

PWP Conflict Studies

Proxy War Dynamics in Libya

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PWP Conflict Studies

The Proxy Wars Project (PWP) aims to develop new insights for resolving the wars that beset the Arab world. While the conflicts in Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Iraq have internal roots, the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and others have all provided military and economic support to various belligerents. PWP Conflict Studies are papers written by recognized area experts that are designed to elucidate the complex relationship between internal proxies and external sponsors. PWP is jointly directed by Ariel Ahram (Virginia Tech) and Ranj Alaaldin (Brookings Doha Center) and funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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Cover illustration: Lighthouse in Benghazi, Libya, February 2019. Photo by Mohamed-Essaïd Lazib.

Introduction

The Libyan state lacked transparent, self-sustainable institutions long before the 2011 uprisings. Hundreds of local disputes and tribal feuds lingered across the country for decades. Under the autocratic regime of Muammar Qaddafi (1969–2011), a combination of calculated tribal interferences, co-optation, and unbridled brutality managed to stave off most—although not all—eruptions of anarchical violence. This idiosyncratic equilibrium ended on February 15, 2011, when social demonstrations turned into a military conflict between loyalist and rebel forces. A month later, the United States gathered a wide-ranging coalition of states and instigated a UN-mandated military intervention in Libya’s burgeoning rebellion against Qaddafi’s rule. Early in that campaign, disagreements surfaced amongst Washington’s allies and partners—especially between the Gulf States—as to what post-Qaddafi Libya should resemble. The international disharmony within the US-led coalition exacerbated the enmity between Libyan rebels. These fault lines, domestic and foreign alike, only deepened in 2014 as the country descended into civil war.

Hundreds of armed groups emerged during the revolution and after the downfall of Qaddafi. Some are remnants of the former regime’s security services, which fractured amid the uprisings; others are tribal forces, local neighborhood watch groups, Islamist militias, and criminal gangs. Some units act as the armed wing of a political party or figure. In 2011 rebels seized and dispersed the large arsenals that Qaddafi kept during his reign. In addition, that same year foreign states intervening as part of the UN-mandated mission distributed even more weapons.¹ As a result, Libya became awash with weapons, a factor that helped political contestation turn violent, albeit at a relatively low level of intensity.

The 2014 civil war tore Libya’s political spectrum into two main factions: the government in Tripoli and its rival in the country’s eastern region. Both governments claim to represent the entire nation and refuse to contemplate any genuine form of compromise with each other. Most armed groups have tended to gravitate toward these poles, creating loose, mercurial alliances. Outside interferences further complicate the situation.

Foreign states have provided military, economic, ideological, and diplomatic support to each rival government as well as to individual armed groups that surround them.

In eastern Libya the authorities based in the cities of Tobruk and Bayda have tended to support Field Marshal Haftar. The commander leads the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army (LNA), headquartered near Benghazi. The LNA, despite its name, is not the Libyan armed force, but it does rely on a core of regulars, many of whom used to belong to the Qaddafi-era military. In addition to the LNA proper, Haftar is backed by an informal coalition consisting of a variety of militias. Some are tribal in nature; others are defined by their neighborhood of origin; others follow Salafism. Haftar also partnered with militias from Zintan, a small city in northwestern Libya. Zintan’s armed groups occupied key positions south of Tripoli during the 2014 civil war. The relationship has weakened somewhat over the subsequent years. Recently, other armed groups in Tripolitania have aligned with the LNA. Haftar claims to be combating political Islam in all its forms. His rhetoric targets not just radical groups like al-Qaeda but also more moderate groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and with non-Islamists. That stance has earned Haftar the diplomatic, ideological, financial, and military support of the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, France, Jordan, and Russia.

In early 2016 the UN helped form and install a government of national accord (GNA). During the subsequent three years, GNA-aligned militias native to Tripoli have pushed out of the capital armed groups from other cities and armed groups associated with political Islam. While its critics often accuse the GNA of being friendly to the Muslim Brothers, its reign in fact saw Islamists grow weaker in the Tripoli area during the years preceding Haftar’s April 2019 attack against the capital.² The GNA was long supported by the US, Italy, Britain, and Algeria, as well as Turkey and Qatar. After Haftar launched his offensive on Tripoli in April 2019, however, the US and other Western states failed to renew their support of the GNA in an unambiguous fashion.

Since 2014, Misrata, a powerful port city in western Libya, has opposed Haftar and, in some instances, backed radical Islamists operating

in eastern Libya. During the 2017–19 period, it followed a more conciliatory approach, which was deemed insufficient by the Haftar camp. Despite the hostility of the GNA-aligned militias based in Tripoli toward Misrata, a number of moderate forces from the merchant citadel have granted their nominal support to the GNA. After the LNA attacked Tripoli in April 2019, Misratan forces stepped back into the capital and fulfilled a major role in protecting it against Haftar’s army.

Littered with a myriad of micro-conflicts, the country’s fragmentation cannot be summarized as a binary contest between regions (e.g., east vs. west), ideologies (e.g., Islamists vs. secular authoritarians), or geopolitical camps (e.g., Egypt vs. Turkey). Foreign interference has had a substantial effect on the itinerary of the relevant proxies, but these proxies have never given full obedience to their sponsors.

This paper’s aim is to sketch out the dynamics of proxy warfare in Libya by examining a select set of individual armed groups and describing their interactions with the relevant outside sponsors. Before reviewing the various militias in detail, the section below offers a brief summary of Libya’s civil war since its eruption in 2014.

Libya’s Civil War

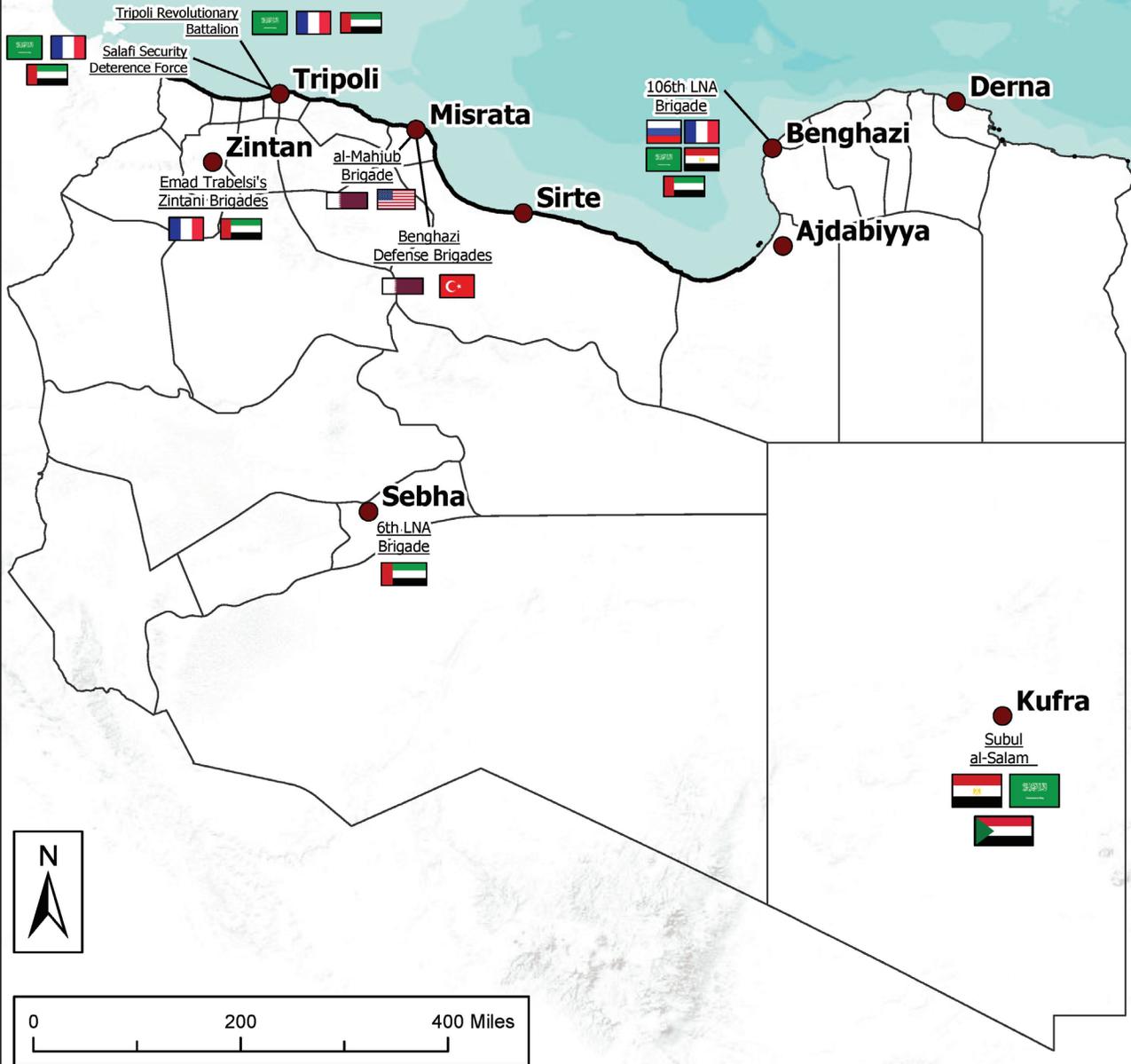
Starting in 2012, a series of abuses and violent events in both Tripoli and Benghazi amplified the rancor many Libyans felt for Islamist and revolutionary elites. In May 2013 the latter imposed by force a drastic piece of legislation dubbed the Political Isolation Law. The July 2013 military coup in Egypt instilled in Libya’s Muslim Brothers the fear that a similar dynamic might befall their country. The Egyptian precedent also provided retired general Khalifa Haftar with the narrative he would use as a means of pursuing his long-standing political ambitions. Overlaying these ideological concerns were regional resentments. Many were concerned about the military and political influence of Misrata. The polarization was particularly dramatic in Benghazi, the largest city in eastern Libya, a region known as Cyrenaica (or Barqa).

In May 2014 Haftar launched Operation Karama (Dignity), a vaguely defined effort to rid Libya of all hues of Islamists and revolutionaries. This marked the effective birth of the LNA. Moving out

of their bases in al-Marj and al-Abyar, the retired general and several hundred fighters entered Benghazi to face off against Islamist militias there. In response, the latter groups coalesced and, in June 2014, founded the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council. In northwestern Libya, armed groups from Zintan attacked the Islamist-dominated rump government in the capital. These Zintani militias, including the one led by Emad Trabelsi (see below), had been active in Tripoli since the fall of the Qaddafi regime in August 2011. They had a history of hostility toward the Muslim Brotherhood and factions from Misrata. To counter Operation Karama, the Misratan and Muslim Brotherhood forces forged their own political and military alliance, called Operation Fajr (Dawn). A mid-July 2014 attack against Zintani forces in and around the international airport in southern Tripoli succeeded in expelling them after seven weeks of clashes. The government in Tripoli, allied with the Fajr coalition, then ceased to be recognized internationally.

The LNA has consistently grown in size since 2014—especially after 2016—thanks to external support. The nonviolent capture of the oil terminals between Sidra and Brega, the so-called Oil Crescent, in September 2016 burnished the LNA’s image on a national and international level. Haftar steadily expanded his territorial control, capturing Benghazi in 2017. Haftar’s “war on terror” narrative labels every Islamist or revolutionary group “terrorists” or *dawa’ish* (members of the Islamic State). The strongman does not distinguish between jihadists, moderate proponents of political Islam, or non-Islamist dissidents. The indiscriminate rhetoric has enabled him to rally a wide range of factions. Many eastern tribes, wealthy businessmen, and former Qaddafi-era officers back Haftar. The Madkhali Salafi groups in Cyrenaica are another important base of support. Madkhalism is a conservative current of Salafism favored by the Saudi government. Since 2014, Madkhali Salafis in eastern Libya have shared Haftar’s commitment to combating the Muslim Brotherhood and other forms of Islamism. Madkhalism prohibits political partisanship and dictates ostensible obedience to an existing authority.³ In northwestern Libya several Madkhali Salafi groups—at the time of this writing—were not overtly aligned with the LNA.

Libya



International Influence on Selected Armed Groups



Egypt



Saudi Arabia



Turkey



France



U.S.



UAE



Sudan



Qatar

Sources: Esri, USGS, NOAA

In May 2018 the LNA initiated an offensive into the coastal city of Derna, near the Egyptian border. After eight months of destructive urban warfare, the Islamist coalition there was defeated almost entirely. Starting in mid-January 2019, the LNA swept across the southwestern province, called the Fezzan. Haftar's progress stalled in April 2019, when he launched a large-scale offensive on Tripoli. The LNA's operation faced stiff resistance from most Tripolitanian civilians and armed groups. With a few exceptions, notably some Zintani groups and a few others, the anti-LNA effort of 2019 has remobilized the Fajr coalition of 2014.

Major Actors

The LNA and Aligned Forces

Haftar's armed coalition has been evolving since its emergence in 2014. In its initial phase, the Karama campaign was waged primarily by civilians from local and tribal forces, siding with approximately two hundred regulars. Since he managed to suppress Islamist militants in Benghazi in 2016, however, Haftar has sought to strengthen the LNA and turn it into a more professionalized and efficient army. At the same time, he ensures that the LNA remain loyal to him personally. For instance, the commander has made a point of staffing some elite units of the LNA with members of the Ferjani and Zway tribes, his kinsmen on his father's and mother's side, respectively.

Foreign support has been crucial to allowing Haftar to transform the LNA. Haftar has maintained a virtual monopoly on access to foreign sponsors. The LNA's most generous and most decisive backer has been the UAE. Egypt also has a close working relationship with Haftar. By providing training and technical support, Cairo has contributed to shaping the LNA into a more conventional and professional military. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Russia, and France are also significant backers.

The 101st and 106th LNA Battalions

The 101st and 106th Battalions belong to a generation of LNA units that formed in Cyrenaica after 2016. As such, the LNA's leadership made sure both units relied more on professionally trained recruits than on civilians who joined fighting units during the 2011 revolution or the 2014 Karama campaign.

The 106th is the largest single group within the LNA in terms of manpower, equipment, and territorial control. Its overall size exceeds five thousand fighters.⁴ In addition, it can rely on supplemental auxiliaries drawn from Salafi groups and eastern tribes. The 106th reached the status of a brigade in 2018 by incorporating about ten battalions from Benghazi and Ajdabiya. Khalifa Haftar's son Khaled, who reportedly trained in Egypt and Jordan, is unofficially in command of the 106th, succeeding his brother Saddam.

At the beginning of its existence, the 106th largely avoided direct combat, in some respects receiving preferential treatment over other local units that had been involved in the battle for Benghazi. This situation has engendered frustration among parts of the Awaqir, a large Benghazi-area tribe, which had been a major force at the LNA's inception in 2014 and borne the brunt of the fighting during the subsequent three years. By restructuring and professionalizing its troops, the LNA has effectively pushed aside fighters who were prominent in 2014 through 2016, including leaders from the Awaqir tribe. Instead, Haftar favored a new vanguard expected to display a higher degree of loyalty to the field marshal. Part of the Awaqir tribe's discontent is also attributable to Haftar's intention to maintain the LNA's economic dominance, a model similar to the current Egyptian military's socioeconomic role.⁵ Such grievances could potentially cause the Awaqir community, and others, to challenge the LNA's political supremacy.

The 106th boasts advanced weaponry, including Emirati Nimr and Jordanian al-Wahsh armed vehicles, as well as Russian Kornet missiles.⁶ Although foreign personnel operate at Benina and al-Khadim air bases, interaction with external backers is often managed by the LNA's General Command, not by individual brigades.

The 101st battalion is a regular military unit mainly made up of fighters from Ajdabiya. It is led by Captain Mohamed Absayat al-Zway, a young officer trained abroad. Absayat's group is disciplined, well-trained, and somewhat tribally diverse. Amid the initial phase of the Derna battle in May and June 2018, Haftar put both the 101st and the 106th at the forefront in order to bolster their legitimacy and strengthen their military stature. The 101st was then declared a

part of the 106th Brigade.⁷ In April 2019 several of the 106th Brigade's subunits were involved in the front line near Tripoli and in the strategic town of al-Aziziya. However, they proved less effective militarily there than they did in Derna and suffered significant casualties. In spite of the brigade's material superiority, the large presence of inexperienced young recruits partly contributed to this failure. GNA-aligned forces captured several soldiers and armored vehicles.

Subul al-Salam in Kufra

Kufra-based armed group Subul al-Salam is led by a civilian fighter, Abdel Rahman Hasham al-Kilani, a Madkhali Salafi. Subul al-Salam first became visible as part of Haftar's coalition in late 2015, when it led offensives against some Darfuri rebel groups who were allied with some ethnic Tubu groups in southeastern Libya. Further north, in the city of Ajdabiya, Subul al-Salam also combatted Islamist militias alongside Zway tribal units of the LNA there.

Subul al-Salam has about three hundred members. It is the main force affiliated with the LNA in southeastern Libya. It is staffed almost entirely by civilian recruits. Unlike other groups in the area, the militia is tribally and ethnically mixed, although the Zway tribe is the largest constituent. Subul al-Salam contacted fellow Madkhali groups, such as Tripoli's Radaa, which gifted three ambulances to Subul al-Salam in 2017.⁸ This overt gesture of support shows that interactions and mutual aid sometimes exist between ideological brethren, even when affiliated with rival authorities.

Subul al-Salam's presence covers a vast geographical area, from the Sudanese and Chadian borders in the south to the Tazerbu checkpoint on the Jalu-Kufra road in the north. The brigade also controls Kufra's airport and a detention center. Subul al-Salam is in regular dialogue with the Sudanese authorities, who control the Jabal al-Awaynat border post at the Egyptian-Libyan-Sudanese triangle. The relationship is important to the militia, even though Haftar does not consider Khartoum an ally.

Despite its Salafi rhetoric, which purports to combat crime, Subul al-Salam participates in human smuggling, artifact trafficking, and other illicit activities.⁹ Overall, Haftar's territorial control is

weaker in southern Libya than along Cyrenaica's littoral. By relying on Subul al-Salam, the LNA's leadership does not achieve full, direct territorial control in the Kufra area but, in effect, outsources security of remote areas to local militias. Haftar used similar pragmatism when he tackled southwestern Libya starting in the first few weeks of 2019.

The Sixth Brigade in Sebha

The Sixth Brigade formed in 2013 by unifying several revolutionary militias in Sebha, the largest city in the Fezzan. General Salem al-Attaybi created the Sixth Brigade by drawing in half a dozen local battalions, mainly from Attaybi's own Arab tribe, the Awlad Suleyman. Since then, the Sixth Brigade has failed to fully cohere or organize along a clear hierarchical structure. However, whenever it clashes with its tribal rivals, its members tend to mobilize in unison. In that sense, the Sixth Brigade is more a tribal militia than a regular army unit.

The Awlad Suleyman, along with the Tubu, were the main anti-Qaddafi forces in the Fezzan during the 2011 uprisings. Most of the other communities and ethnic groups in the area—including the Megarha, Tuareg, and Qadhadhfa (Qaddafi's tribe)—sided with the regime. Intercommunal fighting continued for several years after 2011, pitting Awlad Suleyman against both the Tubu and the Qadhadhfa, and was often fueled by long-standing resentment.¹⁰

At different times both the Tripoli government and the LNA have dispatched forces to try to pacify the Fezzan. Local groups reconfigured the alignment in response to the arrival of these outside forces. They adjusted their narratives to depict themselves as agents and representatives of the national government based either in Tripoli or Benghazi. Mostly, though, they were involved in parochial fights to gain exclusive territorial control over vital roads and infrastructure around the Sebha area.

Qatar and Italy backed reconciliation processes between rival communities in the Fezzan in 2014 and 2017, respectively.¹¹ Both countries promised financial compensation for conflict victims. They planned to pay directly or through the GNA. In return, armed groups would withdraw from military camps and hand them over to "the legitimate

army.”¹² But the compensation was never paid. The foreign involvements thus offered false assurances of support to the parties and inadvertently fueled local violence. Starting in late 2017, clashes erupted between local Tubu (supported by some foreign-born Tubu from Chad and Niger) and Awlad Suleyman groups (joined by other armed groups from allied tribes and some military units) over key territories.

France, one of Haftar’s most important backers, is committed to protecting Chadian president Idriss Déby. Paris thus pressured Haftar to fight the Chadian rebels that had used Libyan territory as a rear base. Besides, France, Russia, Italy, and the UAE have also been keen to see Haftar become more active in ensuring the security of the Fezzan’s major oil fields, either by the use of force or by way of a negotiated settlement with local groups. For most of 2018 Haftar was slow to build the necessary alliances in the Fezzan. Chadian rebels and radical groups like al-Qaeda continued to exploit southwestern Libya as a safe haven. At the end of 2018 the UAE increased its assistance to Haftar so that he could conduct a conquest of the Fezzan.¹³ In early 2019 Haftar succeeded in winning the allegiance of almost all cities there through a combination of peaceful entente deals, pecuniary promises, and brute force.¹⁴

The Revolutionary Groups

The Tripoli Revolutionary Battalion

The Tripoli Revolutionary Battalion (TRB) was established in the summer of 2011. It largely consisted of Tripolitarians who fled to the city of Nalut to join the preparation for the assault on the capital. Among its founders was the Libyan-Irish Islamist Mahdi al-Harati. The TRB received material support from Qatar.¹⁵ The TRB’s original founders also enjoyed a rapport with Turkey’s Islamists. By the end of 2011, however, the TRB splintered into several local groups that acted as independent police units known as Supreme Security Committees. Two individuals then emerged at the helm of the TRB: Haythem al-Tajuri, a former police officer with a history of petty criminality, and Hashim Bishr, a moderate Salafi with sway among local militias and who had previously headed a local Supreme Security Committee. Starting in early 2014, the TRB turned into an opponent of the Muslim

Brotherhood and its allies.¹⁶ Although the TRB was nominally part of the Fajr coalition, it did not contribute significantly to its military effort. The TRB did, however, help protect the UN-backed GNA when it was established in March 2016. In return the TRB derived more privileges and more recognition as a cornerstone of the capital’s security apparatus. Because the TRB’s top leaders have displayed a hostility to political Islam, the UAE and France have sought to dialogue with them.¹⁷

But these outside powers have found it difficult to control the TRB for two main reasons. First, the brigade’s vivid antiautocracy sentiment has persisted among several of its midlevel commanders. As a result, part of the TRB has remained fiercely opposed to Haftar in ways neither Tajuri nor Bishr can fully control. Second, the TRB has unique access to Libya’s wealth through the banking system.¹⁸ Tajuri and some of his lieutenants are suspected of having embezzled tens of millions of dollars from Libya’s public treasury using fraudulent letters of credit and other schemes. The sheer amount of money available inside Libya makes Tajuri and the TRB less immediately responsive to enticements offered by outside powers.

Amid the UAE’s long-standing efforts to undermine the TRB’s commitment to resisting the LNA, the Gulf federation adopted a somewhat more coercive approach in 2018. In late August, Tajuri and fellow TRB leader Bishr traveled from Saudi Arabia to the UAE, coincidentally when a major battle was erupting in Tripoli. The UAE prevented Tajuri and Bishr from leaving. The former was compelled to remain in the country for three months.¹⁹ Before Tajuri’s return to Tripoli, a series of assassinations targeting several midlevel TRB leaders began in Tripoli. It is suspected, but yet unproven, that the UAE pressed for these killings through a subset of Radaa or other Madkhali Salafi cells in Tripolitania. The targets were all TRB commanders particularly hostile to Haftar. During that period, the TRB’s chiefs negotiated indirectly with the LNA about allowing Haftar entry into central Tripoli.

Yet, ultimately, the UAE’s efforts to turn the TRB into an LNA-friendly force failed. The TRB-LNA tentative entente crumbled with Haftar’s April 2019 decision to attack Tripoli. In order to avoid

alienating other local actors and ensure his immediate survival amid an unforeseen assault, Tajuri publicly condemned the LNA's offensive and the battalion emerged as a major obstacle in the first days of Haftar's offensive. Soon afterward, however, the TRB disengaged from parts of the front line and Tajuri himself left Libya. Tajuri's ambivalence amid the LNA's onslaught shows how fluid allegiances can be in Libya: no external entity controls actors on the ground.

Misrata's Mahjub Brigade

The Mahjub Brigade is a revolutionary formation that takes its name from a district in Misrata's western suburbs. Founded during the 2011 siege of the city, Mahjub participated in the battles of Misrata, Tripoli, and Sirte that same year. Despite its inclusion in the Misrata Military Council, the Mahjub Battalion (later a brigade) kept its structural independence. In 2011 it benefited from military equipment shipped by Qatar via Benghazi.²⁰ The militia is nowadays considered the city's second largest force in terms of personnel and materiel. Although it is largely made up of civilian fighters committed to the revolutionary cause, it is organized like a regular military brigade.

The Mahjub Brigade is led through informal consensus by a group of mostly civilian leaders. It has enforced some internal rules and maintained a relatively coherent public stance. Its leadership has sanctioned or expelled members when they were involved in blatantly criminal activities.

Since 2015 the Mahjub Brigade has developed a close relationship with the Misratan merchant class. It often adopts a pragmatic stance on socioeconomic issues, which distinguishes it from the hard-line factions of Misrata. The force exhibits frequent personnel turnover as members become recruited into different security and military organizations. The Mahjub militia's size exceeds 2,500 active fighters and possesses the ability to mobilize many more from former members.²¹ It played a central role in Misrata's July 2014 attack on Zintani forces in southern Tripoli. The Mahjub Brigade also spearheaded the Misratan-led assault on Ibrahim Jadhran's Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) in the Oil Crescent region in December 2014.

Yet Mahjub Brigade's leadership showed themselves to be open to calls for a ceasefire, which

helped to de-escalate the conflict in the Oil Crescent. The Mahjub Brigade also supported the national dialogue process that led to the establishment of the GNA in 2016. Along with other moderate militias from Misrata, including the Halbous and Hattin Brigades, it prevented hard-line militias from impeding the GNA's arrival in Tripoli in March 2016.²² In military terms, the Mahjub Brigade is a significant component of that bloc, which is neither Islamist nor revolutionary in its inclination.

When, in early 2016, ISIS expanded its presence beyond Sirte and attempted to seize the Oil Crescent's terminals, the Mahjub Brigade supported Jadhran materially and coordinated a military action with the latter against a common enemy. Separately, from May through December 2016, the Mahjub Brigade participated in a US-backed campaign to uproot ISIS from Sirte. After ISIS was dislodged, the Misratan armed group took part in security initiatives such as the Central Military Region's Sirte Protection Force and the Misrata-Sirte Coastal Road Protection Room, as well as the Ministry of Defense's Counter-Terrorism Force, based in Khoms but largely staffed by Misratans. Mahjub's attitude toward the GNA soured after the battle of Sirte, however. Brigade leaders criticized the GNA's lack of support, its inefficiency, and its bias toward Tripoli-based militias. They complained that Tripoli-based militias had deepened and expanded their territorial control in the capital while the Misratans were engaged in the campaign against ISIS in Sirte.

In 2017 Mahjub commanders were among a delegation that met with Qatari emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani in Doha.²³ Most of these figures had been involved in the battle for Sirte and hailed from Misrata, including members of the municipal council and the central hospital's director. The GNA's defense minister and other Libyan state officials objected to the move, claiming that it was tantamount to Misrata conducting its own foreign policy.²⁴ Moreover, the move came just a week after Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced their blockade of Qatar. The latter's contribution to 2016's anti-ISIS campaign in Sirte was in fact far less significant than the aid provided by Britain, Italy, and the US. Nevertheless, the examples above demonstrate Mahjub's tendency to conduct its own diplomacy.

Ibrahim Jadhnan's Petroleum Facilities Guard

Ibrahim Jadhnan is a native of Ajdabiya and a former inmate of the notorious Abu Salim prison. Jadhnan is not a radical Islamist but a mere criminal with no strong commitment to a particular ideology. He took advantage of the 2011 uprisings to present himself as a revolutionary. In 2012 Sadiq al-Gheithi, a former Islamist fighter in Afghanistan and, at the time, a deputy defense minister in charge of border security, put Jadhnan in charge of protecting the oil installations in Cyrenaica. Public funds enabled Jadhnan to recruit militiamen from his tribe, the Magharba, in Ajdabiya, and stand up a large armed group called the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG).

In 2013 Ibrahim Jadhnan's PFG blockaded Cyrenaica's major oil terminals located within the Magharba tribal domain.²⁵ Jadhnan claimed this blockade was to protest the lack of salaries from the government. He also claimed that the Tripoli government had illegally siphoned off the natural resource wealth of Cyrenaica. The blockade severely hurt Libya's oil exports. From 2014 to 2015 Haftar maintained a tactical alliance with Jadhnan. Although there are rumors that the UAE and Saudi Arabia supported Jadhnan from 2013 to 2015, it was unclear if Jadhnan acted as a proxy for any foreign power. In March 2014 US Navy SEALs stopped eastern Libya from conducting independent exports of oil.²⁶ Later during Jadhnan's long-term blockade, Russians approached him and asked to be the oil's exclusive buyers in exchange for arms and cash, to no avail.²⁷ Since 2016 Jadhnan has found periodic refuge in Turkey. In May through August of 2016 US officials met the PFG chief several times in an attempt to negotiate a resumption of official oil exports by Tripoli.²⁸ In September 2016 the Magharba tribe expelled Jadhnan and let Haftar take over the oil terminals.

The LNA has since been responsible for the security and smooth operation of the oil terminals. In June 2018 Jadhnan launched a new assault on the Oil Crescent terminals. The Haftar camp claimed that Qatar had funded the attack, although evidence is again shaky.²⁹ Haftar's forces—with military or logistical assistance from the UAE, Egypt, and France—repelled Jadhnan's group and retook the terminals. Jadhnan fled to Misrata and then Istanbul. Later that year, the US and UN placed Jadhnan on the sanctions list.

The Benghazi Defense Brigades

In 2016 Ismail al-Sallabi, a veteran of the Islamist brigades in Benghazi with strong ties to Qatar, cofounded the Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB) with other militants from Benghazi and Ajdabiya.³⁰ A Benghazi commander by the name of Mustafa al-Sharkassi became the BDB's chief. The militia attracted fighters who had previously been expelled from Benghazi and Ajdabiya and forced to relocate in western Libya as a result of Haftar's Karama campaign. Some were veterans of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council. Other BDB recruits were mere civilians with ancestry in Tripolitania who had been chased from their homes in Benghazi. The resentment of these non-Islamist families toward Haftar partly explains the emergence of BDB in May 2016.

The anti-Haftar militia initially had its headquarters in the south of Misrata and, later, in the Jufrah district. Forces of the port city, however, rejected the BDB after it carried out a surprise attack and massacre of pro-Haftar fighters at the Brak al-Shati air base in May 2017. Under pressure from Misrata's moderates, BDB officially dissolved, although some of its members remain active. Several BDB members participated in Jadhnan's attack on the Ras Lanuf and Brega oil terminals in June 2018.³¹ After April 4, 2019, Sharkassi and a few other BDB figures returned from exile to join in the defense of Tripoli, anticipating a friendlier environment would result from Haftar's offensive on Tripoli.

The Pragmatists

As the 2014 civil war subsided and Libya became effectively divided between the Tripoli and the eastern-based governments, some groups managed to maneuver autonomously. This was especially the case in western Libya, where the Tripoli government's control was weak in comparison with the LNA's, which approached a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence across much of Cyrenaica.

Several reasons exist for this asymmetry. Cyrenaica is less densely populated than Tripolitania, and the main tribes there have tended to support Haftar's LNA within the context of an ongoing war against common enemies. The GNA, in contrast, is less a center of power than a label that certain militias utilize. The sheer military might

of Misrata, Zintan, Zawiyah, and other influential cities located near Tripoli have contributed to the GNA's political fragmentation.

The pragmatic actors in western Libya have avoided committing to either Haftar or the Islamist and revolutionary hard-liners. Some armed groups exploited opportunities to dominate commerce and trade. Others engaged in smuggling activities. No simple rule exists to differentiate pragmatists from the rest of the country's actors. Groups analyzed in this section are not necessarily in contact with each other, and some are even rivals. Haftar's April 2019 attack on the capital forced several pragmatists to choose sides, at least temporarily.

Zintani Militia in the Greater Tripoli: Emad Trabelsi's Battalion

Zintan, a small city in the western mountains, has played an outsized role in Libyan politics since 2011. This prominence can partly be explained by the historical trend of Zintanis residing in Tripoli while remaining loyal to the mountain city. Emad Trabelsi is a Zintani leader with roots in Tripoli. On the one hand, he is perceived as loyal to Zintan; on the other, he has been determined to control parts of southern Tripoli. A close partnership between the UAE and the city of Zintan coalesced in May 2011. Whereas Qatar helped Zintan in the first weeks of the revolution, the Emirati government built a longer-lasting rapport with the city. In that context, Emad Trabelsi's al-Sawaiq Battalion, along with other forces from Zintan, participated in the liberation of Tripoli in August 2011 and then asserted exclusive control over the area stretching between Regatta and April 7th Camp. Other Zintani militias occupied the capital's international airport, enabling them to receive even more military equipment from abroad, despite the international arms embargo.

Al-Sawaiq, al-Qa'qa, and the other Zintani militias benefited when Usama al-Juwaili, a Zintani, became defense minister in late 2011. The battalions grew to become brigades as they inducted non-Zintani civilians eager to take advantage of their access to materiel and funding. The overall number of fighters under Zintani command may have reached ten thousand in 2013 and 2014. In the capital, they competed with forces from Misrata, Nafusa, and Tripoli for territorial control and privileged access to state institutions.

Trabelsi and his men were among the few that took up the opportunity to receive training from the UAE. In 2013 the UAE sent major arms shipments to the Zintani-controlled airport. Trabelsi's group possessed Emirati-made weapons and vehicles that no other group in Libya had at that time. During the buildup to the 2014 civil war, the UAE perceived the Zintanis as the only effective bulwark against the revolutionary Islamists and redoubled their support to al-Sawaiq and al-Qa'qa.

During the 2014 civil war, al-Sawaiq and al-Qa'qa militias aligned with Haftar's Operation Karama and against the Misratan forces defending the Tripoli government. In August 2014 all Zintani forces were forced to retreat and leave Tripoli permanently. The Qa'qa' Brigade dissolved soon afterwards, and many of its members then joined, along with al-Sawaiq members, the Trabelsi-led Special Operations Force (SOF) under the eastern Interior Ministry's label. Around that time, the UAE cut back on its military support of al-Sawaiq and other Zintani militias.

For several years after 2014, Trabelsi remained loyal to Operation Karama and Haftar. The field marshal and his entourage refused to recognize the civilian militiaman in the same way they did Zintan's more conservative group of career officers, led by Idris Madi, Mokhtar Fernana, and other military professionals.³²

Meanwhile, Usama al-Juwaili, another Zintani general known for his skepticism about Haftar, sought to establish dialogue with the GNA in 2017 and tried to pull Trabelsi into the orbit of Tripoli. The GNA lacked a reliable national guard or standing army of its own and had little reach into western Libya. These weaknesses drove the GNA to accept Juwaili's military contribution and appoint Trabelsi as chief of the General Security Agency in July 2018. The SOF's pivot away from the eastern government to the GNA illustrates the personal and ad hoc nature of militia maneuvering. In the second half of 2018, Trabelsi's group made incursions into the capital's southwestern suburbs using the GNA label as a source of legitimacy. During that same period, the militia was still perceived by many Tripolitania actors as a potential ally of the LNA.

Yet Trabelsi's armed group never became a traditional, reliable proxy of the UAE, despite having

received support from the Gulf federation from 2011 to 2014. Instead, it concentrated on smuggling and trafficking, often following a parochial calculus. In response to Haftar's April 2019 offensive, Trabelsi joined with Juwaili to fight the LNA.

Radaa—the Salafi Unit in Mitiga Airport

Abdelraouf Kara, a Salafi, and his brothers joined the anti-Qaddafi rebellion in the summer of 2011. The Karas, alongside the Qaddurs, led a revolutionary battalion called the Suq al-Jumaa Martyrs during the war against the Qaddafi loyalists. In 2012, after a few minor changes, the armed group became the Nawasi Battalion. Only in 2013 did Kara form a special offshoot of Nawasi called Radaa (Deterrence) and become its fully independent leader.

Originally from the Suq al-Jumaa neighborhood in the east of Tripoli, Abdelraouf Kara established his headquarters in the nearby Mitiga base (formerly Wheelus Air Base). In August 2014 Mitiga became Tripoli's sole operational airport. Control over such a strategic facility further reinforced Kara's political, economic, and security influence.

From 2013 through 2015 Radaa focused on providing local security, confiscating alcohol, breaking drug-trafficking networks, and running an extrajudicial prison. Since the UN-backed GNA was installed in Tripoli (March 2016), Radaa has only acquired more power. The militia is suspected of receiving financial, ideological, and political support from Saudi Arabia. Officially, Radaa receives funding from the GNA's Ministry of the Interior. In addition, starting in 2017, it has expanded its sway over a substantial part of the black market for currency trading.³³ Lastly, Radaa has also had a hand in other illicit activities.³⁴ The combination of these sources of income makes it a particularly well-funded militia.

Revolutionary actors long suspected Kara would comply with Riyadh's instructions if and when upheaval came to Tripoli. This means Radaa would likely support Haftar should he make his march on the capital. In interviews in September 2016, Radaa fighters explicitly acknowledged the possibility of aligning with Haftar.

Yet, at least so far, Radaa leaders have been cautious toward the LNA amid the latter's offensive on Tripoli. Individuals and subunits of the militia joined the battlefield against Haftar's army, but

the armed group has kept away, preferring to stay put and defend key assets. The war on Tripoli has also helped make more visible the internal divisions within the Radaa grouping, as some elements may eventually gravitate to the LNA while others remain with the GNA.

Conclusions

Libya's conflicts are often both hyperlocal and closely linked to foreign states. External interference has helped empower some Libyan actors by granting them financial, military, and political means. However, international backers are almost never able to dictate their proxies' actions. Libyan actors' tactics and strategies are largely based on their own internal organizational logic and calibrated based upon local, sometimes personal, considerations. Those indigenous parameters impose stronger constraints on armed groups' trajectories, as compared to the influence of external patrons.

Even though Libya's armed groups often deviate from the desires of their foreign sponsor, the material and ideological help from abroad has a substantial effect. The most striking example is Haftar's LNA, which may not have been able to survive at all without firm, continuous assistance from several states since 2014.

Meddling from abroad has undermined diplomatic efforts at brokering a viable political solution. For instance, Haftar's certainty that he can rely upon backing from the UAE and others, in contravention to the UN's arms embargo, has disincentivized him from making concessions or working constructively with the GNA. The same thing can be said about Haftar's opponents. In that sense, external meddling has exacerbated and prolonged Libya's indigenous antagonisms. It induced Libyan factions to pursue reckless strategies under the assumption that foreign support would increase should military or political difficulties be encountered.

Another finding from the case studies above has to do with the indirect nature of some sponsorship relations. In some cases, armed groups in Libya receive all external assistance through a go-between. Reliance upon such an intermediary renders the foreign state's relationship with said armed group less personal and more systematic. The Libyan intermediary thereby acquires the

option to politicize the flow of assistance based on interests unrelated to the foreign sponsor's agenda. In Haftar's case, the Cyrenaica-based strongman has used foreign help as a tool to protect his political interests against the potentially greater autonomy of local tribes, including the Awaqir, a community that bore the brunt of the fighting in Benghazi from 2014 through 2017.

Lastly, foreign sponsors are hardly the only source of material autonomy for armed groups in Libya. Some militias use their military might and political leverage to tap into Libya's vast public treasury. Others pursue illicit activities. When this happens, foreign states encounter a significantly greater amount of difficulty incentivizing an armed group into following a specific desired behavior, simply because domestic opportunities available in Libya are too fastuous for outsiders to match easily.

In sum, foreign interference is neither at the origin of the conflict nor its primary driver. The tensions tearing Libyan society apart are primarily domestic. Moreover—as demonstrated through the examples above—the conflict seldom fits the definition of a classic proxy war. Nevertheless, international interventions have been instrumental in prolonging the crisis. Many of the armed groups preventing peace in Libya today would likely have disappeared or sought a political deal had it not been for continual support from foreign states.

Except for Russia, which entered the Libyan arena in 2015, all foreign states meddling in the conflict are partners or allies of Washington. America's increasing aloofness from the Middle East and North Africa region amplified its inability to promote a political compromise in Libya. If the US decided to play a more assertive role in Libya, it would be in a position to pressure the various meddlers into reducing their interference. That reduction in meddling, in turn, could help reach an acceptable truce. No other country can have a comparable effect on the proxy war dynamics affecting Libya. Given that Washington is unlikely to make a genuine comeback in Libyan affairs as a peace broker, a more probable scenario is perpetuation of the civil war.

Endnotes

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The Nature of Sponsor-Agent Relations in Libya (2012–2018)

Sponsors Agents	GNA Tripoli	LNA Benghazi	US	UAE	Egypt	Saudi Arabia	Turkey	Qatar	Russia	France	Italy
101st & 106th regular LNA units	X	•	T	MFP	M T P I	P			MT	M T P	I
LNA Salafi Btn. Subul al-Salam (Kufra)	—	•			M	P					
LNA Sixth Brigade (Sebha)	•	•						P		P	
Emad Trabelsi's Zintani Btn.	•	•		MTF							
Tripoli's Salafi Radaa	•	—		P		P T F					T
TRB	•	—		T F P		P	P T	M		P	P F
Misrata's Mahjub Brigade	•	X	MTF				P I	TMP FI			P I
Benghazi Defense Companies	—	X					P I M	MFT			

•: Pro/ally

X: Rival

—: Neutral/relative support

M: Military (arms, airstrikes, SF)

T: Technical assistance (training, strategy, intelligence)

P: Political and/or ideological

F: Financial

I: Medical assistance (injuries)