conclusion

In 2018, a small number of armed groups control what remains of the Libyan state and its assets in Tripoli, to a degree that is unprecedented in the capital's tumultuous post-Qaddafi history. This control extends far beyond the extortion of government officials by militias. Tripoli's armed groups are developing into powerful criminal networks that link commanders with politicians, influential businessmen, and the incumbents of key administrative positions.

The extent of this capture poses major obstacles to political progress at the national level. A new government, irrespective of whether it comes about through elections or a new political deal between Libya's conflicting parties, would struggle to assert itself against the pervasive influence of the cartel. It is difficult to envisage the establishment of a meaningful unity government or a peaceful handover of power under these circumstances; the GNA is not in a position to hand over power, as power rests mostly in the hands of the cartel.

The exclusion of powerful political and military forces from access to the

levers of the administration by the cartel creates a highly dangerous situation that is likely to be untenable even in the near term. And as long as this situation persists, the risk of a new war over control of Tripoli will probably continue to grow.

The UN and Western governments have contributed to the current state of affairs, having encouraged the Presidential Council of the GNA to enter Tripoli under the protection of selected militias and tacitly supported these militias' aggressive expansion across the capital. The UN and the West therefore bear some level of responsibility for the cartels' present power and control. Absent serious UN engagement to negotiate more sustainable security arrangements in Tripoli, the cartel's violent implosion from within or its destruction by outside forces are very real possibilities.

There are no easy solutions to the current, unsustainable situation. The Presidency Council does not command regular forces able to take over key locations in Tripoli. The forces it does command lack credibility: they are not seen as neutral in the struggles between militias in Tripoli and could not withstand attacks by any of the armed groups in the capital.

The Tripoli-based units of the Presidential Guard—still being formed after it was established in early 2016—are unable to challenge any of the large Tripolitanian militias, because of both their own military inferiority and the fact that those militias effectively control the government. This was starkly underlined when forces loyal to Tajuri and Brigade 301 forcibly dislodged the Presidential Guard from its positions at the prime minister's office in central Tripoli and Tripoli International Airport in May 2018. Outside of Tripoli, the Presidential Guard provides an administrative cover to local militias, in much the same way as other Libyan security institutions. It is all but impossible to form powerful, integrated units from diverse local forces in the current situation, as there is no powerful political body that could command their loyalty. As has become abundantly clear, the GNA is not in control of its own decisions and is not a 'unity government' in any real sense.

Tackling rent-seeking opportunities does not offer a clear way forward, either. Even if discrepancies between the official and black-market exchange rates, or between fuel prices in Libya and neigh-

bouring states, could be reduced without causing even greater socio-economic damage and triggering major unrest, the ultra-centralized nature of Libya's hydro-carbon economy would continue to open up opportunities for political networks to defraud the state.

The current situation therefore only allows for ad-hoc, temporary solutions that avert renewed fighting and prepare the ground for a wider political solution. For change to occur, the first step requires formal mediation efforts under the leadership of UNSMIL, with the support of Western and regional governments. Such efforts would introduce greater transparency into the multiple and ongoing informal negotiations between stakeholders in the Tripoli area. As a mediator, UNSMIL could try to shape solutions to the acute challenges in Tripoli in ways that might provide the basis for long-term approaches to dissolving the armed groups.

Solutions cannot be prescribed in advance but have to come out of the negotiations themselves. But conceivably, trust between the relevant factions could be built by joint or rotating deployments. Such an arrangement could be tested at two or three strategic locations in Tripoli before being gradually extended across the capital if it proves to be successful. The aim of such arrangements would be to move from a logic of exclusive territorial control (and thus control of the institutions within that territory) to a balance of power in which the factions would mutually deny each other control over state institutions. The monitoring of such an arrangement by a third party—preferably UNSMIL—would be essential to its success. In the event of progress in the political talks, such ad-hoc solutions might be expanded into more ambitious efforts to break up factional interests and meld them into integrated units. ●

## Notes

- 1 This Briefing Paper uses the terms 'armed group' and 'militia' interchangeably in the context of Tripoli's security landscape. Armed groups in Tripoli invariably appear as units of state security institutions but use their official affiliation as a cover for the political or economic interests they pursue. Compared to the revolutionary armed groups that formed in particular communities during the 2011 war, most of the armed groups that have dominated Tripoli since 2012 have less internal cohesion and generally lack broad community support. Some revolutionary armed groups devolved into militias after 2011, while others—most of which originated in relatively cohesive communities—remained deeply embedded in their local communities. In applying the term, this Paper broadly follows McQuinn's (2012) definition of militias as a sub-category of Libyan armed groups.
- 2 This Paper uses 'cartel' to mean a cooperative agreement between these four large militias to promote the mutual interests of these groups in restricting the operations of other armed groups in Tripoli, or the exercise of political power independent of these groups' desires.
- 3 On the LIFG, see Fitzgerald (2015a).
- 4 Author interview with former member of clandestine cell in Abu Slim, Tripoli, April 2018. See also Cole and Khan (2015b, pp. 82–85).
- 5 Author interviews with Zintani and LROR participants in the negotiations, Zintan and Tripoli, April 2016 and March 2018.
- 6 On this incident and the PFG in general, see ICG (2015). As with other security institutions after 2011, the PFG also saw its membership dramatically increase as local armed groups sought its cover to gain legitimacy and access to funds (Lacher and Cole, 2014).
- 7 Including LD 900 million to the Libya Shield Forces, and LD 200 million to the Zintani-led Qa'qa' Brigade. Interview with former senior member of Zeidan government, Istanbul, November 2017.
- 8 Author interview with Zintani battalion leader, Tripoli, September 2016.
- 9 Author interview with Misratan politicians, Tripoli and Misrata, June 2014.
- 10 Lacher and Cole (2014); author interview with commander in Special Operations Force, Bir Ghanem, April 2016.
- 11 Author interviews with Misratan politicians, Misrata, June 2014.
- 12 Author interviews with Misratan politicians, Misrata, June 2014.
- 13 Author's observations, Tripoli, July and August 2014.
- 14 Author's observations and interviews with battalion commanders, Tripoli and Misrata, September–October 2014, January and April 2015. For the Hassi government, see Lacher and Wehrey (2014).
- 15 Author interviews with battalion commanders, politicians, and local observers, Misrata, October 2014, and Tripoli, January/February 2015.
- 16 On Khadrawi's background, see Lacher and Cole (2014).
- 17 Author interview with senior official in CSA, Tripoli, September 2016.
- 18 Author interviews with local observers, Tripoli, April 2016.
- 19 Author interview with Central Shield commander, Misrata, October 2014.
- 20 Author interviews with battalion commander and senior Misratan politician, Misrata and Tripoli, April 2016.
- 21 Author interviews and written correspondence with battalion leaders, local observers, and international officials, Misrata, Tripoli, Tunis, and Zintan, June–December 2015, April 2016.
- 22 Author interviews with former and current leaders from Nawasi Battalion, Tripoli Revolutionaries Battalion (TRB), and Special Deterrence Force (SDF); military officer involved in negotiations with armed groups; and Misratan businessman associated with Brigade 301, Tripoli and Misrata, March and April 2018.
- 23 Author interviews with former and current leaders from Nawasi, SDF, and TRB Tripoli, March 2018.
- 24 Author interviews with battalion leaders and politicians, Tripoli, April 2016.
- 25 Author interview with TRB leader, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 26 Author interviews with political representatives and battalion commanders, Zintan, April 2016.
- 27 On the BRSC and displacement from Benghazi, see Fitzgerald (2015b), Wehrey (2017), and Laessing (2018).
- 28 Author interviews with battalion leaders, politicians and observers, Tripoli, April and September 2016.
- 29 On the Madakhila, see Wehrey (2016).
- 30 Author interviews with politicians and observers, Tripoli, September 2016 and March 2017.
- 31 Author interviews with prominent PC opponent, former leader of Burki Battalion, and local observers close to National Mobile Force, Tripoli, March 2017.
- 32 Author interviews with battalion commander and HCS members, Tripoli, April 2016. See also Akhbar Libya (2016).
- 33 Author interviews with former senior LIFG leader and Misratan battalion leader, Tripoli, March 2017.
- 34 Author observations and interviews with local observers, Tripoli, March 2017.
- 35 Author interviews with politicians, former security officials, and local observers, Tripoli, March 2017 and March 2018.
- 36 Author interviews with military officer and TRB battalion leader, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 37 Interview, Tripoli, April 2018.
- 38 Interview, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 39 Author interviews with former senior LIFG leader and Misratan battalion commander,



- Tripoli, March 2017, and personal communications with local observers, May 2017.
- 40 Author interviews with senior official in regulatory authority, former top security official, and commanders of armed groups, Tripoli, September 2016 and March 2018.
- 41 Author interview, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 42 Kidnapping incidents registered by the Criminal Investigations Department in Tripoli increased from 97 during the first quarter of 2015 to 221 during the same period in 2016 (Ewan Libya, 2016b). Kidnappings peaked in late 2016 and early 2017, when 293 cases were registered during a 46-day period (Akhbar Libya, 2017). Thereafter, their number declined, and a total of 676 cases were registered during 2017 (Al-Marsad, 2018a).
- 43 Author interviews with Abu Slim residents, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 44 Author interviews with Al-Karimiya shopkeeper and Misratan businessman close to leadership of Brigade 301, Tripoli and Misrata, March and April 2018.
- 45 Author interviews with former and current leaders in TRB, SDF, and Tajura armed groups, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 46 In May 2015 the Ghwell government temporarily excluded a range of items from the list of goods for which hard currency was provided at the official exchange rate through letters of credit. Importers who could no longer obtain hard currency at the official exchange rate had no reason left to keep their money in the banks and were forced to engage with the black market. Though the ban was reversed the following month, the Central Bank then introduced a series of measures that made it more difficult to obtain letters of credit (Zaptia, 2016). For suspected collusion between bank employees and criminal gangs, see Zway (2017).
- 47 Author interviews with battalion commanders and local observers, Tripoli, April 2016.
- 48 Author interviews with current and former leaders in TRB and SDF, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 49 During 2016, Libya's Audit Bureau identified fraudulent exchange rate operations worth USD 570 million by 86 companies (Libyan Audit Bureau, 2017, p. 134). It is likely that the actual total is several multiples higher.
- 50 See, for example, the evidence that Haitham al-Tajuri and his associates in 2015 extorted letters of credit worth more than USD 20 million (UNSC, 2016, para. 210). This was by no means an isolated case (see Zway, 2017, p. 23; UNSC, 2018, paras. 97–101).
- 51 Author interviews with senior officials in regulatory authorities, as well as politicians, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 52 Author interview with senior official in regulatory authority, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 53 Author interview with governor of Central Bank of Libya, Tripoli, April 2018.
- 54 Author interview with TRB commander, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 55 Author interviews with armed group commanders and senior official in regulatory authority, Tripoli, March 2018. In addition, the SDF has also received substantial reward payments from wealthy families for the liberation of kidnapping victims. Author interview with SDF commander, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 56 Author interviews with senior official in regulatory authority, former top security official, and commanders of armed groups, Tripoli, September 2016 and March 2018.
- 57 Author interview, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 58 Author interview, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 59 However, since Brigade 301 took over the Islamic Call Society (ICS) Compound from the Misratan-led Special Operations Force, in mid-2017, commanders in Brigade 301 have reportedly sought to gain control of ICS property abroad. Author interview with Misratan observer with ties to Tripoli-based Misratan militias, Misrata, April 2018.
- 60 Author interview with TRB commander, Tripoli, March 2018. See also Al-Marsad (2017b), Arraed (2018), Libya al-Khabar (2018), and a Facebook post by the influential Misratan politician Hassan Shaba (2018).
- 61 See Akhbar Libya (2018) and Libya al-Khabar (2018). The events have been confirmed to the authors by sources inside both institutions.
- 62 Author interview with Afriqiyah employee, Tripoli, June 2018. See also Ben Hamel (2017) and LANA (2017).
- 63 Author interview with Tripoli businessman, Tripoli, April 2018. See also Al-Motawaset (2018b).
- 64 Author interview with career bureaucrat in senior ministerial position, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 65 Author interview with career bureaucrat in senior ministerial position, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 66 Author interview with TRB leader, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 67 Author interviews with politician with close ties to Presidency Council, Tripoli, March 2017 and March 2018. On the health supplies administration, see Al-Khamisi (2017).
- 68 Author interview with Tripoli-based politician, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 69 In addition to its enmities with political Islamists whom the Madakhila consider to be 'terrorists', the SDF has repeatedly arrested artists, journalists, and activists it sees as promoting 'Western' culture. The SDF also tries to indoctrinate prisoners at its Mitiga detention centre. See BBC (2017), Human Rights Watch (2018), and Wehrey (2018).
- 70 Author interview, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 71 Author interview, Tripoli, April 2018.
- 72 Author interviews, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 73 Author interview, Tripoli, April 2018.
- 74 Author interviews with former and current leaders in Nawasi Battalion and SDF, as well as former senior GNA security official, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 75 Chadian fighters, as well as some Tuareg and Tubu soldiers, lack Libyan citizenship, which means that they are more dependent on commanders to obtain salaries, because they are not on regular government payrolls. Author interviews, Tuareg intellectual; Misratan businessman close to Brigade 301; military officer; and Tripoli-based politician from southern Libya, Tripoli and Misrata, March and April 2018.
- 76 See also OHCHR (2018, pp. 3–4).
- 77 Author interview with leader in Tajura armed groups, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 78 Author interviews with leader in Tajura armed groups and Tajura residents, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 79 This is notably the case of an armed group led by Taher al-Misrati, a Tripoli militia leader who until mid-2017 controlled the capital's port. Author interviews with leaders in Tajura armed groups and Misratan observer, Tripoli and Misrata, April 2018.
- 80 Author interview with group of displaced Sabrathan fighters and activists, Misrata, March 2018.
- 81 Author interview with leader in Halbus Brigade, Istanbul, November 2017.
- 82 Author interviews with leader in Special Operations Force and local observer, Tripoli and Misrata, March 2018.
- 83 Personal communications with leaders in Misratan armed groups, November–February 2018; author interview with senior UNSMIL official, Tripoli, April 2018.
- 84 Author interviews with Misratan politicians and leaders of armed groups, Misrata, March and April 2018.
- 85 This includes members of the Burki Battalion, along with a group led by Mohamed 'Damuna'. Author interviews with Misratan battalion commander, Misratan observer, and leader in Tajura armed groups, Tripoli and Misrata, March and April 2018.
- 86 Author interviews with political representatives and battalion leaders, Zintan, April 2016 and March 2017.
- 87 Author interview with representative of Zintan Military Council, Tripoli, March 2018.
- 88 Author interviews with representative of Zintan Military Council and Misratan battalion commanders, Tripoli and Misrata, April 2018.
- 89 Author interviews with aides to military leaders in Tarhuna and local observers from Tarhuna, Tripoli and Zawiya, March 2018.

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The Security Assessment in North Africa receives ongoing funding from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and Global Affairs Canada. It has previously received grants from the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the German Federal Foreign Office, the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the US State Department.

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A Briefing Paper of the Small Arms Survey/Security Assessment in North Africa project, with support from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Global Affairs Canada.

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