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ARMED FACTIONS IN LIBYA

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ABSTRACT: This is a resource for documentation on armed factions in Libya as of March 2015. Information is taken from news sources such as BBC as well as think-tank publications like *Small Arms Survey* and North Africa expert Frederick Wehrey.

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FOREIGN POLICY MAGAZINE

In a March 2015 issue of *Foreign Policy*, an analyst notes:

“Having vacillated for months as Libya descended ever deeper into civil war, the United States and its allies suddenly feel an urgent impulse to do something — yet none among them seems capable of coming up with a coherent strategy.”

The analyst then points out that Libya has reverted to patchwork of city-states loosely governed by warlords, city councils, and tribal networks with two loose coalitions and a third element competing for power since the Summer of 2014.¹

- The Tobruk-based government led by General Khalifa Haftar and defended by Operation Dignity
- The Tripoli-based government led by Libya Dawn that has united Islamist militias from the city of Misrata
- The Islamic State

The analyst concludes that Western Allies must choose between the first two options or even less likely, brokering a national unity government between the two. Saudi Arabia and its backers support the Tobruk Government and prefer to attack all forms of Islamism including Muslim Brotherhood factions. Doing so however would alienate moderates in the Misrata Government who might then join up with jihadists. Despite growing backing for Tobruk from European States for reasons generally related to economic gains, the analyst warns the U.S. should not think about short-term economic gains or stability but rather long term survivability of the region. The ultimate goal is defeating Islamic radicals and that requires more careful alliance building across a broader spectrum of political actors in Libyan society than just industrial concerns.

¹ “Why Picking Sides in Libya Won’t Work”. *Foreign Policy*. March 2015.
<https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CB8QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fforeignpolicy.com%2F2015%2F03%2F06%2Flibya-civil-war-tobruk-un-negotiations-morocco%2F&ei=4TQ5VZ2pMORlsASv4YCwDQ&usg=AFQjCNFwNeLU6c3D-X7CrzyoF1vFAX8v2Q&bvm=bv.91427555,d.cWc>

FREDERICK WEHREY

The Middle East expert Frederic Wehrey explains in several articles that political factionalization in Libya revolves mainly around a weak state and poor institutionalization, ideological differences between political actors, and conflict in other states spilling over into Libya.

- Hardcore Islamic groups generally decry any effort at secularizing the state and Libya's Transitional authorities, claiming any democratic elections, reliance on former Qaddafi officials and not applying sharia law makes it illegitimate.²
- Islamist factions combined forces in a coalition called Operation Dawn to defend against General Khalifa Hifter's Dignity Coalition, and Islamic factions differ in origins, coming from Western Libya, Misrata and Tripoli or even from Berber groups. The foreign-born Islamic State has moved into a vacuum in Libya because of the two-alliance conflict preventing any resources from confronting the IS.³
- Some Islamic Misratan militias, however, are skeptical of Islamic State intentions and see a threat any expansion as a threat. The Dawn-Dignity civil war remains as the primary conflict but the increasing Islamic State presence may alter faction incentives to change sides or become neutral.⁴
- The Islamic State cannot exploit the Sunni -Shia Muslim divide that exists in Syria and Iraq and must attempt to leverage other social cleavages among tribal and communal groups that have been excluded from the new order.⁵
- Misrata stands as a microcosm for Libya's current conflicts and its potential future. The revolution against the old regime started in Misrata. The city hosts the most powerful and well-organized militias. The country's economic foundation of manufacturing, construction, and transportation sits in Misrata along with important merchants. All socio-economic classes and age ranges are represented here including students and professionals. Finally, Misrata leans toward moderate Islamic ideals but stands as an obstacle against radicals and outsiders such as Ansar al-Sharia and the Islamic State.⁶

² Frederic Wehrey, March 5, 2015. "Rising Out of the Chaos: The Islamic State in Libya". <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59268>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Frederic Wehrey. February 2, 2015. "Libya's War Weary Make Peace". *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-africa/2015-02-02/libyas-war-weary-make-peace>

- Libyan factional conflict and chaos was epitomized in the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, creating a sense among many Libyans that the provisional government is too weak and collaboration with revolutionary brigades is no long term solution to the country's problems.⁷
- The battle between General Khalifa Hifter's Operation Dignity, the former-Jihadist and disparate Operation Dawn, and the "third-force militias" mainly from Misrata, represent the greater factionalization of Libyan society with each group claiming political and social control of a territory and having respective leaders and security forces. Most transportation infrastructure to the outside world is destroyed and oil facilities have been moderately damaged in the conflict between three groups.⁸
- The three groups have now settled into a more static, military campaign relying on weapons systems and tactics designed for long-term degradation of opponents forces. Any future peace deal requires outside intervention, possibly the United Nations, and the rising threat of the outside Islamic State may be upsetting the present status quo, making the case for political moderation among all political elites.⁹
- The July 7, 2012 election of Mahmoud Jibril of the National Forces Alliance created the impression that unity could exist in Libya across so many political factions including the federalists in the East. However, the government could not reach beyond Tripoli and required militias to capture control, for example in the western Nafusa Mountains or Saharan region. The Gaddafian police and army forces were too weak and disorganized, or distrusted by the population.¹⁰
- Dismantling local militias will be more problematic now that they have become power-brokers in villages, towns and cities, and the initial authority given by the central government, creating a system of warlords. These militias frequently carry out campaigns against rival towns, and tribes, particularly those favored by former leader Muammar al-Qaddafi.¹¹
- The formation of a strong central state will require retaking the authority ceded to local militias and tribal intermediaries. However, leaders must first consider the disposition of the ad-hoc security bodies, the Supreme

⁷ Frederic Wehrey. 2013. Libya's Revolution at Two Years: Perils and Achievements. *Mediterranean Politics* 18(1).

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13629395.2013.764655?journalCode=fmed20>

⁸ Frederic Wehrey. February 9, 2015. "The Battle for Libya's Oil." *The Atlantic*.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Frederic Wehrey. July 15, 2012. "Libya's Militia Menace".

http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/7718~v~Libya_s_Militia_Menace.pdf

¹¹ Ibid.

Security Committees (SSC) under the Ministry of Interior, and the Libyan Shield Force attached to the Ministry of Defense. The SSC Corps are much better paid than the average Libyan so there is little disincentive for fighters to leave. Despite this, they have become unruly and undisciplined at times.

- The Libyan Shield Force formed to augment the national army and unifies militias from the east, Zintan and Misrata, while preserving the structures of the brigades via a bottoms-up initiative. Its primary goal is suppressing fighting in Kufra, Sabha and Zintan but overuse of force and conflicts of interest have caused the reverse and more instability.
- The most efficient way to reform the security sector would be to adopt a dual-track approach of building up the national army and police emphasizing a newer generation of junior and mid-level officers, while downsizing the bloated senior ranks. Using demobilization and integration programs to give fighters alternative job and education opportunities, while prioritizing the local tribal conflict in the east.¹²
- The initial 2012 post-revolutionary processes in Libya saw efforts to consolidate various regions and political factions, especially in Eastern Libya. The first step was ratifying an effective constitution and formalizing the security sector are the best ways to address the sources of eastern instability in the near term.¹³
- The constitution must balance central and local government interests or conflict will result. The parliament must reflect the whole of the population, and institutionalizing the state (police, army, and judiciary) must have inputs from all groups of citizenry or another top-down authoritarian state will re-emerge.¹⁴
- A strong national army and police force will reduce the need and desire to form revolutionary brigades. Police forces must be professionalized so they can earn the trust of the population.¹⁵

RAND CORPORATION

The Rand Corporation's detailed 2014 post-Qaddafi analysis of Libya's political-economic risk situation emphasizes several key elements that often overlap.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Frederic Wehrey. 2012. The Struggle for Security in Eastern Libya. http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/7716~v~The_Struggle_for_Security_in_Eastern_Libya.pdf

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

- The state's lack of security since 2011, a shortcoming that has encouraged criminal enterprises and radical Islamic encroachment coupled with very few functioning political and administrative institutions.¹⁶ Without professional security organizations, civilian or military, rebel militias can act with impunity, threatening attempts to unify political actors.
- The stalled state-building process is exacerbated by the lack of security and cannot proceed at least at the federal-national level. As a result, several factions control various parts of Libyan territory. (See additional summaries)
- Economic stagnation will continue because outside investors are unlikely to hold confidence without basic security. Even with Libya's valuable petroleum reserves, vital infrastructure improvements cannot be made until the threats of violence are greatly reduced.
- International actors will only have limited roles depending on what strategic interests exist (see *Foreign Policy* summary). Without outside intervention, no matter how materially and financially costly, security governance is unlikely to improve without a more substantial foreign footprint.

The analysis concludes by making four recommendations:

- Provide support for a national reconciliation process
- Help Libya strengthen border control
- Assist Libya in building public administration
- Prepare to intervene more diplomatically if not militarily

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

A more detailed breakdown of Libyan combatants from February 2015 reveals the following six factions.

- **Libya Dawn (Fajr Libya)** - political and Islamic moderates and Berber minority members who currently control coastal cities from Misrata west to the Tunisian border as well as southern cities Gharyan, Nalut and Jado.¹⁷

¹⁶ Christopher S. Chivvis and Jeffrey Martini. 2014. *Libya After Qaddafi: Lessons and Implications for the Future*. Rand. P. IX.
http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR500/RR577/RAND_RR577.pdf

¹⁷ "Battle for Libya: Armed groups stalk divided country". *Agence France Presse*. February 2015.
<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/feb-21/288201-battle-for-libya-armed-groups-stalk-divided-country.ashx>

- **Libyan National Army** - Led by renegade General Khalifa Haftar and former Gadhafian officers and supported by anti-Islamist Zintan militias and regional tribes. The LNA holds the most advanced military aircraft and a Special Forces military unit. The faction also took control of much of Benghazi last October.
- **Cyrenaica Force** - is made up of local tribes in Eastern Libya led by Ibrahim al-Jodrane, who seek political autonomy from a federal model of government. CF is anti-Islamic and is also hostile to moderate Libya Dawn
- **Shura Revolutionary Council in Benghazi**- comprised of Islamists and radical militias including Libya Shield, the February 17 Martyrs and Rafallah al-Sahati Brigades, as well as the jihadi Ansar al-Shariah. Its main opponent is the LNA.
- **Ansar al-Shariah** - is a possible Al-Qaeda affiliate that has a presence in Benghazi, Derna, and in Sirte and Sabratha in the west. Member defection to ISIS is prominent as of late.
- **ISIS** - Derna-based but has units in Sirte, the village of Nufliyah to the south and cells in Libya's southern desert

AL JAZEERA

One year earlier, a description of contesting military factions in Libya by *Al Jazeera* revealed the following factions.¹⁸

“ANTI-CONGRESS FACTIONS”

- **National Army** - is an armed militia with nationalist goals, and led Khalifa Haftar. NA can trace its roots to exiles trained in Chad by the US to fight against Gaddafi in the 1980s but later dispersed to re-organize to challenge Gaddafi in 2011. NA's utmost mission is to prevent Islamists from taking control of the government, going so far to launch attacks against the moderate General National Congress in May 2014.
- **Regular Libyan Military Forces** - the Army and Air Force units that made up the Gaddafi military have mostly defected to the NA after the 2011 uprising and began the process of rebuilding and training in east Libya.

¹⁸ “Mapping Libya's armed groups”. *Al Jazeera*. June 2014.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/05/libya-armed-groups-explained-201452293619773132.html>

The most notable unit is *Saiqua*, or the thunderbolt special forces brigade, engaging Islamist militias. Many senior officers are skeptical of Congress's ability to remain neutral or secular and believe money is being sent to radicals.

- **Zintan** - Second largest alliance of militias and based in the Nafusa Mountains southwest of Tripoli. Zintan does not side with either Congress or Islamic forces and regularly clashes with several other militias for control of Tripoli. Troops wear military uniforms that resemble LNA fatigues

“PRO- CONGRESS FACTIONS”

- **LROR (Libyan Revolutionary Operations Room)** - formed in 2013 and is foundation of Libyan Shield, it claims to be “revolutionary” and to support the Congress but is also accused of being Islamist. LROR is affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and its greatest rival and opponent is Haftar.
- **Ansar al-Sharia** - is Libya's indigenous Islamic State faction, dedicated to founding a caliphate and refusing to recognize any constitutionally based government. American sources find it responsible to the attack on the Consulate in Benghazi in 2012. Ansar established social and education training in the Benghazi area in Eastern Libya and is training foot soldiers. Combats most often with the Libyan National Army and Haftar.
- **Misrata** - was the largest collection of militias and most powerful single armed faction in 2014, and armed with heavy weapons, tanks and rockets. Part of Misrata claims to support Islamists in the Congress. It is powerful enough to tip the balance of power between Haftar and Islamic forces.

BRITISH BROADCASTING COMPANY

BBC presented the most detailed breakdown of factions one month earlier. There are slight differences in describing some factions and more detailed explanations of police institutions. The London press labels one block “state affiliated bodies” rather than “anti-Congress factions”. The Libyan Army is distinguished from the Libyan National Army.

STATE-AFFILIATED BODIES

- **Libyan Army**- the remnants of Gaddafi's military forces are training new recruits and are providing street security in Tripoli. Many former soldiers did not return to serve in the Army.¹⁹
- **Al-Saiqa Forces** - the most elite unit of the Libyan Army under Gaddafi and comprised of paratroopers and commandos. ASF is popular in Benghazi because it regularly combats the Islamist Ansar al-Sharia and represents a united Libya.
- **The National Security Directorate (NSD)** - the main state police force that investigates crime and street security. It was overwhelmed in Benghazi, Derna in the east and Sebha in the south
- **Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room** - Charged with protecting Tripoli. Parliament banned it in October 2013 but a branch is active in Benghazi attempting to quell violence.
- **Anti-Crime Unit** - the elite police unit under the Ministry of interior that investigates drug offenses and government corruption.
- **Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG)** - Protects oil installations, the critical part of the economy, and formed in 2013.
- **Libyan Shield Force** - formed in 2012 as temporary bridge to integrate former rebel fighters into the Army but now clashes with other state units such as the Al-Saiqa Forces. It has four brigades across the country.

MILITIAS

- **Libyan National Army** - Khalifa Haftar's faction declared the Libyan government as illegitimate in February 2014 and subsequently launched attacks on Islamists in Benghazi. Haftar was an Army general under Gaddafi who fled into exile for 20 years and returned to help oust the government in 2011.
- **Al-Zintan Revolutionaries' Military Council** - Made up of 23 smaller groups in Zintan and the Nafusa Mountains in Western Libya. Its military council has five operating brigades and runs a satellite channel.

¹⁹ Guide to key Libyan militias". BBC. May 2014
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19744533>

- ***Al-Qaqa Brigade*** - is a part of the Defense Ministry and protects senior officials and government ministers. Uthman Mulayqithah is its head and defected from the State in 2011.
- ***Al-Sawaiq Brigade*** - Originally from Zintan, al-Sawaiq took part in the assault on Tripoli in September 2011. Since then, it has provided personal protection for senior figures at the National Transitional Council, changing its name to al-Sawaiq Brigade for Protection.
- ***Misrata Brigades*** - In the immediate aftermath of Gaddafi's toppling, more than 200 militias, or "revolutionary brigades", were registered with the Misratan Union of Revolutionaries, comprising about 40,000 members. Along with some "unregulated brigades" based in the central city of Misrata, they are thought to control more than 800 tanks and at least 2,000 vehicles mounted with machine guns and anti-aircraft weapons.
- ***17 February Martyrs Brigade*** - The Benghazi brigade likely the largest and best armed militia and Islamist in ideology. BBC claims it "is funded by the Defense Ministry and is thought to consist of about 12 battalions equipped with light and heavy weapons." Implements security and law and orders tasks in eastern Libya and Kufra in the south.
- ***Ansar al-Sharia*** - a Salafist militia which came to prominence in June 2012 when it paraded armed vehicles in central Benghazi to demand the imposition of Islamic law, or Sharia. It was accused by the US of being part of the events that led to the burning of the US consulate in Benghazi in September 2012. Although Ansar al-Sharia has helped provide security in public places, it has also been accused of human rights abuses, and was involved in the destruction of Sufi shrines.

SMALL ARMS SURVEY RESEARCH

The publication *Small Arms Survey Research* published a 2012 article on Libyan armed factions classifying them into brigades and militias. Revolutionary brigades (*kata'ib*) first appeared in Misrata and participated initially in simple street skirmishes but later evolved into more sophisticated organizations using advanced technology such as global positioning systems (GPS) and Google Earth.²⁰

- **Revolutionary brigades** - according to Small Arms, most fighters and weapons (75-80%) fit into revolutionary brigades, and are not controlled by the state. These factions formed at the early stage of the civil conflict and became bound by ideology and discipline, and a distinctive

²⁰ Armed Groups in Libya: Typology and Roles. 2012. *Small Arms Survey Research Notes* 18. http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/H-Research_Notes/SAS-Research-Note-18.pdf

consensus-oriented decision making approach. Revolutionaries utilize several types of local coordinating structures (leadership models) such as military councils and unions of revolutionaries. Most importantly, they have the most significant combat experience as individual soldiers or as whole fighting units. An example includes the Misrata Union of Revolutionaries (40,000 troops) comprised of roughly 41% students, 38% private sector workers, 11% public sector employees and 8% physicians.

- **Unregulated brigades** - are factions that broke off from revolutionary brigades in the later stages of the war. In March 2012, there were six to nine unregulated brigades in Misrata—less than four per cent of the total number of operational groups in the city.
- **Post-revolutionary brigades** - Groups deemed “post-revolutionary” emerged in 2012 complicating the political and military landscape. They generally hold sway in pro-government or pro-Qaddafi neighborhoods such as Bani Walid or Sirte.
- **Militias** - *Small Arms Survey* defines militias as a distinct collection of armed groups including criminal networks and violent extremists. Militias only make up a small fraction of factions in Libya and the survivability of these groups is always in doubt if engagement occurs against state units or brigades.

Another *Small Arms Survey Working Paper* greatly details armed factions in Libya including in-depth interviews, statistics and activities of brigades. The paper notes how the ‘February 17th Revolution’ in 2011 in Benghazi, began the insurrection against the government that would attract international media attention and evolve into today’s civil conflict.²¹ By focusing on Misrata, Libya’s third-largest city and where in 2012, a disproportionate number of armed fighters operated, larger lessons can be drawn on the situation across the whole of the country.²²

The main findings include:

- The decentralized nature of the revolution continues to define the evolving security environment. This fragmentation is most clearly seen in the development of armed groups that can differ dramatically from city to city.
- Revolutionary brigades emerged because neither the Libyan Army nor the Ministry of Defense could reform to the point of unifying under common

²¹ Brian McQuinn. 2012. After the Fall: Libya’s Evolving Armed Groups. *Small Arms Survey Research*. P. 10.

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Brian_Mcquinn/publication/261416239_After_the_Fall_Libya_s_Evolving_Armed_Groups/links/0a85e5343cb46c6b5f000000.pdf?ev=pub_int_doc_dl&origin=publication_detail&inViewer=true

²² Ibid. P. 11.

goals or missions. The National Shield with its four divisions, reported to the Chief of the Libyan Army Maj. Gen. Yousef al-Mangoush, who also began to earn the loyalty of 7000 fighters in the Misrata region

- An inspection of weapons storage facilities in Misrata, determined that revolutionary and unregulated brigades appear to exercise substantial control over their light and conventional weapons. However local military commanders and civilian leaders warn that inadequate storage facilities for weapons and ammunition present a safety risk and that additional technical expertise in the construction of more storage facilities is needed. Misratan brigade members hold almost all 30,000 of their small arms rather than risk depositing them in an armory.²³

The authors studies brigades in Misrata by several characteristics:

- A **group's formation history** - including access to a safe haven which provides tactical and strategic advantages but affects combat experience levels.

- **Community linkage** - ties to a neighborhood, commune or other social organization

- **Integration with local authorities** - extent to which a group has accepted the authority of the local civilian and military establishment since the start of the fighting

The four types of armed factions include **revolutionary brigades, unregulated brigades, post-revolutionary brigades, and militias**. (see previous Small Arms summary)

The author details the formation of the Misratan Union of Revolutionaries by chronicling:

Stage 1: Its initial success

Stage 2: Its occupation of Tripoli Street

Stage 3: Its emergence of brigade structures

A fourth section breaks down weapons proliferation by armed faction and the type of weapons held

A fifth section examines inspection regimes and internal rules on the brigade.

²³ Ibid. P. 13.

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