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Security actors in Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan since 2011

How local factors shape Libya's security sector, and what this means for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration

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Summary

- Libya's armed groups predominantly operate in the areas where they originated. This means that the security sector has developed since 2011 in accordance with distinctly local dynamics: the social composition of the area; the experience of conflict; the structure of the local economy and economic opportunity; and relations with neighbouring localities and the state's formal institutions. This local factor is critical to understanding the country's security sector, and the challenges for security sector reform (SSR) and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), but has been relatively underexplored.
- This research paper attempts to address this gap, through a close study of the development of the security apparatuses of Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan. It draws on a set of interviews with key figures with close knowledge of the security landscape, along with in-depth interviews with residents of the three cities.
- Charting the evolving relationship of Libya's armed groups to state authority must be done in the context of the developing political, economic and security landscape in the country. Misratan, Zawiyan and Zintani armed groups have obtained state affiliation through various routes and institutions, but these different affiliations have in most cases proved weak and subject to change.
- Armed groups from the three cities, at their core, remain based on social networks. Focusing on the positioning of key social constituencies and commanders reveals that the formal structures of the security sector reflect local conditions, rather than being shaped by the central Libyan state.
- SSR has remained the primary focus of policy efforts for Libyan and international policymakers, but – beyond cosmetic changes – there has been limited progress. State-led DDR has been largely dormant since 2015. Given Libya's ongoing governance crisis, illustrated by the continuing existence of rival political institutions and a competitive and divided security sector, DDR has often been viewed as premature – but lessons from other contexts caution against such a view.
- Policymakers considering action to support DDR in Libya should seek to calibrate efforts to local contexts and to mobilize resources into a flexible programme that might be replicated in other locations and eventually expanded to the national level. This will require concerted coordination and dialogue between the Libyan authorities, which remain focused on national-level programming, and international donors, who seem to broadly acknowledge that localized approaches are the most feasible interventions.

- In cities like Misrata and Zintan, where most armed groups are not permanently mobilized, dialogue should seek to improve the management of weapons and ammunition as well as put in place measures to limit their use. The creation of committees that provide an interface between citizens and armed groups to mediate such discussions could be beneficial.
- Programming efforts should seek to directly enhance local social accountability in accordance with a shared set of principles and rules. One way of achieving this is to pursue the agreement of a 'core' code of conduct that can be applied across Libya's territories and that aims to provide citizens of any area with equal treatment, setting a common baseline for national SSR efforts.
- A more ambitious route to pursue progress would be to provide economic incentives to local communities, via municipal councils, in return for progress on issues such as demobilization, weapons management and reducing community violence.
- Training opportunities for members of armed factions should be based on assessments of the local context, rather than in accordance with a 'one size fits all' national programme. The creation of local units that are afforded a degree of autonomy to develop context-specific initiatives may be the most effective way of doing this.

01 Introduction

Libyan armed groups have been singled out as the key impediment to conflict resolution, but it would be a mistake to divorce them from their local context.

Libya's struggles in the decade following the uprisings that led to the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi are well known. At the national level, two major further outbreaks of conflict – in 2014, leading to a governance split and the emergence of rival authorities in the east and west of the country, and in 2019–20 as Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) sought to capture Tripoli – underscored the challenges of securing a transition to more stable government. But violence has also been localized, most notably in the bloody battle for control of Benghazi, but also in other areas of the country, from Kufra in the southeast to Ubari and Sebha in the southwest. Turf wars among rivals in major cities have continued, with events in Tripoli dominating international news coverage.

The total number of Libyans who directly participated in the civil war of 2011 is unclear, yet it is certain that the numbers of those armed swelled following the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime.[1] A decade later, the number of armed security personnel was thought to exceed 400,000,[2] although the true number of Libyans who are currently either members or auxiliaries of armed groups is unclear.

Defining the actors and groups within this armed landscape is challenging. Most armed groups are formally affiliated to the Libyan state but in reality are not subject to the authority of the state's formal chain of command, with the result that many operate with significant autonomy. More widely, it should be noted that the formal elements of the Libyan state – i.e. its formal institutions – are controlled

1 Wolfram Lacher and Peter Cole note that the total numbers of fighters registered in key cities exceeded 50,000 in Misrata, Zintan and Nalut, with it therefore reasonable to assume that the numbers of fighters considerably exceeded this number. See Lacher, W. and Cole, P. (2014), *Politics By Other Means: Conflicting Interests in Libya's Security Sector*, Working Paper, October 2014, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, p. 18, https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/politics-other-means-conflicting-interests-libyas-security-sector-working-paper-20.

2 Badi, E., Gallet, A. and Maggi, R. (eds) (2021), *The Road to Stability: Rethinking Security Sector Reform in Post-Conflict Libya*, Geneva: DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, p. 10, https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/The_Road_to_Stability2021.pdf.

by an array of competing actors and their extended social networks. This means that the Libyan state cannot be considered a unitary actor, and indicates why the policies of formal state institutions tend to reflect the parochial interests of the networks that control the institutions, rather than the broader national interests of the state.[3] Relations between holders of executive office and these groups lean heavily on interpersonal connections rather than institutionalized systems and processes. This blurring of lines makes the distinction between 'state' and 'non-state' actors – which is of particular interest for anyone seeking to reform the security sector by empowering the former against the latter – problematic.

Libya's security sector has thus come to be described as 'hybrid', because its armed actors have one foot inside and one outside the state's formal structures.[4] The term 'hybrid' helps to convey some of the complexity of Libyan armed groups' networks and interactions.[5] However, it also brings compromise: by accepting these organizations as operating in both state and non-state areas, a somewhat arbitrary separation of the formal state from the rest of society is created. This creates a false binary division in parts of the Middle East and North Africa where a multiplicity of actors enjoy state power.[6] Libya is one such context, as a close study of armed groups in Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan illustrates. Moreover, one of the aims of this research paper is to move away from understandings of Libyan armed groups primarily based on their formal – or lack of – state affiliation.

This paper explores the nature of Libya's security sector through comparison of three local contexts, presenting case studies on Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan. While the security sector can be seen to 'broadly comprise all institutions and other entities with a role in ensuring the security of the state and its people',[7] the analysis focuses specifically, in each of the cities studied, on the social networks of the armed groups that have some role in providing direct security functions in their city. It is not the aim of the paper to redefine complex localized security environments in Libya, but rather to focus on the nature of their development. Moreover, expanding the analysis to cover a wide array of state institutions would have been too broad a scope of enquiry. Thus, for each of the case study locations, the paper will reference the security apparatus and the armed groups that apparatus comprises.

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3 A series of in-depth papers assessing the trajectory of Libya's armed groups and the nature of their relationship to state authority have sought to understand why the 'state' – despite direct sponsorship and nominal integration of the majority of these groups under state structures – has been unable to reform the security sector and establish a coherent chain of command for the country's national military. On the latter, see Badi, E. (2020), *Exploring Armed Groups in Libya: Perspectives on Security Sector Reform in a Hybrid Environment*, Geneva: DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/ExploringArmedGroupsinLibya_0.pdf.
4 Badi (2020), *Exploring Armed Groups in Libya*.
5 Eaton, T. (2021), 'The Libyan Arab Armed Forces: A Hybrid Armed Actor?', War on the Rocks, 27 January 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-libyan-arab-armed-forces-a-hybrid-armed-actor.
6 Mansour, R. (2021), 'The 'Hybrid Armed Actors' Paradox: A Necessary Compromise?', War on the Rocks, 21 January 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-hybrid-armed-actors-paradox-a-necessary-compromise.
7 Inclusive Security and DCAF (2017), *A Women's Guide to Security Sector Reform: Training Curriculum*, Washington, DC: Inclusive Security and DCAF, p. 8, https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/imce/Women's%20Guide%20Curriculum/InclusiveSecurity_Curriculum_Series_SSR_MOD2.pdf.

While political actors' pursuit of self-interest has been much criticized as having contributed to Libya's post-2011 failures, armed groups have been singled out in particular.[8] Their growing presence across all aspects of Libyan life, their engagement in economic, and often criminal, enterprise, their penetration of state institutions and in a number of instances their widespread violations of human rights have led many to argue that the armed groups are the key block to a more accountable system of government. Discussion of the vested interests of 'militias' is widespread.[9]

Armed groups have significantly increased their power and influence since 2011. They have affiliated themselves with the state, obtaining access to salaries – perhaps as much as LYD15 billion in 2022 (equivalent to some $3.15 billion)[10] – and other sources of revenue without becoming accountable to it. Rather than the state integrating the armed groups, the latter have integrated the state's own forces into their structures.[11] And the ambitions of Libya's armed groups are growing. In 2023, for instance, the acting interior minister of the Government of National Unity (GNU) and the interior minister of the rival Government of National Stability (GNS) have risen to prominence on the basis of their ties to armed groups. Armed groups have also consolidated their power on the ground. In key cities such as Tripoli and Zawiya, they have developed into powerful blocs, with smaller actors either subsumed within them or forced out. Moreover, armed groups are increasingly involved in the negotiation of political deals, and have set up direct lines of communication with one another despite the ongoing competition among them. Political agreements are unlikely to endure without the acquiescence of armed group leaders. Should elections be held, armed groups are likely to be directly represented in the legislature.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to entirely divorce armed groups from their social context. With some notable exceptions, Libyan armed groups predominantly operate in the areas where they originated, giving them a distinctly local character. This ensures a degree of social accountability that should not be underestimated – even if this varies from location to location, and a group's constituency may comprise only a limited subset of the community. This local factor is critical to understanding the Libyan security sector, yet it has been relatively underexplored.

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8 There are many such examples. 'Militias' have been argued to be a key cause of political instability: see, for example, Badi, E. (2022), 'Armed Groups No Longer: Libya's Competitive Political Militias', ISPI – Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 6 July 2022, https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/armed-groups-no-longer-libyas-competitive-political-militias-35656. Militias have also been criticized for being responsible for widespread human rights abuses: see, for example, Amnesty International (2017), 'Libya's Violent Militias', 16 February 2017, https://www.amnesty.org.uk/libyas-violent-militias.

9 See, for example, Noria Research (2019), *Predatory economies in eastern Libya: The dominant role of the Libyan National Army*, Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/GITOC-Predatory-Economies-Eastern-Libya-WEB.pdf; Lacher, W. and Idrissi, A. (2018), *Capital of Militias: Tripoli's Armed Groups Capture the Libyan State*, Briefing Paper, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/resource/capital-militias-tripolis-armed-groups-capture-libyan-state.

10 Author's calculations based on Central Bank of Libya disclosures of allocations in 2022. LYD15 billion is the cumulative total of the salary lines that are associated with armed factions. See Central Bank of Libya (2022), 'Revenue and Expenditure Statement from 01/01/2022 to 31/12/2022', https://cbl.gov.ly/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/01/Official-Statement-Dec-2022.pdf.

11 Eaton, T. et al. (2020), *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014: Community Dynamics and Economic Interests*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/03/development-libyan-armed-groups-2014.

In so doing, this research paper builds on previous work for Chatham House that has sought to understand post-2011 armed groups in Libya as extended social networks.[12]

Drawing on a wide range of key informant interviews of individuals with close knowledge of the security landscape conducted between January 2021 and March 2023, and 28 in-depth interviews with residents of the three cities,[13] this paper seeks to address this gap through study of the development of the security apparatuses of Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan. The paper has been developed from the author's research with a group of Libyan researchers, including Mohamed Abdusammee, Mohamed al-Gurj, Asma Khalifa, Mohamed Lagha and Ahmed Shalghoum, without whose contribution this paper would not have been possible. Other researchers have preferred to remain anonymous. All of the analysis, and any errors, are the responsibility of the author alone.

The study reveals that the security sector in each location has developed in accordance with distinctly local dynamics: the social composition of the area; the experience of conflict in the location; the structure of the local economy and economic opportunity; and relations with neighbouring areas and the state's formal institutions.

Drawing on the analysis, the paper goes on to explore the implications for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of armed groups in the three locations studied, and across Libya more widely. It should be noted, however, that the paper stops short of seeking to articulate any detailed form of programmatic DDR strategy, acknowledging that such work requires sustained engagement with experts in the DDR field, Libyan and international policymakers.

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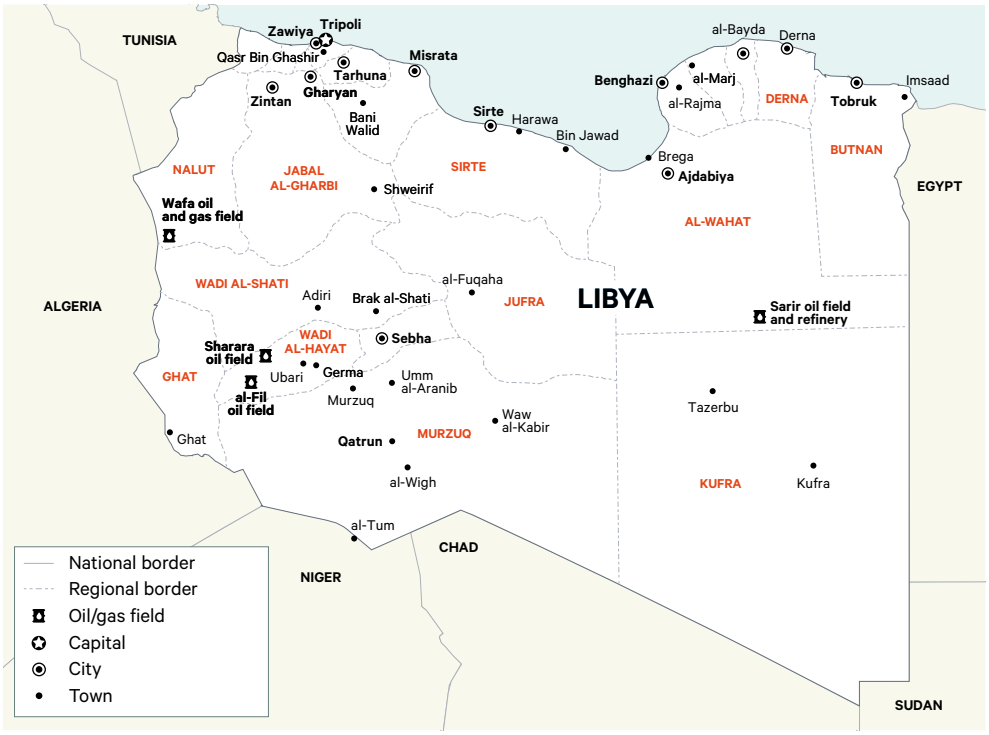
12 This research paper builds on and complements previous studies published by Chatham House: Eaton, T. (2018), *Libya's War Economy: Predation, Profiteering and State Weakness*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-04-12-libyas-war-economy-eaton-final.pdf; Eaton et al. (2020), *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014;* Eaton, T. (2021), *The Libyan Arab Armed Forces: A network analysis of Haftar's military alliance*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/libyan-arab-armed-forces/01-network-analysis-libyan-armed-groups.
13 All interviews were conducted on condition of anonymity.

02
Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan after 2011

Each city has developed its own narrative and conception of its role in the post-2011 period.

Map of Libya



The security apparatuses of Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan have had a major influence on post-2011 governance in Libya. Although the city of Zintan has around 60,000 residents, its forces occupied the capital, Tripoli, following the ouster of the Gaddafi regime, and they played a key role in the political battles that subsequently engulfed the Libyan transitional authorities. Misratan-led forces drove Zintani armed groups from the capital in 2014, leading to the administrative division of the country and sparking a chain of conflicts along the northwestern coast that Zintani forces viewed as an existential threat. Since 2019, Zawiyan forces have been at the heart of a tug of war between Libya's contending authorities, and have leveraged their position in return for material support to achieve supremacy over their local rivals.

To understand the structure of the security apparatuses in Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan, it is necessary to chart the political positioning of the cities' elites and the shifting allegiances of their armed groups, their commanders and their social networks. Armed groups from all three cities all fought on the side of the revolutionaries against the Gaddafi regime in 2011, but went on to fight on different sides in further conflicts in 2014 and in 2019–20. Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan have become important political power centres and military powers, making them influential players in the post-2011 political and security landscape.

There are distinct similarities in the experiences of the three cities in the 2011 war. Misrata built up significant military power in order to defend itself from a regime onslaught amid sustained street fighting. Residents of Zawiya ousted regime forces from the city in February 2011, only for the regime to recapture the city. The rebels' military commander was killed, and Zawiya then remained under regime control until August 2011, when rebel forces retook the city after intense fighting. In Zintan, military defectors and civilians came together to oust regime forces from the city in February 2011, subsequently, despite heavy bombardment, resisting an attempt by the regime to retake control there. Zintan became a strategic location and a key transit point for weapons and supplies for rebel forces, and its forces subsequently spearheaded the capture of Tripoli from the Gaddafi regime in August of that year.

Since this time, relations between Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan have waxed and waned, with each maintaining its own narrative of events. Zintani forces remained in Tripoli after Gaddafi was ousted, providing a springboard for Zintan's unprecedented influence on the national system of government. Forces from Zintan provided security for the General National Congress (GNC), and they enjoyed close relations with the National Forces Alliance and patronage from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The willingness of Zintani forces to reach an accommodation with elements of the former regime – for example by integrating armed personnel their forces and helping former regime figures escape Tripoli – brought them into dispute with other parts of the rebel movement. The bitter battle over who should be allowed to participate in post-revolutionary governance structures led to a schism, as the GNC pushed through a Political Isolation Law.

The Zintani narrative of the war of 2014 is one of betrayal, which has continuing resonance today. In 2014, Misratan politicians and armed groups were at the forefront of the development of the Libya Dawn alliance that ousted Zintani groups from Tripoli following disputed elections, sparking a renewed civil war. While

analysis of the 2014 conflict tends to focus on Tripoli, fighting also took place in the northwestern region, with Zintan's factions engaging from the neighbouring town of al-Rujban to R'as al-Jdir on the Tunisian border. A significant number of armed fighters and civilians displaced by the conflict relocated to Zintan. Zintani armed groups subsequently affiliated themselves predominantly with the Interim Government that was established in eastern Libya following the relocation of the House of Representatives.

Misrata's narrative of the 2014 war is that the city acted as the guardian of the revolution. Following the conflict, Misratan armed groups, and the city more broadly, aligned with the National Salvation Government (NSG) that established itself in Tripoli in the ensuing governance split. From its detractors' perspective, Misrata had sided with the Islamists in the GNC to support a coup against the winners of the recent elections. Yet, for its supporters and many in Misrata itself, the intervention aimed to prevent the return of authoritarianism under Haftar.[14] Elements from Misrata also supported groups fighting Haftar's 'Dignity' operation in eastern Libya, albeit largely with materiel rather than fighters.[15] Haftar has remained the city's antagonist ever since.

Zawiya's own narrative aligns with that of Misrata. While less influential in the revolutionary camp than Misrata, Zawiya had played an important role in the development of the Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room (LROR). Under the leadership of Shaaban Hadiya (also known as Abu Obeida al-Zawi), the LROR was formed in 2013 from Islamist armed groups from across the country. It had the clear objectives of ousting officials who had worked with the Gaddafi regime, and of forcing Zintani armed groups from the capital.

In the 2019–20 war for Tripoli, Misratan and Zawiyan forces united behind the Government of National Accord (GNA), which had been formed in December 2015 following the UN-mediated Libyan Political Agreement, while Zintani forces were split between backing Haftar's LAAF and support for the GNA. Zawiya's forces in particular were the target of significant outreach by Haftar's forces, but the city's actors ultimately coalesced against the LAAF. This schism within the revolutionary bloc has never fully healed.

A further split emerged following the dispute over the legitimacy of the GNU, which was formed through UN mediation and ratified in March 2021 to reunify Libya's divided authorities and to prepare the country for elections. The collapse of the election process and the subsequent recriminations led to the formation of the GNS, which was appointed by the House of Representatives in February 2022. As at late 2023, the allegiances of the main Zawiyan armed groups were split between the GNU and the GNS; the majority of Zintani armed groups appeared to be aligned with the GNS; and the majority of Misratan groups with the GNU.

14 Eaton, T. and Lagha, M. (2022), 'Libya's Bellwether City', *New Lines Magazine*, 1 September 2022, https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/libyas-bellwether-city.
15 Rahman, A. and Di Maio, M. (2020), *The Private Sector amid Conflict: The Case of Libya*, World Bank, https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1644-4.

03
The development of the post-2011 security apparatuses in the three cities

Armed factions in Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan are formed from social networks drawn from the local context. It is these features, rather than policy from the central state, that has shaped them.

The evolving relationship of Libya's armed groups to state authority must be studied in the context of the developing political, economic and security landscape in the country. Misratan, Zawiyan and Zintani armed groups have obtained state affiliation through the defence and interior ministries, as well as via direct relationships with the Presidency Council and the Libyan Intelligence Service. Elements of Zintan's security sector have also aligned themselves with Haftar's LAAF. Such institutional affiliations have in most cases proved weak and subject to change.

Armed groups from each of the three cities remain based on social networks. Seen through this lens, the changes in names of the groups, their shifting affiliations and reorganizations, and their influxes of funding shed light on the prevailing distribution of power in the country. Tracking these developments

has become increasingly complex. However, focusing on the positioning of key social constituencies and commanders reveals a clearer narrative, with the formal structures of the security sector reflecting local conditions. These dynamics show that durable institution-building in the security sector at national level remains elusive.

The Misratan security apparatus: social mobilization, restructuring and expansion

In Misrata, support for the goals of the revolution rather than formal state authority remains at the centre of the social contract between the community and its armed groups. Over the past decade, Misratan armed groups have led and engaged in conflicts across Libya, with hundreds of individuals fighting on various front lines for what they believed to be national causes. The majority of these Misratan fighters do not belong to the military, and do not necessarily have a sense of military hierarchy and command. Consequently, to mobilize their units effectively and maintain control military operations, Misratan commanders need societal support for their cause. For day-to-day operations in times of relative peace, the core state-affiliated elements of the Misratan security apparatuses respond to orders coming down the Tripoli-based official chain of command.

A number of initiatives have sought to formalize Misratan armed groups under the aegis of the Libyan state, albeit in a period where Misrata exerted significant influence over the state itself. This has led the security apparatus in Misrata to become more coherent since 2015, as the prevalence and the impact of activities by members of non-state-affiliated armed groups – including illegal arrests, checkpoints and the exercise of authority over citizens and government institutions – have diminished considerably. This transformation has been associated with attempts to professionalize armed individuals under military forces and Ministry of Interior agencies. Early efforts, via the establishment of the Libya Shield apparatus and the Third Force, ended in failure.[16]

Misrata's security apparatus has been subject to efforts at restructuring whereby commanders from the city have sought to install a military hierarchy and train personnel, although connections to the revolutionary groups remain firmly in place (see Table 1). The clearest examples of these attempts are the creation of Brigades 166 and 301, the Joint Operations Force (JOF) and the Counter Terrorism Force (CTF).

16 Formed in 2012, Libya Shield aimed to accommodate existing non-state armed groups under the state's aegis. In response to the death of a prominent revolutionary fighter, a military campaign led by Misrata's Libya Shield forces targeted the town of Bani Walid. These actions led to widespread criticism and effectively ended the project of professionalizing rebel groups under Libya Shield. Simultaneously with the formation of Libya Shield in 2012, hundreds of Misratans joined the Third Force. Many high school and university students went to join the operations of this new force in Sabha, Brak al-Shati, Sharara oil field and Jufra. The Third Force sought to expand the authority of the parallel GNS and to undermine armed groups affiliated with Haftar in the south following the 2014 war. These efforts focused particularly on Zintani groups stationed at al-Feel oil field and on Mohamed Ben Nayel's force at the Brak al-Shati airbase. In May 2017, the killing of approximately 140 LAAF-affiliated fighters in Brak al-Shati, alleged to have been carried out by elements of the Third Force in collaboration with some members of the Benghazi Defence Brigades, led to public outrage and to the removal of the Third Force's mandate. Libya Shield and the Third Force were considered resounding failures.

Table 1. Misratan-dominated state-affiliated forces and their origins

Year of formation	State-affiliated force	Location of HQ	Affiliation	Revolutionary group
2013	Joint Operations Force	Misrata	Presidency Council	Drawn from a mix of groups
2014	Al-Sumood Brigade	Zwara	No current affiliation	Al-Marsa Brigade
2015	Brigade 166	Misrata	Ministry of Defence	Nimr Brigade
2015	Brigade 301	Tripoli	Ministry of Defence	Halbous Brigade
2015	Special Support Force	Misrata	Ministry of Interior	First Security Group (2015)
2016	Al-Sumood Operations Room	Misrata	Presidency Council	Misrata Military Council-affiliated groups
2017	Counter Terrorism Force	Khums	Presidency Council	Drawn from a mix of revolutionary groups
2019	Al-Burkhan al-Ghadab Operations Room	Tripoli	Ministry of Defence	–
2019	Operations Room for the Protection of Sirte and Jufra	Abugrein	Presidency Council	Misrata Military Council

Source: Chatham House research.

Brigade 301 was formed from fighters affiliated with the Halbous Brigade in Tripoli in 2015.[17] The Halbous Brigade is a revolutionary armed group that defended the eastern areas of Misrata in 2011 and subsequently became one of the largest, best equipped and most organized brigades in the city. It played a significant role in the Libya Dawn operation in 2014, deploying to Tripoli to oust Zintani forces. Halbous was led by a cadre of five leading officers. One of them, Mohamed al-Haddad, was appointed to the command of the Central Military Zone in 2017, and a number of leading Misratan armed groups were brought under his command. Haddad was appointed chief of the general staff of the GNA in 2020. His influence stems not only from his official position but also from his connections to Halbous. It is said in the city that Misrata cannot go to war without Halbous.

17 Since its formation in 2017, the Defence-affiliated Brigade 301 has remained in strategic positions in Tripoli around the international airport. Brigade 301 went on to play a prominent role in the battle for Tripoli in 2019–20.

Brigade 166 was formed in 2015 to protect state institutions. At that time, most of its recruits were fighters from the Nimr Brigade, which had been a prominent revolutionary faction fighting on Misrata's eastern front lines in 2011. Like Brigade 301, the group has partly relied on its connections to revolutionary factions to maintain its influence.[18]

The JOF, which is responsible for counterterrorism operations, was founded in 2013 under the Ministry of Defence, before coming under the direct purview of the Presidency Council in 2016. Members first joined the group after an announcement was broadcast on Misrata FM radio about accepting new members to a state group. Headquartered in central Misrata, the JOF also contains members from other cities such as Khums and Zliten. The group is formed of fighters with a reputation for being 'well behaved', and who can be trusted to be part of a force intended to support and secure state institutions. When the GNA Presidency Council was formed, it placed the JOF under the direct command of then prime minister Fayez al-Sarraj. The JOF has since come to be regarded as one of the most effective and respected forces in Misrata.

Founded in 2017, the CTF emulated the JOF approach. It recruited fighters who had participated in the al-Bunyan al-Marsous operation against ISIS in Sirte in 2016. under the command of Mohamed al-Zain (who previously commanded an artillery battalion affiliated with the Central Military Zone). The CTF has since collaborated with international partners on counterterrorism operations, and is directly affiliated to the Presidency Council.[19]

A concerted effort has also been made to develop regular armed forces with Misratan recruits under the formal aegis of the Central Military Zone of the Ministry of Defence.

All four of these forces continue to draw, to differing degrees, on Misratan revolutionary armed formations. Crucially, they each maintain a military hierarchy within their units, and each force is being expanded via formal training programmes that are separate from the revolutionary factions. Members have received military training, and through their state affiliations Brigade 301, Brigade 166 and the CTF are entitled to receive military serial numbers.

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18 Mohamed al-Hsan is a prominent field commander within Brigade 166, and played a leading role during the al-Bunyan al-Marsous operation in Sirte (2016) and the al-Burkhan al-Ghadab operation in Tripoli (2019–21). He currently serves as the commander of the field operations room, acting as a point of contact between Brigade 166 and troops affiliated with Haftar in areas of south Sirte and Shweirif.

19 The CTF has two main units: a regular unit that consists of state military troops with military numbers and ranks, and a reservists auxiliary unit that consists of civilian fighters/members of non-state-affiliated armed groups. In the beginning, the CTF mostly accepted individuals who had participated in the al-Bunyan al-Marsous operation against ISIS in Sirte in 2016. But it subsequently established a training centre in the city of Khums and allowed others to join under the auspices of the Defence. Since 2017, the CTF has been graduating batches of new troops after a series of practical and theoretical training courses. Yet, despite having this training centre, it has continued to assign critical missions to its reservists' unit commanded by Mukhtar al-Jhawi, who is also the commander of the non-state-affiliated al-Bukhari Brigade.

A concerted effort has also been made to develop regular armed forces with Misratan recruits under the formal aegis of the Central Military Zone of the Ministry of Defence. These formal elements containing Misratans recruited since 2011 are not, however, believed to be influential outside the administrative circles of the Central Military Zone, which is responsible for Libya's central region (including Misrata). In 2019, in response to Haftar's Tripoli offensive, armed forces that would previously have been expected to be integrated under the Central Military Zone were instead affiliated to the Presidency Council, seen as facilitating more direct funding relationships.

The Central Military Zone has been unable to obtain significant funding from the state. It has played no significant role in security developments over recent years. Key informant interviews indicated that these formal groups would continue to be overshadowed by hybrid forces such as the JOF and others that have formal elements but retain connections to the revolutionary groups, as well as by the revolutionary groups, as there is a continuing perceived need to remain on a state of alert to counter threats by LAAF-affiliated armed groups.

Ministry of Interior-affiliated forces have been able to consolidate their authority within Misrata since 2015. They are now confident enough to provide law and order on the streets and to enforce judicial orders without the need to be supported by armed groups, as was the case previously. Defence groups are not present on the streets of the city, and neither military institutions nor non-state-affiliated armed groups interfere in regular civil affairs. Consequently, unlike in many other cities including Tripoli, revolutionary armed groups play no role in the day-to-day provision of policing in Misrata, nor are there checkpoints controlled by armed factions. The Misrata Security Directorate, affiliated with the Ministry of Interior, provides policing within the city, running police stations from al-Dafnia gate in the west of the city to Abugrein in the east.

The Security Directorate does, however, seek support from both the JOF, which continues to provide a counterterrorism function, and the Special Support Force (SSF).[20] This form of interagency cooperation is encouraging. The SSF is considered to be one of the most effective Ministry of Interior state forces in Misrata and central Libya. It was founded in 2015 by the city's municipal council, and was then known as the First Security Division. The group's main duty initially was to secure the Misrata Medical Centre and to stop armed individuals from entering it and abusing medical staff. Its perceived legitimacy enabled it to address and reduce such violations. The SSF was commanded by a prominent young Salafi figure, Anwar Swaisi. During Haftar's military assault on Tripoli in 2019–20,

20 Examples of cooperation with these forces include the securing of the coastal road between Tripoli and Misrata during the conflict in southern Tripoli, and drug and crime control missions. The JOF and SSF emerged after the city suffered increases in the crime rate and in violations against state institutions and public properties, including hospitals, between 2011 and 2015. The JOF has also conducted counterterrorism missions and implemented arrest warrants by the attorney-general in Misrata, as well as in Bani Walid, Khums, Sirte, Tripoli and other areas. The group often conducts missions and patrols in cooperation with the SSF.

the force was reconstituted by the Ministry of Interior, and it became the SSF under the Ministry of Interior's General Directorate of Central Support. The SSF is now completely commanded by the Ministry of Interior.[21]

With strong social connections to the local community, the JOF and the SSF are considered to be among the most powerful and reliable state security agencies in Misrata. The Ministry of Interior, as well as judicial authorities, have been cooperating with both in critical missions related to counterterrorism, countering drug-trafficking and restoring public property. However, there have been reports of some members of the JOF having allegedly committed human rights violations on occasion against journalists and activists.[22]

The enduring importance of revolutionary factions

Prominent revolutionary factions within Misrata have continued to eschew a formal affiliation to the state. These include the al-Mahjoub Brigade and the al-Marsa Brigade, among others. The al-Mahjoub Brigade was established in 2011 by rebels from one of Misrata's largest neighbourhoods, Zawiat al-Mahjoub, in the west of the city, after they gained control of the neighbourhood from Gaddafi-supporting troops. The group then focused on the front lines west of Misrata, starting from the area of Addafnia, moving to Zliten and then on to Tripoli and Sirte. Al-Mahjoub subsequently took part in all major armed conflicts in the central area of Libya and in Tripoli, including Libya Dawn (2014), al-Bunyan al-Marsous (2016–17) and al-Burkhan al-Ghadab (2019–21). Compared with Halbous, the al-Mahjoub Brigade is less organized and more impulsive about joining armed conflicts that do not directly affect the local security of Misrata. Like Halbous, al-Mahjoub is more influential in times of war: it does not play an official role in the city. But unlike Halbous, it does not have a state-affiliated sister force. It is, however, capable of significant deployments, and its influence should not be disregarded. For example, the Sirte Security and Protection Force, established following the al-Bunyan al-Marsous operation, was mainly formed by groups belonging to al-Mahjoub (most prominently the Shnina Brigade).

Prominent revolutionary factions within Misrata have continued to eschew a formal affiliation to the state.

The al-Marsa Brigade is effectively split into three main factions: al-Marsa al-Kubra, commanded by Salim al-Zoufri; al-Marsa 06, under the leadership of Salah Badi; and Death Company, commanded by Khaled Abu Aoud. Al-Marsa was formed

21 Before it was reconstituted by the Ministry of Interior in 2020, the SSF was seen as monopolized by perceived Salafi elements led by Anwar Swaisi. However, since Swaisi's departure the group's leadership is no longer considered to be Salafi. The focus of the force is often on missions and patrols related to counterterrorism, drug control and securing state institutions, in addition to supporting the police and Ministry of Interior security directorates in situations that require special task forces (such as dealing with armed individuals on public roads). The most significant semi-combat/frontline mission that the SSF was deployed for was during the al-Burkhan al-Ghadab operation (2019–21), when it established checkpoints and patrols over the coastal road between Misrata and Tripoli in response to concerns about banditry and kidnapping by some members of the al-Kaniyat group (9th Brigade).
22 Amnesty International (2022), 'Libya: State-financed militia must be held to account for extrajudicial execution in Misratah', 31 March 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/03/libya-state-financed-militia-must-be-held-to-account-for-extrajudicial-execution-in-misratah.

in 2011 by rebels mainly from the al-Ramla and Garara neighbourhoods of Misrata. While Gaddafi's troops did not manage to reach areas close to the central coast, such as al-Ramla and Garara, rebels from those areas also participated in the battles on Misrata's eastern front lines.

Elements of al-Marsa received a state affiliation under the NSG in 2014–15, but they seem to have lost this following the appointment of the GNA. In May 2015, the al-Marsa 03 was positioned in Sirte power plant and was the last group to withdraw from the city after members of the NSG and the GNC refused to support Misrata armed groups in their conflict with ISIS.

Zawiya's security apparatus: family ties, local competition and profit

The forces active in Zawiya consist of two main – and rivalrous – axes of power, based principally on familial ties and neighbourhoods, which have also effectively controlled the means through which the Zawiyan security sector has obtained affiliation with the Libyan state. The first is the central Zawiya axis of Mahmoud Bin Rajab and Mohamed Bahrun, which brings together factions from the Awlad Saqr tribe and family-based groupings located in the centre of the city. The second axis is built on the Abu Hamyra tribe, under the leadership of armed groups headed by the Abu Zariba and Khushlaf families, that control southern Zawiya and the city's crucial oil refinery. These axes continue to vie with one another for dominance in the city. Their disputes have at times spilled over into violence, yet they have sought to avoid large-scale confrontation in order to preserve a degree of social stability. In December 2023, at the time of writing, these conflicts remain ongoing following a GNU-led bombing campaign in May–June 2023, and are continuing to reshape Zawiya's security apparatus. The situation is set to remain volatile, and further reconfigurations should be expected. However, it should be noted that any 'victory' for one axis over the other is not likely to be absolute, as the rival groups' social constituencies remain resident in their respective areas of the city.

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Unlike in Misrata, the development of armed groups in Zawiya has been forged in competition over economic interests. It is the actors themselves who have dictated the terms on which they have become affiliated with the state, as politicians have sought to reward Zawiya's armed groups for their loyalty

with resources and legitimacy by integrating them into the state structure. However, efforts to professionalize local forces or to break their existing chains of command as part of this integration have foundered.

The Zawiyan security forces are dominated by key figures who command the major forces in the city, which remain permanently mobilized. Compared with the situation in Misrata and Zintan, local community members and leaders in Zawiya are less able to check the behaviour of the city's armed groups.

The central Zawiya axis

The central Zawiya axis includes several figures who are viewed as having close connections to Islamist-leaning factions associated with the former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) commander Shaaban Hadiya.[23] Hadiya led the LROR, formed in 2013 from Islamist armed groups from across the country. All major Zawiyan revolutionary brigades joined the LROR, with their commanders having close relationships with Hadiya. Among these were Mahmoud Bin Rajab's Faruq Brigade, which also had Mohamed Bahrun as one of its members, and Othman al-Lahab's Silaa Brigade. The Nasr Brigade, which would later form a key part of the rival Abu Hamyra network, also joined with the LROR.

Changes emerged in the balance of power between the armed groups in Zawiya as a result of political changes at the national level and of power struggles at the local level. A key part of the Libya Dawn coalition, the LROR enjoyed significant influence while the Government of National Salvation operated in Tripoli. The formation of the GNA at Skheirat in December 2015 led to a decline in the influence of the Zawiyan armed groups.

Three developments in 2017 significantly changed the Zawiyan security sector. The first was the ouster of the LIFG's leadership from Tripoli, which illustrated its reduced influence. Hadiya subsequently relocated to Istanbul. Second, fighting among rival armed groups in the centre of Zawiya escalated. In June 2017, Ibrahim Hneesh, the 20-year-old leader of a group of local militants, was killed during a gunfight with the militia of the Khadrawi family.[24] His death triggered further fighting among competing armed groups. The third development, also in June of that year, was the arrest in Saudi Arabia of Mahmoud Bin Rajab, who was later transferred back to Libya and placed under LAAF detention.[25]

The violence in the city, along with Bin Rajab's absence, created the space for Mohamed Bahrun (also known as 'Al-Far', or 'the Mouse') to emerge as a new leader. As a result, Bahrun's First Security Division attracted members of rival

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23 The relative influence of Hadiya is open to question. In 2023, he returned to Libya and became a vocal critic of Abdel Hamid al-Dabaiba, the GNU prime minister with whom most of his former allies in armed groups – such as Bahrun and Bin Rajab – are now aligned. His campaign, the 'Resolve Uprising Movement', claims to seek the removal of Dabaiba and the GNU together with the UN Special Envoy, and an end to corruption. Hadiya participated in protests in Zawiya in July 2023 as part of the movement. But his positioning did not persuade leaders such as Bahrun and Bin Rajab to renounce allegiance to Dabaiba. See Libyan Center for Security and Military Studies (2023), 'Movement of July 27: To Where?', 27 July 2023, https://lcsms.info/en/movement-of-july-27-to-where.

24 Cousins, M. (2017), 'Clashes reignite in Zawia as both sides reinforce', Libya Herald, 6 June 2017, https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/06/06/clashes-reignite-in-zawia-as-both-sides-reinforce.

25 Wehrey, F. (2021), 'A Libyan Revenant', *New Lines Magazine*, 14 July 2021, https://newlinesmag.com/first-person/a-libyan-revenant.

factions and expanded significantly.[26] Bahrun and the Awlad Saqr armed groups, such as the Silaa Brigade, continued to compete with the armed groups of the Abu Hamyra tribe for primacy in the city, and for a leading role in lucrative markets for goods.

In 2019, the return of Bin Rajab and the events surrounding the LAAF's offensive on Tripoli transformed the situation once again. Following his release by the LAAF, Bin Rajab returned to Zawiya after reportedly indicating to Khalifa Haftar's forces that he would likely support the LAAF in its attempts to capture Tripoli.[27] However, Bin Rajab instead remobilized Zawiyan armed groups that had been active in the 2014 conflict from the Awlad Saqr, along with factions in the central Zawiya area that had been competing against the Abu Hamyra armed groups. The Zawiya Security Directorate-affiliated First Security Division, led by Bahrun, and Force III Support Force, led by Mohamed Ali Khalifa Sulaiman, joined Bin Rajab's forces.

The forces aligned with Bin Rajab were formalized within the Ministry of Defence as a result of their support for the GNA against the LAAF's offensive. The GNA's then defence minister, Salah al-Din Namroush, a high-ranking Zawiyan military officer, emerged as a key figure in this period. Namroush is the formal 'face' of Bin Rajab's faction, and is widely known to have aligned himself with Bin Rajab's directives.[28] While Namroush fronted engagement with Turkey, whose forces' entry into Libya had swung the tide of the war, Bin Rajab is reported by some with a close knowledge of the security sector to have been an important interlocutor with Turkish forces. Namroush left office with the GNA in March 2021.[29] Bin Rajab's forces were formalized as the 52nd Infantry Brigade in July 2020 via a resolution issued by Namroush in his capacity as defence minister. The al-Naqliya Martyrs' Brigade, formed of elements from central and northern Zawiya that fought in the campaign against the LAAF, was also formalized under the Western Military Zone.

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26 The exact origins of the First Security Division are unclear. There are reports of an armed group operating under this name from 2011, and a First Security Prison has been administered by the group since this time. But it was following a bout of violent conflict in 2017–19 within Zawiya that the First Security Division appears to have emerged as a more substantive group and Bahrun established himself as a key leader.

27 The mayor of western Zawiya, Abdel Karim al-Abah, was said to have been pivotal to the negotiation for the release of Bin Rajab. Abah agreed to allow Haftar's forces to establish a camp on the western front of the city in return for the release of Bin Rajab, utilizing the connections of his son, Qais al-Abah, to the city's armed groups to negotiate the compromise. Haftar's offensive, launched in April 2019, depended on gaining access to Tripoli from the coastal road via Zawiya, utilizing the base that Abah had permitted to be created. Zawiyan forces dealt a critical blow to Haftar's campaign by capturing 128 Haftar-aligned fighters between Tripoli and Zawiya in the opening hours of the operation. This happened following an agreement between the Zawiyan armed groups brokered by Bin Rajab, who has since remained a strident anti-Haftar voice. See Libya Al-Ahrar (2019), 'مصادر متطابقة: 128 مسلحا يتبعون لحفتر يقعون أسرى' [Multiple Sources: 128 Armed Men Affiliated with Haftar are Captured], 5 April 2019, https://libyaalahrar.tv/2019/04/05/مصادر-متطابقة-128-مسلحا-يتبعون-لحفتر-يقع.

28 Chatham House research interviews with security officials, September 2022.

29 Following its appointment in March 2021, the GNU left the post of defence minister vacant, with Abdel Hamid al-Dabaiba holding the position on what was supposed to be an interim basis. To secure the support of the central Zawiya axis, Namroush was appointed as the commander of the newly created West Coast Military Zone. Previously, Ministry of Defence forces operating under the General Command in the Zawiya area fell under the authority of the Western Military Zone, which was led by the prominent Zintani commander Osama al-Juweili. The creation of the West Coast Military Zone enabled the central Zawiya axis to have greater control over access to resources and more authority within the General Command's structures.

Table 2. Zawiyan forces affiliated to the Government of National Unity

Year of formation	State-affiliated force	Location of HQ	Affiliation	Tribal affiliation	Origins
~2014	Criminal Investigations Unit	Zawiya	Zawiya Security Directorate (Ministry of Interior)	Mixed	Rebranded from the First Security Division in 2020, which also drew former fighters from the Khadrawi and Hneesh units
2019	Force III	Zawiya	Zawiya Security Directorate (Ministry of Interior)	Awlad Saqr	Faruq Brigade, recruitment of local fighters in vicinity of the Zawiya refinery
2020	District Support Force	Zawiya	Zawiya Security Directorate (Ministry of Interior)	Mixed	First Security Division, recruitment from Sabriya area, Surman
2020	52nd Infantry Brigade	Zawiya	West Coast Military Zone (Ministry of Defence)	Mixed	Formed from revolutionary-era battalions, such as the al-Faruq Brigade and the Mohamed Kilani Brigade, and demobilized fighters
2019	Al-Naqliya Martyrs Brigade	Tripoli	West Coast Military Zone (Ministry of Defence)	Mixed	Volunteers from central and northern Zawiya who fought against the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) in 2019–20
2021	Force II for Support and Stability	Tripoli	West Coast Military Zone (Ministry of Defence)	Mixed	Drawn from Bin Rajab forces, formalized in 2021
2022	Office for Counterterrorism and Combating Destructive Acts	Tripoli	Libyan Intelligence Service	Mixed	Drawn from Bahrun's forces who transferred from the Criminal Investigations Unit

Following its involvement in the campaign against Khalifa Haftar's forces in Tripoli, the forces under the control of Mohamed Bahrun were formalized as a Criminal Investigations Unit (CIU) under the aegis of the Zawiya Security Directorate, as part of the Ministry of Interior. In 2020, the head of the Zawiya Security Directorate, Ali al-Lafi, recognized the status of the Bahrun's forces, which had been operating as an informal 'support' force for some time.[30]

However, these institutional relationships did not define the scope and nature of Bahrun's actions. Bahrun would subsequently use his forces to support the head of the Libyan Intelligence Service (LIS), Hussein Ayeb, in the latter's struggle for control of the LIS amid challenges from Tripoli-based armed groups. This support for Ayeb led to Bahrun's appointment to the new position of head of the Office for Counterterrorism and Combating Destructive Acts.[31]

30 In addition to the CIU, three other distinct groups emerged from Bahrun's faction. Force III was formed in 2019 as an armed group that brought together a small number of militants from the Awlad Saqr tribe under Mohamed Ali Khalifa Sulaiman (known as 'Charlie'). The force was established to incorporate members of the Awlad Saqr tribe who were living near the Zawiya refinery, ostensibly in order to provide security for that area.
31 When he left the CIU, Bahrun handed over its command to a long-time associate. Bahrun kept his main headquarters in the Olympic Club in central Zawiya – though he has since sought to relocate to Tripoli – and held on to many vehicles and weapons, as well as transferring 300 active members of the CIU to his new agency. The CIU was left with a limited number of cars, weapons and non-armed members. As a result, it is now seen as a largely inactive force.

Since the period of data collection for this paper, the already tense situation in Zawiya has escalated significantly. In April 2023, clashes broke out between the forces of Bahrun and Hassan Abu Zariba after the reported killing of a member of each force.[32] Subsequently, in May and June, a series of GNU drone strikes targeted facilities in Zawiya (as well as Zuwara and Warshefana) that included buildings linked to the Abu Hamyra axis.[33] In the aftermath of this campaign, the GNU has sought to place the West Coast Military Zone – dominated by the central Zawiya axis commanders – in charge of previously Abu Hamyra-controlled areas, such as the critical Zawiya refinery.[34] Illustrating the importance of the central Zawiya axis to the GNU, Namroush was appointed Deputy Chief of Staff of the Libyan armed forces in November 2023.[35]

The Abu Hamyra axis

Zawiya's second axis of power is generally seen as being built on the Abu Hamyra tribe. Key players in the city are drawn from this tribe, notably the Abu Zariba and the Khushlaf families. In both of these families, three brothers have divided power, influence and positions among themselves. The two sets of brothers are cousins. Yet these groups should not be considered purely tribal because recruitment into them has not been limited to family or tribal connections.

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Ali, Essam and Hassan Abu Zariba have steadily accumulated power and influence in Zawiya since the overthrow of the regime. They formed the Abu Surrah Martyrs' Brigade in 2012, and the group has been seen as controlling southern Zawiya.[36] Its strategic partnership with the Nasr Brigade (which is also from the Abu Hamyra and controls the Zawiya refinery) allowed the Abu Surrah Martyrs' Brigade to dominate some local trading markets. The Abu Hamyra's competition with rival Awlad Saqr armed groups is seen as having become more violent, particularly since the campaign against the LAAF drew to a close and fresh disputes over central government emerged.

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32 Zaptia, S. (2023), 'Deadly militia clashes in Zawia – another short term ceasefire reached but underlying causes persist', Libya Herald, 29 April 2023, https://libyaherald.com/2023/04/deadly-militia-clashes-in-zawia-another-short-term-ceasefire-reached-but-underlying-causes-persist.
33 Reuters (2023), 'Libya's Tripoli government targets more western towns with drone strikes', 2 June 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/libyas-tripoli-government-targets-more-western-towns-with-drone-strikes-2023-06-02.
34 Al-Wasat (2023), 'The Public Prosecutor: The Commander of the Support Company was imprisoned on charges of facilitating fuel smuggling' [in Arabic], 13 August 2023, https://alwasat.ly/news/libya/408265.
35 Libya al-Ahrar (2023), 'Namroush is Deputy Chief of Staff, Military Assignments in the West' [in Arabic], 16 November 2023, https://www.libyaakhbar.com/libya-news/2268267.html.
36 Chatham House interviews with security officials from Zawiya, June 2023.

The Stability Support Apparatus (SSA) was established by a resolution of the Presidency Council of the GNA in January 2021, at the request of a coalition of the Abu Hamyra and the Tripoli-based Abu Slim Security Unit. These groups pressured the GNA to form a joint force that would bring together armed groups from Tripoli and Zawiya. The GNA's resolution included appointing Hassan Abu Zariba, the commander of the Abu Surrah Martyrs' Brigade, as the deputy head of the SSA. Hassan Abu Zariba was responsible for establishing and overseeing a branch of the SSA in the cities west of Tripoli, from Zawiya to al-Ajaylat. He also incorporated other armed groups within the SSA, under the Abu Surrah Martyrs' Brigade: among these were the al-Ajaylat Martyrs' Brigade and the 55th Infantry Brigade, which controlled the municipalities of al-Zahra, Ma'amoura and al-Mayi in neighbouring Warshefana, southwest of Tripoli. As a result, the Abu Surrah Martyrs' Brigade became the main force from which the SSA was established. From the end of 2021, Hassan Abu Zariba expanded his network of alliances in Zawiya and began to build an alliance between the SSA and the Nasr Brigade, with which the Abu Zariba family has been aligned for years.

However, a rift subsequently emerged between the Abu Zaribas and the commander of the SSA's Tripoli elements, Abdel Ghani Belkacem al-Kikli (known as Gneiwa).[37] Their conflicting stances became clear in May 2022, when the Abu Zaribas and their coalition split off to support the GNS, which had been appointed by the House of Representatives. Essam Abu Zariba was appointed minister of the interior in the GNS, and Ali Abu Zariba, a member of the House of Representatives, became close to Fathi Bashagha, the GNS prime minister. Gneiwa sided with the GNU, led by Abdel Hamid al-Dabaiba. The SSA is said to have received more than LYD130 million from the GNU.[38]

Later that month, when Bashagha sought to enter Tripoli, elements of the SSA fought on opposite sides. Gneiwa supported the GNU, and the Abu Zaribas sent armoured vehicles to support the GNS. The Abu Zaribas' support for Bashagha has limited their opportunities to gain a different legal standing that would enable them to give up the SSA name.

While the above-mentioned GNU bombing campaign in Zawiya claimed that the strikes targeted criminals in these areas, their initial focus within Libya was seen as political. The targeting was interpreted as messaging to the Abu Hamyra axis on the risks it was running in its continued opposition to the GNU.[39] Subsequent to the strikes, in addition to the GNU placing the West Coast Military Zone in formal charge, the attorney-general announced that the commander of the Support Unit (the official name for the Nasr Brigade under its formal affiliation with the Petroleum Facilities Guard) had been detained pending investigation for 'facilitating fuel smuggling'.[40] At the time of writing, however, there is

37 In Tripoli, Gneiwa is also the commander of the Abu Slim Central Security Unit. As Gneiwa's deputy, Hassan Abu Zariba commands the SSA's Western Region. Abu Zariba's forces provided military support for Gneiwa during the security tensions in 2021 between the SSA in Tripoli and rival militias.
38 GNU Council of Ministers, decision no. 185 (2022). Seen by Chatham House researchers.
39 Herbert, M., Horsely, R. and Badi, E. (2023), *Illicit Economies and Peace and Security in Libya*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, July 2023, p. 8, https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Matt-Herbert-et-al-Illicit-economies-and-peace-and-security-in-Libya-GI-TOC-July-2023-1.pdf.
40 Al-Wasat (2023), 'The Public Prosecutor: The Commander of the Support Company was imprisoned on charges of facilitating fuel smuggling'.

no evidence to suggest that Mohamed Khushlaf, the Nasr Brigade commander, was detained or remains in detention.[41] These developments indicate that Zawiya's security space will continue to be contested, with no clear resolution in sight.

Zintan's security apparatus: expansion and protection of local interests, and varying interpretations of the revolutionary cause

From a unified position in favour of the revolution in 2011, Zintan's security landscape has since fractured, with parallel processes of integration with eastern- and western-based authorities. Such affiliations have been largely determined by the political positioning of key Zintani commanders and their networks as part of a process of deal-making. This has led to a fragmented and confused security apparatus. Based on their current affiliations, Zintan's armed groups can be broadly divided into four factions: pro-GNU, pro-LAAF, groups loyal to the former Gaddafi regime, and neutrals. However, there is overlap among them. Some groups have taken pro-LAAF and pro-Gaddafi positions simultaneously, while others remain technically part of GNU-affiliated forces even though they do not recognize the GNU. The degree to which these affiliations have fluctuated illustrates the weakness of the groups' ties to governing authorities.

The fragmentation of Zintan's security sector after 2014 reflects the distinctive political positioning of the city.

The fragmentation of Zintan's security sector after 2014 reflects the distinctive political positioning of the city. Zintan was a bulwark of the 2011 revolution, but it has also been willing to engage with former regime elements and take a softer line on the return of state officials, in contrast with the hardline constituencies of Misrata and Zawiya. Consequently, seeking to dissect the Zintani security services along ideological lines is imperfect. Zintani armed groups might be described as pro- or counter-revolution, and Islamist or non-Islamist. Yet the pro-revolutionary groups have entered a coalition of sorts with the LAAF, which is dominated by counter-revolutionaries. The Madkhali-Salafists,[42] meanwhile, have consistently opposed the Muslim Brotherhood's political project.

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41 Chatham House interviews with residents of Zawiya, December 2023.
42 Madkhali-Salafis are adherents of the Saudi cleric Rabee al-Madkhali, although they do not self-identify as Madkhalis. Madkhalis are typically seen as 'quietist' Salafis who focus on spreading the faith (daawa), privileging obedience to the ruler and neither employing violence against rulers nor participating in institutional politics. However, the lines between characterizations of Salafis are blurred. For an analysis of these dynamics, see Collombier, V. (2020), *Salafi Politics: 'Political' and 'Quietist' Salafis in the Struggle for the Libyan State,* Research Project Report, Fiesole: European University Institute, https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69113/QM-02-20-018-EN-N.pdf; and International Crisis Group (2019), *Addressing the Rise of Libya's Madkhali-Salafis*, Middle East and North Africa Report No 200, Brussels: International Crisis Group, p. 10, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/addressing-rise-libyas-madkhali-salafis.

The ZMC and the revolution

Despite splits since the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, the enduring importance of the Zintan Revolutionaries' Military Council (ZMC) as a military operations room and critical social forum for the city's armed groups illustrates Zintan's continuing allegiance to the 2011 revolution. The ZMC was established early in the uprising to command all the military forces and revolutionaries from Zintan and the surrounding area who volunteered to fight. Its influence soon expanded to controlling a large number of other military councils, and its model was reproduced in other locations. The ZMC was aligned with the non-Islamist current in Libyan politics, and only accepted recruits who could demonstrate that they had no affiliation to the former regime.[43] Strongly hierarchical, it initially consisted of 23 Nafusa mountain (the mountainous area within which Zintan is located) militia groups, and it was viewed as one of the most powerful and well-organized groups in Libya.[44]

A series of defections and the realignment of some groups with Haftar following the 2014 war diminished the ZMC's influence. As a result, there have been major attempts to dismantle and reconfigure the ZMC. It still exists, however, and its leaders still have good connections with different social, political and military actors in the Nafusa mountain region. The ZMC retains the support of a number of armed groups, most of which are formally affiliated to other authorities. It has participated in all the wars in which the Zintan tribes have engaged, providing weapons, ammunition and fighters.

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The ZMC has also had a prominent role in determining who from Zintan could run for political positions. At the same time, state authorities are viewed as having offered positions to figures from Zintan to ensure the ongoing support of the ZMC. The appointment of Osama al-Juweili as defence minister in 2012 was viewed as particularly notable in this regard. Perceptions of the broader political influence of the ZMC have been reinforced by the fact that the House of Representatives has five members from Zintan, even though only two seats are nominally allocated to the city.[45] In addition, two members of the State Council also have significant support from the ZMC.[46]

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43 Landinfo (2014), 'Libya: Militias, Tribes and Islamists', 19 December 2014, https://www.landinfo.no/asset/3025/1/3025_1.pdf.
44 The ZMC was first led by Mukhtar Fernana, then by Mukhtar Shahub, and then by Osama al-Juweili who became defence minister in 2012. Juweili retained his influence over the ZMC and was seen to be the power behind it. Abdulsalam Abu Sitta, who headed the ZMC following Juweili's government appointment, was killed in the 2019–20 war for Tripoli. Abu Sitta was a close confidant of Juweili, and the two men were closely aligned. The ZMC was then led by Abdul Hafiz Baziz, and it is currently led by Fathi al-Ghazil, also known as 'Zghifendou'. Both also have good relations with Juweili.
45 The Zintani MPs are Tareq al-Ashtar, Abdul Salam Nasia, Musab al-Abed, Omar Qarmil and Fahmi al-Tawati.
46 Khalifa al-Madighou, one of the most important members of the State Council for Zintan, and Hadi al-Amyani, the brother of the current mayor.

Table 3. Key armed groups affiliated with the Zintan Military Council

Years active	Armed group	Location of activity	Commander	Relationship with ZMC
2011–14	Al-Qaaqaa Brigade	Tripoli	Othman Mlegta	Defunct
2011–14	Sawa'iq Brigade	Tripoli	Emad al-Trabelsi	Defunct
2011–14	Al-Madani Brigade	Tripoli	Ibrahim al- Madani	Defunct
2011 to date	Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Brigade	Southern Libya	Al-Ajmi al-Atiri	Defected to LAAF in 2014; split from LAAF in 2017
2011 to date	Al-Samah Group	Northwestern coast	Ismail al-Samah	Defected to LAAF in 2014
2011 to date	Nasser al-Hallak Brigade	Northwestern coast	Riyad al-Hubail and Mohamed Kamour	Member of ZMC
2011 to date	Al-Gurj Battalion/ Rayayna Petroleum Facilities Guard	Northwestern coast	Mohamed al- Gurj	Defected to LAAF in 2014
2014–20	Committee of 200	Zintan	Marwan Saqr	Defunded by ZMC after support for LAAF in 2019 war

Source: Chatham House research.

The role of key commanders: Osama al-Juweili and Emad al-Trabelsi

As in Zawiya, the positioning of key security figures is critical. Realignments of Zintani security structures affiliated with Tripoli-based authorities have been negotiated through Osama al-Juweili and Emad al-Trabelsi, with both acting as focal points for the pursuit of Zintani interests through state authorities in the capital.

Osama al-Juweili has been at the forefront of Zintan's security sector since 2011, and was seen as a main driver of Zintani influence in government until 2022. As GNC minister of defence in 2012–13, he signed off on the formation of several new units to absorb Zintan's fighters, and he appointed dozens of military attachés, the vast majority of whom were from Zintan, to Libya's official diplomatic missions abroad.[47]

47 Lacher, W. (2020), *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict*, London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi and Sydney: I.B. Tauris, p. 26.

Juweili led Zintani forces in the 2014 fighting. These forces were divided into three main branches: a formal military one led by Idris Madi; a quasi-civilian one led by Abdelsalam Abu Sitta and the ZMC; and a religious one, responsible for teaching and ideology, led by Tariq al-Durman (also known as Abu al-Khatab). All these actors came together in a Joint Operations Room, sometimes called the Information Room, which constituted the main leadership at that time and was run by Juweili. Following the conflict, Madi's military branch, along with Durman and his adherents, affiliated themselves with the LAAF.

Following the ouster of Zintani forces from Tripoli in 2014, Juweili retained his connections with the revolutionary camp. In June 2017, his appointment as commander of the Western Military Region of the GNA-aligned Armed Forces signalled the rapprochement of Zintani revolutionary factions with the Tripoli-based authorities. Although he was technically under the authority of the Presidency Council of the GNA, in reality Juweili was able to operate autonomously.

Juweili was a critical figure for the GNA in its attempts to marshal support to counter the LAAF's offensive on Tripoli in 2019–20. He was instrumental in ensuring that Zawiyan groups opposed Haftar's initial advance on Tripoli. Juweili headed the Western Military Region's Joint Operations Room – formed in May 2019 – a key command centre in the war for Tripoli. The Joint Operations Room was a critical structure for the GNA-affiliated forces and for integrating fighters and militias under the command of the General Staff. Following the defeat of Haftar's forces, Juweili's Joint Operations Room incorporated former military leaders holding a military rank. It took control over the al-Aziziya road and of the April 7 Military Camp in Tripoli, and also secured the Batin al-Jabal road between al-Jabal al-Gharbi and Tripoli. The Joint Operations Room trained batches of recruits and created a site in the Surman Reserve area as a primary military location and administrative building. Its military force expanded after fighters joined from the Amazigh regions, especially from al-Qalaa, Nalut, Jadu and Gharyan. An armed brigade from al-Asaba also joined, as did soldiers from the Riqdalin, al-Jumayl, Zaltan, al-Ajaylat, Sabratah and Surman areas.

Following the collapse of the 2021 elections process, Juweili backed Fathi Bashagha's GNS, formed by the House of Representatives in February 2022.[48] In response, the GNU fired him from his post as commander of the Western Military Zone. Juweili rejected his removal, joining a campaign to replace the GNU in the summer of 2022.[49]

Amid these events, Emad al-Trabelsi, a fellow commander from Zintan, supplanted Juweili by becoming the primary conduit for support for the city through the Tripoli authorities. He rose to prominence following the 2011 overthrow

48 At the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in November 2020, Juweili had aligned himself with Bashagha and Agila Saleh on a political list. But the list was defeated by Dabaiba in controversial circumstances.
49 Juweili's forces suffered significant losses in their attempts to enter Tripoli, including many of their most experienced fighters. They were in significant part made up of fighters from the Tebu and Tuareg communities, leading to widespread allegations that Juweili was employing mercenaries. Chatham House interviews with Zintani and Tripoli-based security sources, March 2023.

of the Gaddafi regime, establishing himself in Tripoli.[50] Following the expulsion of Zintani forces from the capital, Trabelsi returned to the western mountains before reaching an accommodation with the House of Representatives and Haftar in 2015. In 2016, the eastern-based Interim Government of Abdullah al-Thani appointed Trabelsi as head of a new Special Operations Force. The following year, he was appointed head of a joint security room affiliated with the House of Representatives.

The GNA wrested Trabelsi's allegiance back to the Tripoli-based authorities, bolstering its support in Zintan. In July 2018, prime minister Fayez al-Serraj appointed Trabelsi to head the newly created General Security Service, which allowed him to incorporate his fighters from the Joint Operations Force under the GNA. The General Security Service was supported by the GNA as a means of checking the power of Tripoli's own armed groups. Trabelsi's General Security Service played no significant role in the 2019–20 war for Tripoli, however, focusing instead on retaining its physical position in the capital. Despite his limited role in the fighting, Trabelsi was appointed deputy head of the Libyan Intelligence Service in September 2020, but the Presidency Council under Mohamed al-Menfi dismissed him from this position when it entered office in 2021.

Trabelsi was rewarded for his support of the GNU when he was appointed acting minister of interior in the government of Abdel Hamid al-Dabaiba in November 2022. Dabaiba worked hard to retain Trabelsi's allegiance throughout the summer of 2022. One source in the Ministry of Finance indicated that the General Security Service was able to obtain LYD50 million of funding in June 2022.[51,52] The GNU also created a new border guard unit under the leadership of Mohamed al-Shaibani al-Amyani, who was Trabelsi's former office director and deputy minister of interior for immigration affairs in the GNA. For the GNU, retaining Trabelsi's support prevented a reunification of the Zintani security sector by Juweili.

The promotion of Trabelsi to the position of acting minister of interior was a significant prize for Zintani forces, in that it allowed them to remain in the capital to preserve their interests. The impact of Juweili's defeat on Zintani interests was mitigated by the fact that the General Security Service took over the camps previously held by his forces. A source close to Juweili noted that Zintani armed groups were only concerned with keeping the city under their military control and preserving their political gains in Tripoli, and that the withdrawal of Juweili's forces from the April 7 Military Camp in August 2022 was just a formality as the Zintan forces can still access Tripoli via the General Security Service.[53] The same source noted Zintani armed groups have no problem being

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50 After entering Tripoli in 2011, Trabelsi organized alongside other fighters from the western mountain towns of Zintan and al-Rujban, stationing himself at the headquarters of the Islamic Call Society. These forces were later formalized into the Sawa'iq Brigade. In 2012–13, it began to recruit former members of the armed forces of the Gaddafi regime and forged a close relationship with the National Forces Alliance of Mahmoud Jibril. The Sawa'iq Brigade provided the security for the GNC.
51 Chatham House interview with senior official, December 2022.
52 The events of August and September 2022 are disputed by Zintani sources and remain contested. Some contend that Trabelsi's forces did not attack Juweili's in the fighting in Tripoli while others claim that Trabelsi did not deliver adequately on a commitment not to oppose Juweili's entry to Tripoli. One key informant suggested that members of Trabelsi's forces were said to have manufactured an excuse to begin a skirmish with Juweili's forces, contrary to a previous understanding, which contributed to Juweili's failure to achieve his objective. Chatham House interviews with Zintani security sources, December 2022.
53 Chatham House interview with senior Zintani security source, December 2022.

under either the Trabelsi or the Juweili umbrella.[54] Their overwhelming priority is to maintain their access in Tripoli, and to avert any threats that might reduce or end their presence in the capital.

Zintan and the LAAF

Zintan's relations with Haftar and the LAAF must be seen in the context of developments in Tripoli and the outbreak of the 2014 war. Existing relationships with former regime elements, support for the 'liberal' political current and the Libya Dawn offensive led a significant number of Zintani armed groups to ally with Haftar's growing Dignity coalition and to break ties with the ZMC after the 2014 conflict. From a Zintani perspective, support for the House of Representatives in the east and the reformulated Interim Government of Abdullah al-Thani represented continuity. Haftar was appointed general commander of the Armed Forces aligned with these eastern-based authorities in March 2015.[55] The groups that declared support for Haftar were mainly active in the battle to control key infrastructure such as the al-Watiya airbase and the Melitah oil and gas complex, key towns such as al-Rujban, and the desert regions to the south of the Nafusa mountains. One such group is the Rayayna Petroleum Facilities Guard, known locally as the al-Gurj Battalion. Formed in 2011, this relatively long-established group is drawn from a single tribe, the al-Gurj. It is affiliated to the Petroleum Facilities Guard as well as to the LAAF.[56]

Other groups developed in significance through the recruitment of fighters in the context of the 2014 war. The al-Samah group, led by Ismail al-Samah, was first formed in 2011. After declaring its support for Haftar, it received military equipment and funds from the UAE. Fighters from the southern regions and the east also joined the al-Samah group, especially during the 2019–20 war for Tripoli, as did fighters from the areas of al-Rujban, al-Asbaa city, Tarhuna, Gharyan and al-Sayan. Many members of the group are supporters of the former Gaddafi regime.

The 2017 accommodation of Juweili and the remaining elements of the ZMC with the GNA led to an open split in Zintan between GNA-aligned and LAAF-aligned forces. Idris Madi, who headed the Western Military Region for the LAAF-aligned forces from 2014 until 2020, had worked with Juweili in the Ministry of Defence before breaking with him and the ZMC.

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54 Ibid.

55 The al-Gurj Battalion, the al-Ajmi al-Atiri Battalion, Ismail al-Samah, most of the fighters from the al-Mahariq and al-Jarwa tribes, Ramadan Abu Raqiqa and some fighters from the Abu Raqiqa tribe pledged their support to Haftar and subsequently left the ZMC.

56 The al-Aqraj Brigade is responsible for protecting and securing the oil valves in the al-Rayayna area east of Zintan. In the aftermath of the Libya Dawn war, it shut down the pipeline to the Sharara oil field, the country's largest, from November 2014 until December 2016. In November 2014, it shut down the oil pipeline in al-Rayayna that links the Sharara oil field to the al-Zawiya refinery. Five months later, it also closed the pipeline that links al-Fil oil field to the Melitah complex. The closure of the pipelines allegedly led to $27 billion in lost revenue, according to the National Oil Corporation. The al-Aqraj Brigade lifted the blockade when instructed to do so by Haftar. Ben Ibrahim, A. (2016), 'National Oil Corporation calls for pipelines reopening in south west of Libya', Libya Observer, 20 September 2016, https://libyaobserver.ly/economy/national-oil-corporation-calls-pipelines-reopening-south-west-libya; Marefa (2023), 'الريانة' [al-Rayana], https://www.marefa.org/الريانة،_ليبيا.

Haftar's forces developed links with religious and tribal leaders in Zintan, drawing on shared affiliation to the Interim Government to build relationships with Zintani political and security figures. Tariq al-Durman has been a key ally for the LAAF in Zintan.[57] He appears to have been particularly critical to the maintenance of support from Madkhali-dominated armed groups drawn from Zintan and the northwestern coastal cities of Sabratha and Surman in 2014–20. Among these groups were the al-Adiyat Brigade – reported to take Durman's orders – which positions itself as an elite strike force and which was active on the front lines in the 2019–20 Tripoli offensive. Durman also maintained a strong relationship with the Committee of the 200, a group akin to a popular police force whose membership is drawn from across the social groups of Zintan. These armed groups crumbled after Haftar's defeat in Tripoli. As a result of its support for Haftar, the Committee of the 200 lost funding from the ZMC, and many of its fighters and people went into hiding and withdrew from the scene in Zintan. The al-Adiyat Brigade has relocated to the east, and it is also reported to be operating alongside the LAAF's Tariq Bin Ziyad Brigade in the south.

There has been a nominal reunification of the Zintani security sector since Juweili's ouster by the GNU.

The divide placed significant stress on social peace in Zintan, as was evident amid the 2019–20 LAAF offensive on Tripoli, when Zintani groups fought on opposing sides. However, they conspicuously avoided direct confrontation on the battlefield.[58] Following the LAAF's loss, Zintani forces affiliated with it were ostracized, with key figures such as Durman moving to the east. Madi resigned his post as head of the LAAF Western Military Region.

There has been a nominal reunification of the Zintani security sector since Juweili's ouster by the GNU. In the politicking that followed the LAAF's failed Tripoli offensive, Juweili backed Bashagha's GNS, forged as part of a deal between Bashagha, Haftar and Agila Saleh, the speaker of the House of Representatives. Juweili's support for Bashagha signalled a reconciliation with Haftar, thereby removing a key obstacle to the reunification of Zintan's security sector. Juweili subsequently announced that the Zintani security sector had been reunified, which has eased tensions in the city. Yet with the civilian leadership of Zintan aligned with the GNU, and the GNU's acting minister of interior, Trabelsi, hailing from the city, the situation remains confused.

Zintan and the Greens

A further level of complexity is added by the support among some Zintani armed groups for the former regime. In some cases, LAAF-aligned groups have also professed support for actors from the former Gaddafi regime, collectively known

57 Eaton (2021), *The Libyan Arab Armed Forces: A network analysis.*
58 Lechner, J. A. (2022), 'Will Zintan Determine Libya's Future?', *Foreign Policy,* 16 July 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/16/zintan-libya-militias-tripoli-dbeibah-bashagha-haftar.

as the 'Greens'. They do not necessarily see a contradiction in this, even though Muammar Gaddafi's son and erstwhile heir apparent, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, is seen as a threat to Haftar's prospects.

Some members of Zintani forces have gone from being among the jailers of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi to being part of his personal guard.

Some members of Zintani forces have gone from being among the jailers of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi to being part of his personal guard. His capture, in November 2011, by Zintani forces provided significant political leverage for the city. Saif al-Islam was placed in the custody of the Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Brigade, which was then affiliated with the ZMC. Led by al-Ajmi al-Atiri, the brigade was formed of soldiers and fighters mainly from Zintan's Awlad Issa tribe. In 2014, Atiri's forces refused to hand Saif al-Islam over to the general prosecutor for trial in Tripoli, citing 'security concerns'. They released him in 2015, and are said to have subsequently provided his protection.[59] After aligning with the LAAF in 2014–17, Atiri's forces have renounced any affiliation to a formal state entity. When, in late 2021, Saif al-Islam travelled to Sebha to register as a candidate for the presidency, it was members of Atiri's forces who were widely believed to have provided the protection.[60]

Non-aligned forces

Zintan also contains a faction that has sought to remain neutral in these internecine disputes. At the security level, the key neutral armed group is the Nasser al-Hallak Brigade. Reminiscent of the Misratan revolutionary groups, the Nasser al-Hallak Brigade, which was formed in 2011, sees itself as a reserve force to protect Zintan in the event of conflict. It takes its name from one of its early leaders, who was killed in the civil war. The brigade includes a variety of volunteer fighters from Zintan with different tribal backgrounds, most of whom are Salafists but not adherents of Durman's line.[61]

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59 Human Rights Watch (2014), 'Libya: Gaddafi Son, Ex-Officials, Held Without Due Process', 13 February 2014, https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/02/13/libya-gaddafi-son-ex-officials-held-without-due-process. Atiri's group allegedly received significant funds in return for this stance, with speculation that Gaddafi had used for this money hidden by the former regime. The Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Brigade fought in the 2014 war and subsequently became affiliated with the LAAF before withdrawing from the latter's alliance in 2017. It was joined by pro-Gaddafi fighters from other areas, relying heavily on Tebu and Tuareg fighters from the south. Atiri's brigade lost its position on the airport road in Zintan in 2017 for the first time, and then a number of its forces were stationed at the al-Watiya airbase. But it returned to its position in Zintan after a dispute broke out between it and the military command at al-Watiya when the brigade objected to the presence of 'foreign forces' (referring to the Tebu and Tuareg) at the base. The brigade did not participate in the fighting on the outskirts of Tripoli in 2019–20. The al-Gurj Battalion took control of its headquarters in 2022. In 2015, Atiri released Gaddafi, based on an amnesty law passed by the House of Representatives, and he announced that the Libyan revolution was a conspiracy, openly declaring its support for 'Dr Saif Al-Islam Gaddafi', whom Atiri claimed 'is innocent and deserves to run for the presidency to complete the project of Libya al-Ghad [Libya Tomorrow, the project led by Saif to reform the Libyan state].'
60 Chatham House interviews with local security officials, January 2022.
61 The Nasser al-Hallak Brigade members, when demobilized, mainly work as guards of oil installations. Despite having fought in the 2014 and 2019 wars, the brigade does not interfere in political affairs, and it has no actual direct relationship with any prominent politicians. Its most prominent leaders are Mohamed Kamour, a moderate Salafi sheikh, and Riyadh al-Hubail. Marwan Saqr, the former leader of the Committee of the 200, and adherent to Durman's line, is also a member of the brigade. The Committee of the 200 was demobilized following its open support for Haftar in the war for Tripoli. For years, the Nasser al-Hallak Brigade was an intermediary between the ZMC and the LAAF Western Military Region Joint Operations Room in Zintan. Security sources claim that the brigade is being reconstituted to protect Zintan and that it receives major military support from the ZMC, in coordination with the government in Tripoli.

04 Armed group–community relations

Armed groups are seen to provide critical protection to the communities in which they operate, but those that operate outside of the city elicit distrust.

Local community views of armed groups within Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan vary depending on the roles these groups play, their footprint on the ground, and their level of social legitimacy and social accountability.[62] Broadly, however, members of all three communities agree that the armed groups continue to play an important, if imperfect, role in protecting their city. While criticism of the armed groups is widespread, there is also a sense of reassurance that each group is wedded to the city in which it has its roots and must exist within that city's 'social umbrella'. If an armed group opts to leave the social umbrella, the local community largely distrusts its actions and sees it as jockeying for power at the national level.

62 Chatham House spoke with 10 residents of Misrata, eight residents of Zawiya and 10 residents of Zintan between January 2021 and March 2023. Such was the difficulty of speaking to residents of Zawiya that out of 36 individuals contacted by researchers at Chatham House, only 10 agreed to be interviewed, two of whom remain completely anonymous even to Chatham House. It appears that it is mostly men who are targeted by armed groups or who are involved with them. Therefore, it was easier to interview women. It did not prove possible to interview individuals whose family members are part of the armed-group scene. We accept that this has an impact on the assessment of community views. In Misrata, interviews were conducted with seven men and three women aged between 24 and 56 years. Their professional and social backgrounds are varied, including teachers, academics, lawyers, civic activists, civil workers, and two previous members of armed groups. In Zintan, interviews took place with six men and four women, aged between 24 and 40, from a variety of professional and social backgrounds, from journalists and students to business owners.

In Zintan specifically, notwithstanding the divisions among the city's armed factions and among the wider community, in-depth interviews with its residents revealed a considerable degree of alignment on the importance of prioritizing the city. They said that Zintan had suffered for its attempts to serve the national interest: for its citizens, the memory of the 2014 war endures.

The human cost of insecurity and outbreaks of conflict is felt in all three cities. The seemingly endless cycle of young men joining armed groups only to eventually lose their lives is devastating.[63] The Uppsala Conflict Data Programme has recorded nearly 14,000 deaths from violent conflict in Libya between 2011 and 2022.[64]

Presence of armed groups and their perceived role

The footprint of armed groups in Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan varies considerably from city to city; this is reflected in community perceptions. Misrata and Zintan residents described armed groups there as having less of an overt presence on the streets. Interviewees in Zintan generally agreed that in daily life members of the armed groups keep to their civilian role, only assuming their military persona when circumstances require. One interviewee commented that they saw members of armed groups as civilians, and that the latter's only military connection is drawing a salary while performing their regular jobs.[65]

Residents of all three cities said that the primary and necessary function of armed groups was to provide protection for citizens.

In Zawiya, the constant presence of armed groups was seen as oppressive. A climate of fear prevails in the city, whose residents have been caught in the crossfire of violent battles for supremacy among armed groups.[66] Of the 10 residents interviewed, four said that they had family members who had been killed in Zawiya since 2011. While Zawiyans found common cause in their support for the 2011 revolution, the years that followed the second civil war of 2014 have left civilians increasingly disillusioned. Between 2014 and 2018, fighting among Zawiyan factions was extensive, and the city also suffered from the closure of the coastal road to Tripoli as a result of the conflict with neighbouring Warshefana. Zawiya's armed groups have coalesced since 2019, making it easier for civilians to move around, and contributing to a reduction in levels of crime in the city.

63 Chatham House interview with resident of Zintan, January 2023.
64 Uppsala Conflict Data Program (2023), 'UCDP One-sided Violence Dataset version 23.1,' https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/index.html#onesided.
65 Chatham House interview with resident of Zintan, January 2023.
66 Chatham House interviews with residents of Zawiya, September 2022.

One interviewee said this is why civilians reluctantly accept their presence. The fact that now they can travel without fear, and have access to Tripoli once again, is important to civilians.

Residents of all three cities said that the primary and necessary function of armed groups was to provide protection for citizens. In the view of civilians in Zintan, for instance, it is beneficial to have armed groups loyal to their city who would protect them if necessary. All interviewees expressed fear that Libya could relapse into violent conflict. They regard cities that do not have a strong security sector as underdeveloped and unprotected.

Misratans see the primary role of their city's armed groups as defending it from external threats. While civilians in Misrata do not want armed groups to continue to exist separately from governmental structures, the lack of trust in the central government in Tripoli and the ongoing threat from Haftar necessitates the continuing existence of the remaining revolutionaries and their armed groups. Several interviewees spoke of threats against the city, the possible further overthrow of the government in Tripoli, and an existential fear of being subjected again to what happened in 2011. This is where the interests of civilians and armed groups intersect in Misrata.[67] However, there were some signs that this collective fear is decreasing as younger members of armed groups are joining the police force or taking training courses and finishing their education.[68] But opinions seem to diverge on this issue, and fear and lack of trust continue to be a major obstacle when it comes to the behaviour of armed groups.[69]

In Misrata, interviewees spoke of threats against their city, the possible further overthrow of the government in Tripoli, and an existential fear of being subjected again to what happened in 2011.

In contrast with interviewees in Zawiya and Zintan, those in Misrata perceive a more national role for their armed forces. The relationship between the city and the central government in Tripoli is a complicated one, with most interviewees associating the government with the country as a whole. They regard the country itself as a work in progress, and they associate central government with corruption. Nonetheless, most interviewees agree that the armed groups have been supportive and protective of consecutive governments, and see this as necessary to prevent the image of the country Misratans would like to build from fading.[70]

Beyond protection, armed groups in Zawiya and Zintan are seen to provide other services. Notably, there is an expectation in Zintan that armed groups contribute to the city as a whole.[71] Certain armed groups play a big role in negotiating development projects with the government, and have brought construction

67 Chatham House interview with resident of Misrata, March 2022.
68 Chatham House interview with resident of Misrata, March 2022.
69 Chatham House interviews with residents of Misrata, March 2022.
70 Chatham House interview with resident of Misrata, March 2022.
71 Chatham House interviews with residents of Zintan, January 2023.

contracts to the city. Contributing to society is considered to be an important role for armed groups, especially when the experience of Zintan is compared with that of cities that do not have armed groups.

In times of peace, Zintan residents said, armed group members act as 'diplomats' in other cities to support their fellow Zintanis, and they are seen as providers of social assistance outside the city.[72] Instances of civilian conflicts, confrontation with other armed groups and kidnapping are often resolved by members of Zintani armed groups via tribal and familial connections.[73]

Zawiya's residents said that armed groups have sought to be facilitators of public services. Some of the services mentioned relate to enforcing the rule of law – something the city's armed groups have a legal mandate to do through affiliations with the Ministry of Interior – through the provision of protection and the reduction of violent crimes such as hijacking and kidnapping. As in Zintan, civilians in Zawiya rely on armed groups to resolve crimes and mediate small conflicts.[74] One interviewee said that armed groups had latterly begun to advertise their services, asking members of the public to come to them if they had any matter they wanted addressed. The interviewee described this development as the groups 'inserting themselves' in various issues so they would become indispensable to citizens.[75]

The services provided by armed groups in Zawiya extend to political lobbying on behalf of the population, and negotiating with the Tripoli authorities for the release of salaries or to expedite passport applications. The armed groups are also taking on the role of intermediary between the city's residents and the central government in Tripoli when it comes to the delivery of services such as banking.[76] However, access to the 'VIP services' the groups can provide are seen as often depending on individuals' connections.

Perceptions of social legitimacy and accountability

In Misrata, the social legitimacy of armed groups is rooted in social backing and acceptance of their decision-making and actions in times of crisis. In 2011, the groups were perceived by citizens as 'protectors and saviours'.[77] But in 2013–14, in the view of interviewees, the legitimacy of the armed groups' decisions that led to Misratan fighters entering Tripoli was questionable. This reflects the broader, ongoing debate over what Misratan armed groups should proactively do on the national scene. It is notable in this context that the engagement of armed groups

72 Chatham House interview with resident of Zintan, January 2023.
73 Chatham House interview with resident of Zintan, January 2023.
74 Chatham House interview with resident of Zawiya, July 2022.
75 Chatham House interview with resident of Zawiya, August 2022.
76 Ibid.
77 Chatham House interviews with residents of Misrata, March 2022.

in the al-Bunyan al-Marsous operation against ISIS in 2016–17 and the Al-Burkhan al-Ghadab operation in defence of Tripoli from LAAF's attack in 2019–20 were viewed as entirely legitimate.[78]

The intervention of Misratan armed groups to resolve issues outside the city is perceived well only when the purpose is to stem or prevent bloodshed. This function is sometimes undertaken in collaboration with the council of elders and the municipal council, as was the case with the ending of a long-running dispute between the city of Zawiya and neighbouring Warshefana in 2019. There is a coordination of efforts between the municipal council and armed groups in their intervention to resolve conflicts outside the city.[79] One interviewee described this as 'putting out fires' or 'calming down of conflicts', and as an important stabilizing role played by the city.[80]

In Zawiya, individual perceptions of the social legitimacy of armed groups vary according to the degree of proximity to them – e.g. whether someone is a member of a family that is involved with the armed groups, whether they live in a particular neighbourhood, or which tribe their elders affiliate with. One interviewee expressed the view that the groups' legitimacy was derived directly from their ability to make change on the ground by use of force.[81] The view of residents who do not have specific ties with the armed groups is that the groups are not legitimate socially, even if they are affiliated with the central government.[82] Fear may also be a factor: one interviewee reported that citizens of Zawiya do not feel comfortable talking about the city's armed groups.[83] Notably, a significant number of Zawiyans approached by Chatham House for interview declined to participate.

In Zintan, residents perceive armed groups as an extension of tribe, and say that interpersonal connections are the source of the groups' legitimacy. Some people in the city do not recognize the label of 'armed groups' as such. One interviewee said that armed men are simply an extension of the five tribes in the area. They spoke of this in terms of 'belonging', explaining that the city's armed groups are part of social structures that supersede notions of 'us and them'.[84] Others said that all the armed groups in the city had formalized their status. Armed groups perceive themselves to be part of an army, even if they have divided loyalties.[85] However, one interviewee saw the armed groups as militias that, no matter how organized, remain too undisciplined and lacking in training to be considered as anything else.[86]

In Misrata, most families have members who are part of armed groups that were referred to by interviewees as either 'ours' or 'our sons'. This social connection has meant that, while armed groups may be divided politically, there is a consensus among them – the result of broad coordinated dialogue – that they should resolve their disagreements without recourse to violence or military means.

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78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Chatham House interview with resident of Misrata, March 2022.
81 Chatham House interview with resident of Zawiya, August 2022.
82 Chatham House interview with resident of Zawiya, August 2022.
83 Chatham House interview with resident of Zawiya, August 2022.
84 Chatham House interview with resident of Zintan, January 2023.
85 Chatham House interviews with residents of Zintan, January 2023.
86 Chatham House interview with resident of Zintan, January 2023.

In Zawiya, interviewees broadly had a negative view of armed groups, but this was balanced by a perceived need for the city to have groups that could defend residents' interests. One interviewee noted that Zawiya's armed groups 'belong to us at least', which indicates that, even if trust is severely lacking, the groups are seen as belonging to some social structure.[87] However, none of the interviewees considered that there were effective means of holding armed groups to account. One said that armed groups have their bases within civilian neighbourhoods, going on to say that these groups are seen as having used their extensive weaponry and equipment to intimidate people.[88] The situation has improved slightly since 2019, although mediation efforts and the facilitation of humanitarian passage and assistance to displaced people still fall largely to civil society organizations such as the Red Crescent.[89] Tribal elders and politicians adhere to the armed groups, not the other way round. The armed groups' power relationship with the council of elders and the municipality is unbalanced, meaning that the groups have more sway in determining how conflicts are resolved.[90]

Interviewees were unanimous in their perception that Zawiyan armed groups do not always represent the interests of civilians. Many groups are seen as being interested in material gain, influence and power. At times, these motivations might intersect with tribal interests, with the result that elements of the community benefit.[91] Interviewees said that the situation is very volatile, and that conflicts occur on a regular basis among social groups and the armed groups that represent them.[92] An activist working on women's rights in Zawiya said that in certain cases female victims and survivors of domestic violence were able to receive help from the SSA's Western Region. However, the interviewee said that such assistance would not be possible if an alleged perpetrator was a member of or connected to the group itself.[93] While the armed groups perform the roles of the police, civil servants and military in the city, two interviewees doubted the motivation for this. One claimed that having inflicted street wars and destruction on Zawiya, the armed groups now wanted to regain the trust of civilians through provision of services. The other saw this service provision role as purely strategic, because being important and respected in the city serves the groups' longer-term interests.

View of the central state and distrust of forces beyond the cities' social umbrella

Residents of Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan made a clear distinction between armed groups that are based within their respective cities, compared with those based in Tripoli or elsewhere. It was widely assumed that armed groups operating outside of their respective cities would behave less accountably because they would not be subject to in-group codes of conduct. In other words, the social umbrella is

87 Chatham House interview with resident of Zawiya, August 2022.
88 Chatham House interview with resident of Zawiya, August 2022.
89 Chatham House interview with resident of Zawiya, August 2022.
90 Chatham House interviews with residents of Zawiya, August 2022.
91 Chatham House interviews with residents of Zawiya, August–September 2022.
92 Ibid.
93 Chatham House interview with resident of Zawiya, August 2022.

seen as a means of conferring social legitimacy for an armed group. The social umbrella's function in regulating armed group behaviours within a particular community is no longer in place when a group leaves its home city.[94]

Misrata interviewees described groups based outside the city as illegitimate, describing them variously as 'mercenaries', 'gangs', and 'pawns of politicians'.[95] This indicated that some residents of Misrata had 'lifted the social cover' of these groups, which is akin to social disowning of the armed groups in question. One interviewee called the Misratan armed groups 'the strong arm' of the security sector, viewing them as a necessary ally for any central government. Yet, on a practical level, some see Misratan-origin armed groups operating in the capital as not being part of Misrata's security space.[96] They criticized these forces for providing personal protection to the government.[97] Others see these groups as simply providing the services they are contracted to undertake.[98]

Misrata interviewees described groups based outside the city as illegitimate, describing them variously as 'mercenaries', 'gangs', and 'pawns of politicians'.

The (counter-intuitive) takeaway here for policymakers is that, in the eyes of the local community, those elements of the Misratan security sector that have revolutionary origins still have a greater degree of legitimacy than do the elements that have official state mandates. Many within the latter groups are perceived by interviewees as having been corrupted by money and politicians. Membership of government-related forces that offer services such as police, fire brigades and traffic control is viewed more favourably. For civilians in Misrata, joining such services is essential in making the city safer, and also helps rebuild trust in these institutions following the violations committed by the Gaddafi-led state police force and military. The SSF was highlighted here for its successes in fighting crime, protecting public buildings, coordinating emergencies and mediating disputes around construction projects.

In Zintan, armed groups are seen as a means of protecting the city's interests beyond its boundaries. Even here, however, interviewees said that those groups that play an active role in aiding Zintanis in other cities are held in higher regard than those that are based in Tripoli and are part of the official state security apparatus.[35] Zintani interviewees saw many of those that remain in Tripoli as self-interested. One alleged: 'They take the money for themselves and protect politicians and their families in Tripoli.'[99]

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94 Interviews with residents of Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan, March 2022–January 2023.
95 Chatham House interviews with residents of Misrata, March 2022.
96 Chatham House interview with resident of Misrata, March 2022.
97 Chatham House interviews with residents of Misrata, March 2022.
98 Chatham House interviews with residents of Misrata, March 2022.
99 Chatham House interview with resident of Zintan, January 2023.

The communities of Zawiya view the relationship between the central government and the armed groups as transactional. The central government was seen by two interviewees as complicit in enabling groups to gain power in return for access to their fighters.[100] This view has solidified amid the posturing between the GNU and the GNS. The involvement of armed groups from Zawiya in the August 2022 clashes in Tripoli to keep Abdel Hamid al-Dabaiba in government raised concerns among Zawiya's residents that another war would break out and spill over to their city.[101] These fears were realized in May and June 2023, when the GNU used drone strikes against facilities in Zawiya (as well as in Zuwara and Warshefana) that included buildings linked to the Abu Zariba-controlled elements of the SSA.[102] While the GNU Ministry of Defence claimed that the strikes targeted criminals in these areas, the fact that these targets were chosen was interpreted within Libya as a warning to the West Coast SSA of the risks of its continued opposition to the GNU.[103]

100 Chatham House interview with resident of Zawiya, August 2022.
101 Chatham House interview with resident of Zawiya, August 2022.
102 Reuters (2023), 'Libya's Tripoli government targets more western towns with drone strikes'.
103 Herbert, Horsely and Badi (2023), *Illicit Economies and Peace and Security in Libya*, p. 8.

05 Armed groups' engagement in the economy

The growing economic interests of armed groups have become one of the most challenging hurdles to overcome in efforts to remove coercive practices from economic relations.

The deep engagement of armed groups in the economy is a significant impediment to reform of the security sector and prospects for DDR. How armed groups in Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan generate revenues varies considerably, depending on both the nature of each group – permanently mobilized state forces require a more stable revenue base than might a force that mobilizes only in times of crisis – and differences in the operating environment. The latter are perhaps more significant in terms of implications for DDR: factors such as social relations between armed actors and the community, or variations in local economic structures, condition how armed groups interact with a city's economy. Where alternatives are limited, most notably in Zawiya, and where armed groups play an accepted role in economic relations, as in Zintan, extracting armed groups from the local economy is an uphill challenge.

Economic opportunity structures

Some cities offer a broader array of economic opportunities than others. Misrata is a historic centre of commercial activity in Libya and is home to a thriving business community. Although the Gaddafi regime effectively eviscerated the private sector in Libya, the development of Misrata's port from the 1980s, the presence in the city of the country's largest steel mill and the establishment of the Misrata Free Zone in 2000 helped underpin the city's position as the nation's economic hub.

The business community within Misrata includes wealthy individuals who have the capacity to shape the import/export, wholesale and transport/storage sectors at national level.

Zawiya is home to a significant fishing industry as well as the country's largest oil refinery and power-generating station. However, its formal economy is seen to be in decline by its citizens.[104] Factories that were operational prior to the revolution have shut down, making the region more reliant on imported goods.[105] The illicit sector has developed rapidly, by contrast. The city has become known as the centre of smuggling – including lucrative fuel-smuggling – and trafficking operations on the northwestern coast, with its strategic location on the coastal highway between the Tunisian border and Tripoli ensuring that Zawiya has the ability to dominate Libya's principal overland trade artery.

Zintan's economy has boomed since 2011. The city's business actors used Zintan's influence in the capital and in government to develop its economy in 2011–14. After Zintani forces were ousted from Tripoli, Zintan's airstrip became the connection between the forces of western-based actors and the eastern-based authorities. Zintan's hinterlands are also strategic, with key oil and gas infrastructure either based in or passing through areas under Zintani control. Key trade routes through Libya's western border also run via the city.

Benefiting through the state

Whether an armed group is mobilized permanently or only in periods of crisis has a significant bearing on the nature of its funding from the state. Regular forces with state mandates are reliant on ongoing funding, while those that are largely dormant outside of wartime need only more sporadic funding.

'Regular' armed groups have used their affiliation to the state to secure revenues by obtaining state salaries and lump sums to cover their operating costs. In the capital, armed groups provide material support in return for funding from the state, a key driver of Libya's security 'market'. Tracking the institutional affiliations of the forces provides an insight into their political affiliations. For example, during the 2019–20 war for Tripoli, a number of armed groups such as the CTF and the JOF came directly under the aegis of the Presidency Council, and they have subsequently developed direct funding relationships with the Prime Minister's Office.[106]

On the other hand, the General Command of the army under the leadership of Mohamed al-Haddad has struggled to mobilize funding following the conclusion of the ceasefire in October 2020. The army's regular units continue to be offered fewer supplies than the state-affiliated forces – such as Brigade 301 and Brigade 166 – created from the revolutionary factions. These dynamics reflect the perception that the security sector remains a competitive market for the ability to exert political influence, rather than being primarily concerned with the conduct of official tasks mandated to the forces in question.

104 Chatham House interviews with residents of Zawiya, August 2022.
105 Rahman and Di Maio (2020), *The Private Sector amid Conflict: The Case of Libya*.
106 Chatham House interviews with officials in the security sector, March 2022.

Revolutionary forces from Misrata and Zintan have generally mobilized and then sought to obtain compensation from the state once a campaign is under way. The period when Osama al-Juweili was defence minister was a particularly profitable period for Zintan's business community, as prominent Zintani traders benefited extensively from contracts issued by the ministry. This group of traders has long-standing relationships with Juweili and the ZMC, and has provided key items such as fuel and food for the ZMC's deployments. The relationship is seen as being so close that goods are often supplied on credit, with the understanding that the ZMC will pay for them when it receives funds from the state.[107]

Monetizing territorial control: protection markets, trade routes and trafficking

Unlike cities such as Tripoli and Zawiya, territory within Misrata is not subject to the dynamics of a competitive security market. As already noted, most armed groups in Misrata are not permanently mobilized, with groups such as the JOF and the SSF providing security. The role of armed groups in the economy is thus very different in Misrata. However, Misratan factions remain active outside the city, and control access to its main entrances (east, west and south) and the seaport. Control of these access points provides some actors with a potential means of generating revenues. For example, the seaport is secured by the Misrata Security Directorate, which is listed under the Ministry of Interior. It was claimed in key informant interviews that some members of the forces in charge of the seaport had benefited directly and personally from their positions by facilitating the release of goods for a financial compensation from business owners.[108]

Some elements within Zawiya's security sector can almost be considered to operate like organized crime groups, some of which are perceived as having become consolidated as mini illicit empires. Members within the major factions in the city are seen as having close connections to the smuggling of goods such as fuel, illegal drugs and weapons, and they are also said to have also been linked to actors involved in migrant-smuggling and people-trafficking. Money-laundering and a vibrant protection market have also been prominent activities for some armed group members. Key informants note that some members of Zawiya's armed groups are seen as linked to drug dealers and smugglers in the city, and that, where such members have not been directly involved in the running of such a business, there are concerns that protection fees have been extracted to allow others to participate in the market. Critically, the same armed groups, particularly those with Ministry of Interior affiliations, are responsible for enforcing the law. As the influence of Zawiya's armed groups has increased since 2019, the control that they wield over state institutions has increased, and in some quarters there are concerns that a culture of impunity may have set in. In such circumstances, any meaningful effort to clamp down effectively on the behaviour of members of these groups is seen as unlikely, beyond partisan attempts motivated by securing the support of one group to prevail over another.

107 Chatham House interviews with Zintani officials, January 2023.
108 Chatham House interviews with officials in the security sector, March 2022.

Community members in Zawiya note that some of the fighting in the city has principally been viewed as being linked to control of illicit markets, as illustrated by clashes over the control of warehouses, checkpoints and other physical infrastructure. The economic dimension of such local fighting is unmistakable. For example, key informants highlight that the tensions began to escalate between some members of the SSA and the CIU when the SSA took the control of checkpoints in Ajilat, which it was believed had been used by smugglers.

Zintan's prominent position in the post-Gaddafi period was enabled by the control of Tripoli by its armed groups from the summer of 2011 until the spring of 2014. Control of Tripoli International Airport, in particular, generated significant revenue for some members in return for allowing the flow of goods in and out of the country.[109]

Physical control of oil and gas infrastructure is also believed to have provided some within Zintan's armed groups with significant revenues from protection fees.

Physical control of oil and gas infrastructure is also believed to have provided some within Zintan's armed groups with significant revenues from protection fees. The city continues to hold locations of strategic and economic value in terms of trade routes and oil and gas infrastructure. The Petroleum Facilities Guard South West is based in Zintan. It is responsible for securing the oil facilities located from the beginning of the mountain range in the north to the border with Niger in the south, to the borders with Algeria and Tunisia in the west, and to Jufra in the east, in addition to the oil concessions located in the areas of Murzuq and Ubari. Al-Rayayna[110] and the Wafa oil and gas field remain under the influence of members of Zintani armed groups.

Some members of Zintani factions based at the Wafa oil and gas field in the southwest are seen as having used their influence to pressure the authorities. Gas from Wafa is transported by pipeline to the coast and is supplied to the western region, particularly to the al-Ruwais power station. It appears that a few actors seen as associated with the Petroleum Facilities Guard South West have sought to gain many of the service contracts for oil companies operating in its areas of influence. A degree of control over heavy machinery enables them to fulfil market needs[111] and secure lucrative contracts. Furthermore, the Petroleum Facilities

109 In one example, a trader is reported to have made significant profits from scaling up his importing of goods from abroad through Tripoli International Airport, while other Zintani traders are believed to have established an important role in the trade of prescription medicines through access to the airport. One of the most profitable markets in Libya is the trade in prescription pharmaceuticals, which has attracted the attention of a new generation of criminal networks, including some pharmacists who operate alongside armed groups. The Tripoli airport has been a critical hub for the trafficking of pharmaceuticals into the city.
110 The al-Rayayna Petroleum Facilities Guard (known locally as the al-Gurj Battalion) control the al-Rayayna valve pumping station. This gives access to the main oil pipeline from the Sharara and al-Fil fields in the south to the northwestern coast.
111 Chatham House interview with local officials from the Nafusa mountain area, February 2023.

Guard South West has used its physical control over the Wafa oil field to exert pressure on oil companies and the government to help fulfil its aims. Such actions have caused significant disruptions to the economy.

Successful operations for members of Zawiyan armed groups active in the illicit sector depend on the control of territory and the ability to establish and protect the movement of illicit goods. In essence, largely the same infrastructure and capacities are required for successful engagement in the various forms of smuggling. A notable feature of the key informant interviews was that members of nearly all armed groups are seen as having participated in multiple forms of smuggling.

Zawiya's oil refinery and port complex is the most important piece of economic infrastructure within the city. It is the largest in Libya, producing around 120,000 barrels per day (b/d) of fuel. It is also directly connected to the Sharara oil field, which produces 300,000 b/d of light crude, roughly a quarter of Libya's crude production. The refinery complex also houses a port that functions as an oil terminal. The port is one of only two terminals in western Libya, the remainder being in the eastern region. The refinery and port are widely seen as having been critical to the illicit sector in Zawiya, and to have formed an important node of fuel-smuggling in the western region. The National Oil Corporation estimates that up to one-third of petroleum and diesel provided by the state is smuggled, equivalent to 1.3 million tonnes per year.[112] The port has also functioned as a major launch point for migrants seeking to reach Europe. The refinery complex houses a detention centre that continues to operate. Control of the refinery is widely seen as the major prize in Zawiya's conflict economy. Yet, as the activities that take place from the refinery have substantial and long onward supply chains – fuel has to be transported overland, and migrants by sea – the networks of smugglers operating from the refinery must maintain working relations with members of armed groups that control territory in the remainder of the city. This leads to a bargaining process among networks of armed actors and their social constituencies. The refinery is located in an area between those seen as controlled by the Bin Rajab-Bahrun axis and the Abu Hamyra axis.

The refinery complex has become a site where these groups seek to apply their shifting institutional mandates to justify their presence. By 2023, a tense modus vivendi had emerged. Given the mandates of various elements of the Ministry of Interior to combat illegal migration and provide border security, the port had become heavily securitized. The Directorate of Combating Illegal Migration, the General Administration for Coastal Security and the Border Management Department all claim a right to operate there. Key informants indicated that both the Bahrun and Abu Zariba forces maintain a presence in the refinery complex. In addition, the Libyan Coast Guard unit, led by Abdulrahman al-Milad (also known as al-Bija) and under the Ministry of Defence, was present. As noted, following its bombing campaign in Zawiya, in August 2023 the GNU sought to place the West Coast Military Zone – dominated by the central Zawiya axis commanders – in charge of the Zawiya refinery, although at the time of writing

112 Eaton, T. (2019), 'Libya: Rich in Oil, Leaking Fuel', Chatham House, 9 October 2019, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/10/libya-rich-oil-leaking-fuel.

it remains unclear what changes have taken place in practice.[113] Such shifts have the potential to significantly impact the workings of the illicit sector in Zawiya, and fit a broader context of GNU affiliates seeking to consolidate their control of vital trade corridors on the northwestern coast.

The increased tension within Zawiya has driven some armed groups to seek to expand their territory beyond the city's boundaries. Neighbouring Surman is reported to be more or less fully under the control of Zawiyan armed groups, while those connected to Bahrun have also engaged in battles for control within Sabratha.

Zintani control of territory has also been monetized through the establishment of protection rackets. Notably, some smugglers and traffickers are said to pay Zintani armed groups for protection to move their goods through Zintani controlled territory, as part of a model based on profiting from granting safe passage.[114] Where a group has strong control over a territory, traffickers are in a position to broker safe passage for a fee.[115] Control of border posts is a critical source of influence in this regard. Since 2011, members of Zintani factions have sought to increase their influence and role on the western border, as evidenced by the movement of Zintani forces to the city of Jamil in 2014 as well as continuing efforts to wield influence over the town of Ghadames.[116]

Constraints on economic behaviour: local and external

Significant differences are perceived over the degree of social accountability to which members of armed groups from the three cities are subject. Notably, armed groups in Zawiya are subject to fewer constraints over the economic activities that some participate in. For example, trafficking and smuggling activities by some members are reported to take place in plain sight within the city's boundaries. In contrast, such activities are more likely to be clandestine and carried out beyond the city limits of Misrata and Zintan to avoid social pushback.

The economic activities of members of Misratan and Zintani armed groups based outside of their local community are viewed as more expansive. Local residents in the Kirimiya Market area of southwest Tripoli reported Zintani armed group members as informally taxing merchants in areas in return for protection services and even approaching local residents to press them for money for phone credit or meals from restaurants.[117] In both cases, these activities would likely generate significant pushback if they were attempted within the groups' home city.

To maintain their business model, some armed groups have also sought to mitigate pressure being applied by external actors. The management of irregular migration via Libya to Europe has been of key interest to international players.

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113 Chatham House interviews with residents of Zawiya, December 2023.
114 Chatham House interviews with Zintani armed group members, March 2023
115 Chatham House interview with local official, March 2023.
116 Ibid.
117 Chatham House interviews with local officials, January 2023.

Zawiyan armed group members have been placed under UN sanctions for alleged involvement in human trafficking.[118] In response, Zawiyan factions have sought to present themselves as effective in countering people-smuggling to the international community; yet flows of irregular migration have continued from Libyan shores, and Zawiyan groups have continued to participate in the activity. Rather than halting flows altogether, Zawiya's armed groups appear to have regulated the movement of irregular migrants from western Libya. This has allowed them to achieve a manageable flow whereby the armed groups can continue to (indirectly) receive international support for disrupting irregular migration while also profiting from engagement in people-smuggling and trafficking.[119]

Those who have been subject to detention by Zawiyan armed groups allege significant and ongoing abuses of human rights. Former detainees at the al-Maya detention centre, administered by the SSA, report being placed into forced labour, being subject to ransom demands, and being re-trafficked.[120] An important goal behind the establishment of the al-Maya centre was reportedly to attract attention by detaining a large number of migrants in order to secure the political, financial and material support of the international community.[121]

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118 For example, the Nasr Brigade's Mohamed Khushlaf, a key member of the Abu Hamyra network was sanctioned by the UN in 2018 for human rights violations and participation in human trafficking: United Nations Security Council (2018), 'Mohamed al Amin al-Arabi Kashlaf', 7 June 2018, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1970/materials/summaries/individual/mohammed-al-amin-al-arabi-kashlaf. Also sanctioned was Abd al-Rahman Milad, a commander in the Libyan Coast Guard and another member of the Abu Hamyra network. See United Nations Security Council (2018), 'Abd al Rahman al-Milad', 7 June 2018, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1970/materials/summaries/individual/abd-al-rahman-al-milad. Milad has subsequently sought to rehabilitate his image. See Herbert, Horsely and Badi (2023), *Illicit Economies and Peace and Security in Libya*, p. 7.
119 Eaton, T. and Yousef, L. (2023), 'The dual face of migrant smuggling in Libya', *The New Arab*, 30 March 2023, https://www.newarab.com/opinion/dual-face-migrant-smuggling-libya.
120 Confidential report seen by Chatham House researchers, November 2022.
121 Ibid.

06 Conclusions: implications for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration

Without an internationally mediated forum, successes in DDR efforts across Libya will remain isolated, and conversations about security sector reform between Libyan state authorities and international donors will continue at cross purposes.

This paper has explored how the security apparatuses of Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan have developed since the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, demonstrating that significant local variation remains in terms of the social composition of the area, the experience of conflict, the structure of the local economy and economic opportunity, and relations with neighbouring localities and with the state's formal institutions.

Over more than a decade, there have been extensive discussions among both policymakers and policy analysts over the prospects and potential pathways for security sector reform (SSR) in Libya.[122] Studies of the failures of SSR attempts to date have identified a series of strategic failures, including an overemphasis on foreign-sponsored 'train and equip' interventions by external states that betray a prioritization of short-term interests over long-term solutions for meaningful reform of Libya's security sector.[123] Libyan officials, meanwhile, have been criticized for undertaking cosmetic reshufflings within ministries relevant to the security sector that are informed by internal power struggles rather than a holistic view of SSR.[124] Ultimately, these reshuffles can be seen as having obstructed reform plans while being portrayed as SSR.[125]

Reform of Libya's security sector is acknowledged as a critical component of bringing functional governance to the country. The Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan case studies in this paper underscore the scale of the challenges still to be overcome.

Reform of Libya's security sector is acknowledged as a critical component of bringing functional governance to the country. The Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan case studies in this paper underscore the scale of the challenges still to be overcome. Effective reform of the security sector is also widely accepted to be wedded to the establishment of a sustainable political settlement, meaningful institution-building and the establishment of a functioning rule of law. None of these conditions is in place at the time of writing. In this context, the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) has advocated for the pursuit of security sector stabilization (SSS) in Libya, involving amalgamating interim informal stabilization measures with security arrangements to create the conditions necessary for longer-term SSR. In a 2021 report for DCAF, Emadeddin Badi and Archibald Gallet argue that this can 'simultaneously lay the foundation for SSR, reconstruction, and development, and encourage the buy-in of many domestic and international stakeholders'.[126]

Successful disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of armed actors hinges on these broader SSS and SSR efforts. A proper needs assessment of Libya's security sector must be followed by a political consensus on how to

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122 See, for example, Lacher and Cole (2014), *Politics By Other Means*; Pack, J., Mezran, K. and Eljarh, M. (2014), *Libya's Faustian Bargains: Breaking the Appeasement Cycle*, Atlantic Council, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Libyas_Faustian_Bargains.pdf; Wehrey, F. (2021), 'The Lost Decade: DDR and SSR Lessons in Libya Since 2011', in Badi, Gallet and Maggi (eds) (2021), *The Road to Stability: Rethinking Security Sector Reform in Post-Conflict Libya*, pp. 15–28; Al-Shadeedi, H., van Veen, E. and Harchaoui, J. (2020), *One thousand and one failings: Security sector stabilisation and development in Libya*, The Hague, Clingendael Institute, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/one-thousand-and-one-failings.
123 Maggi, R. (2022), *Building security: How Europeans can help reform Libya*, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, https://ecfr.eu/publication/building-security-how-europeans-can-help-reform-libya.
124 Badi, Gallet and Maggi (eds) (2021), *The Road to Stability: Rethinking Security Sector Reform in Post-Conflict Libya*, p 14.
125 Ibid., p. 14.
126 Ibid., p. 21.

meet these needs through training and force development, before demobilization and disarmament pathways can be determined.[127] Without an agreed vision for the sector, trying to implement DDR is unlikely to be successful – and may cause harm. DDR has been described as:

> [A] process through which members of armed forces and groups are supported to lay down their weapons and transition to civilian life. DDR processes contribute to stabilization and peacebuilding efforts, and to creating an environment in which a peace process, political and social reconciliation, access to livelihoods and decent work, as well as sustainable development can take root. For these reasons, DDR processes should be seen as integral parts of efforts to consolidate peace and promote stability, and not merely as a set of sequenced technical programmes and activities.[128]

Within Libya, state-led efforts to pursue DDR have been largely dormant since the collapse of the Libyan Programme for Reintegration and Development (LPRD) in 2015.[129] The LPRD failed to demobilize significant numbers of combatants: according to the programme's own figures, only 1,400 individuals received vocational training under its auspices, while 38,000 ex-combatants were integrated within security institutions.[130] Internationally supported efforts to support DDR have been undertaken in several cities, including Misrata, Tripoli and Zintan, but they have remained on a limited scale in terms of the geographies they cover and the numbers of combatants they engage.[131]

In the absence of meaningful SSR and SSS, DDR may be regarded as premature in Libya, but there is a body of evidence that cautions against such a view. First, the situation is not static within Libya: the country's already sprawling security sector continues to grow, with fresh cohorts of recruits signing up to join state-affiliated and non-affiliated armed groups. Such dynamics make it clear that policymakers cannot wait for a 'post-conflict' situation to begin planning for DDR.

Second, the ongoing crisis reflects a continuing process of state formation, so policy interventions in the security space must be part of that process in order to achieve their ultimate objectives. Here, there are signs of progress: the Ministry of Labour has been tasked with developing a programme for DDR, while the international community is currently exploring what can be done in terms of 'pre-DDR'. The UN defines the concept of pre-DDR narrowly, focusing on combatants, and states that it is a 'local-level transitional stabilization measure designed for those who are eligible for a national DDR programme'.[132] However, there is a broad range of interpretations over what constitutes pre-DDR,

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127 Badi, Gallet and Maggi (eds) (2021), *The Road to Stability: Rethinking Security Sector Reform in Post-Conflict Libya*, p. 17.
128 UN University (2016), 'The role of DDR in peacebuilding and sustaining peace', p. 1, https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/pb_review_thematic_paper_orolsi_ddrs_-_role_of_ddr_in_pb_and_sp-final.pdf.
129 The Joint Military Commission 5+5, formed in 2020 to negotiate a nationwide ceasefire, has discussed issues surrounding DDR, agreeing that DDR programming should take place in conjunction with SSR. However, it has yet to develop a tangible programme. See Libya Observer (2022), 'Williams stresses the importance of DDR program to achieve security in the country', 26 May 2022, https://libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/williams-stresses-importance-ddr-program-achieve-security-country.
130 Maggi (2022), *Building security: How Europeans can help reform Libya*.
131 Chatham House review of existing projects, interviews with donors and practitioners, June–November 2023.
132 United Nations (2019), *The UN Approach to DDR*, p. 16, https://www.unddr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/IDDRS-2.10-The-UN-Approach-To-DDR.pdf.

and discussions often widen to include elements more traditionally associated with DDR itself, such as transitional management of weapons and ammunition as well as reducing community violence.

Third, trends in DDR are moving towards a more expansive programmatic approach and away from limited interventions that envisage a linear, stage-by-stage process. Emerging lessons from the Democratic Republic of the Congo – while contested – suggest that more diverse and forceful 'next-generation DDR' merits consideration. Unlike traditional DDR programming, next-generation DDR contains components that are highly relevant to the Libyan context.[133] It often begins before peace agreements are brokered; it is broader in scope, moving from limited interventions to activities connected with national development objectives; it is connected to SSR, transitional justice and state-building efforts; and, finally, it is conceived as a dynamic political process that is determined by local conditions.[134]

Mirroring policy discussions on the Libyan political process – where it is unanimously agreed that the political, security and economic tracks should be interconnected, but there is no agreement over how this can be achieved – effective DDR must be wedded to broader objectives and processes. Yet, in reality, the discussion over the scope of DDR programming reflects a debate over what is achievable in the current circumstances and with the resources currently available to the Libyan state and to international actors. This leads to a challenge in determining the bounds of any programme for pre-DDR or DDR proper.

Drawing on the findings of the analysis of the Misratan, Zawiyan and Zintani security sectors, the following sections of this chapter identify potential options for DDR programming that could be introduced in the current circumstances rather than limit recommendations to pre-DDR programming alone.

Trust and the continuing absence of a national settlement: the case for greater inclusivity

Greater inclusion of the Libyan people in the political process that is supposedly determining the country's post-conflict transition is a precondition for successful DDR. The testimony of residents of Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan makes it clear that there is a lack of trust in national-level institutions and in political developments taking place outside of their respective cities. They see a political process that remains the preserve of political and security elites who negotiate among themselves to hold on to power while offering little in the way of public goods. An environment in which political and security elites bargain with one another to divide access to and control of the state is enabling consolidation of authority in the hands of a few, and further empowering armed actors at the expense of the wider population. International actors should refrain from seeking to secure 'intra-elite' deals, and be careful about the extent to which they include armed actors in any discussion over the shape of Libya's future governance. Experiences

133 It is also noteworthy that that results in the DRC were improved where an element of coercion existed to drive DDR efforts. UN University (2016), 'The role of DDR in peacebuilding and sustaining peace', p. 1.
134 Ibid., p. 2.

in Iraq and Lebanon, as well as the last decade in Libya, show that internationally mediated efforts to forge bargains among political and security elites, in the interests of promoting stability, have perpetuated political systems that benefit those elites at the expense of citizens.[135]

Lack of trust means that there is little support among community members interviewed for the demobilization of local armed groups, which are seen as providing necessary protection for the interests of each city. Perceptions may vary – with Khalifa Haftar's forces being viewed as an existential threat by Misratan revolutionary factions, or residents of Zintan seeing armed groups as necessary guarantors of the city's economic interests – but it is social forces that continue to underpin the armed groups.

As this paper has emphasized, armed groups in Misrata, Zawiya and Zintan remain reliant, to varying degrees, on social legitimacy to be able to mobilize and to justify their actions. Previous analysis published by Chatham House argued that, rather than viewing Libya as a constellation of armed factions, it would be more accurate to note that it is an armed society.[136] Given these societal underpinnings, the most effective way of disempowering armed groups is to turn towards a broader, inclusive process to debate Libya's future, building momentum by ensuring civilians have agency within their own communities rather than continuing the drift towards the further empowerment of armed actors. Moving from limited discussions of stabilization to address more positive issues such as development and pursue more substantive discussions over the future of the security sector within the political process is also more likely to create momentum for DDR.

Locally calibrated approaches instead of a national strategy: arms for development?

Policymakers considering action to support DDR in the current context must deal with the reality that there is no accompanying national programme for SSR, for development or for governance reform of Libya's bloated and ineffective state structures.[137] This places severe limitations on what can be achieved in the interim. For instance, the lack of an SSR strategy means that there is no clarity over the future structures of the security sector, or the number of people required in the service, or the criteria for selecting them. Without this, the parameters and requirements for a national DDR programme remain unclear. Meanwhile, the absence of a national development plan makes it harder to support the creation of viable and attractive economic alternatives to joining armed groups. Moreover, while there is a degree of consensus over the need to decentralize political

135 Mansour, R., Eaton, T. and Khatib, L. (2023), *Rethinking political settlements in the Middle East and North Africa: How trading accountability for stability benefits elites and fails populations*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135652.
136 Eaton et al. (2020), *Libyan Armed Groups since 2014*.
137 At the time of writing, DCAF is in the process of finalizing a major consultation with Libyans across the three historical Libyan regions of western Libya (Tripolitania), eastern Libya (Cyrenaica – also known as Barca) and southern Libya (the Fezzan) on local perceptions of the desired future shape of the security sector. Notably, however, this is not a consultation led by the Libyan authorities.

authority, the decentralization of the security sector presents distinct challenges. Without a concept of the desired structure of the security sector, it is not possible to design SSR efforts at the local level.

There is, however, a growing realization internationally that the most workable structure for Libya's security sector will be one tailored to the country's highly localized status quo. For example, a study for the Clingendael Institute assesses that Libya requires a decentralized model of security provision that places 'territories and communities in charge of their own security based on a shared set of principles and rules'.[138] DCAF's in-depth 2021 study concluded that there can be 'no one-size-fits-all process' for designing a nationwide SSR blueprint in Libya.[139] Such framing is beneficial for the development of DDR programming.

The only workable solution in this context is to calibrate DDR efforts to the specificities of local contexts, and to mobilize resources into a flexible programme that might be replicated in other locations and expanded to the national level. This paper has illustrated the stark differences between the local contexts in Misrata, Zintan and Zawiya. Such differences highlight the need for any DDR programme to be designed according to the local context, with a recognition that what is required in one area is different to that in another. Here, it is important to note that specific dynamics in Tripoli and Benghazi – where heavily militarized armed groups control territory beyond the reach of the local social umbrella – are not mirrored across the country as a whole.

In determining how best to tailor DDR approaches to each context, it is critical to diagnose what elements will be most applicable in local circumstances.

In determining how best to tailor DDR approaches to each context, it is critical to diagnose what elements will be most applicable in local circumstances. Reflecting the structure of this paper, the discussion below identifies three key variables and suggests how differences in those variables might be reflected in programming objectives.

State of mobilization of local forces

The first key variable is the extent to which the forces in an area are permanently mobilized. In Misrata and Zintan, a large number of members of armed groups operate on an auxiliary basis, and thus may contend that they are already demobilized. In this context, DDR work is more feasible. The emphasis becomes centred on disarmament, or on weapons and ammunition management. Dialogue – perhaps facilitated by the UN and/or other international agencies – in cities such

138 Al-Shadeedi, van Veen and Harchaoui (2020), *One thousand and one failings: Security sector stabilisation and development in Libya*.
139 Badi, Gallet and Maggi (eds) (2021), *The Road to Stability: Rethinking Security Sector Reform in Post-Conflict Libya*, p. 63.

as Misrata and Zintan should seek to improve the management of weapons and ammunition as well as put in place safeguards and checks and balances to limit their use, in partnership with local communities. The creation of committees that provide an interface between citizens and armed groups to mediate these discussions could be beneficial. This will help alleviate issues surrounding the distribution of weaponry and seek to put an end to the shows of strength by non-state-affiliated armed groups in a city's vicinity. In Zintan, now that the majority of the city's armed actors are aligned against the GNU, there is currently an opportunity to engage armed groups to talk collectively about these issues for the first time since 2014. This may create problematic dynamics politically, given the antagonistic relationship of those groups to the GNU, but it also creates opportunities for consolidation of the local security sector.

In locations such as Zawiya, where armed groups are largely permanently mobilized, initiatives on weapons and ammunition management are likely to be more difficult to implement and should therefore not be a key focus. Moreover, these permanently mobilized groups are state-affiliated and therefore can argue that there is no need for them to demobilize; thus, DDR efforts must be wedded to broader SSR.

The degree of local social accountability

DDR programming efforts should seek to directly enhance local social accountability – the second key variable – in accordance with a shared set of principles and rules. In Misrata and Zintan, where social accountability mechanisms remain strong, internecine violence has remained limited. Particularly notable in this context are the dynamics around social mobilization in Misrata, and the efforts of social leaders in Zintan to avert direct fighting between factions supporting rival contenders for national government.

Such social accountability places meaningful checks on the behaviour of armed group at local level, while also tackling entrenched problems of impunity for abuses committed by their leaders. However, it also prevents the consolidation of the security sector under the formal chain of command of the state. The best way of navigating this conundrum is to pursue the agreement of a 'core' code of conduct that can be applied across Libya's territories, and that aims to provide citizens of any area with equal treatment, setting a common baseline with which a national SSR programme might engage. This is an area that international donors might consider supporting through partnerships with Libyan civil society and local government officials. Such an initiative should not be seen as a substitute to formal oversight of the sector as would ultimately be delivered through an SSR programme.

In cities such as Zawiya, the degree of violence witnessed in the community is significantly higher and social accountability is lower. There it is critical that programming efforts centre on reducing community violence through dialogue between armed groups and the community in order to increase social accountability. Again, as mentioned above, the creation of committees bringing together citizens and armed group representatives could provide a forum for such

discussions.[140] Existing funding of activities to demilitarize civic spaces and set up alternatives to recruitment into armed groups for young Libyans also provides a fertile route for 'pre-DDR'.

Economic opportunities

The third key variable is economic opportunity. Particularly in locations where armed groups are closely connected to organized crime dynamics, there is a need to foster alternative livelihoods not just for armed group members but also for the community as a whole. The absence of a national development plan and the limitations to work to decentralize political and financial authority complicate efforts in this area.

There is a need to set in place a programme to provide training and opportunities for former members of armed groups, as the defunct LPRD previously sought to do. This is something that the Ministry of Labour should explore in its efforts to take the government lead on DDR, and international co-funding and support could be utilized effectively for the initiative. In planning for such a programme, it will be important to understand why the LPRD had limited success in this area so as not to replicate any shortcomings. It is common for members of armed group to demobilize even without specific programmes to support them, so DDR should be seen as a continual process rather than a one-time opportunity. However, such efforts must go beyond money alone. One of the common errors of DDR thinking in Libya to date has been the assumption that combatants can simply be 'bought off'.[141] The financial incentives for remaining in an armed group may be very strong, but this is also not the only factor. Interviewed for this paper, a former member of one Zintani armed group noted that young men are highly attracted to the social status associated with belonging to a group.

A more ambitious route to pursue progress would be to provide economic incentives to local communities, via municipal councils, in return for progress on issues such as demobilization, weapons management and reducing community violence.

In keeping with the localized approach, training opportunities should be structured based on assessments of the local context, rather than on the basis of a 'one size fits all' national programme. The creation of local units that are afforded a degree of autonomy to develop context-specific initiatives may be the most effective way of doing this.

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140 International organizations have sought to support the creation of committees with some similar goals in some contexts, though the format suggested here would make them more substantive than they are at present. It is important to note that this would also bring risks for civilian participants should the relationship with powerful armed groups deteriorate. However, the potential risks could be mitigated through the development of clear terms of reference and agreement over the public messaging (if any) of the committees' work that takes place. Ultimately, international support would be required to back the committees.
141 Maggi (2022), *Building security: How Europeans can help reform Libya*.

A more ambitious route to pursue progress would be to provide economic incentives to local communities, via municipal councils, in return for progress on issues such as demobilization, weapons management and reducing community violence. There is debate among practitioners and policymakers over the extent to which DDR programming should be voluntary on the part of armed groups, yet in the Libyan context it would be a logical step to seek the buy-in of communities to place pressure on armed groups to participate.

Previously, there have been suggestions that the Libyan state could offer development funds in return for the relinquishing of arms.[142] While such proposals should be treated with caution, the relative absence of economic alternatives for communities where the participation of armed group in economic activities is high poses a considerable problem. The creation of a pot of funding for local development – potentially co-funded and overseen by the international community, and disbursed in return for commitments by communities and local armed groups to, for example, a moratorium on recruitment, or to no longer engage in commercial deals – could set in train a virtuous circle. Such support could form part of the emerging decentralization agenda, working through municipal councils that might apply for government grants or even put forward proposals for how development support would help their communities achieve DDR. Examples of successful use of such funding could then encourage other communities to pursue similar efforts.

Kickstarting a DDR agenda

In appraising potential pathways forward, a central dilemma remains. How can localized and disparate efforts at DDR be wedded to national approaches? Answering this question will require concerted coordination and dialogue between the Libyan authorities and international donors. The Libyan state's conceptions of DDR (and SSR) remain focused on a centralized approach that is ill-suited to realities on the ground. And while international donors have sought to fund projects at the local level, sharing a broad consensus on reducing community violence and increasing the accountability of armed groups to communities, they lack an agreed framework for cohering these efforts and replicating them. This gap highlights the need to transform the ongoing knowledge-sharing of international donor-funded activities into an internationally mediated forum with the ambition to craft a strategy in partnership with Libyan authorities. Without this, successes will remain isolated, and the conversation between Libyan state authorities and international donors will remain at cross purposes.

142 Sawani, Y. (2017), 'Security sector reform, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of militias: the challenges for state building in Libya', *Contemporary Arab Affairs,* 10(2), pp. 171–186, https://doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2017.1297564.

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Prior to joining Chatham House, Tim worked for BBC Media Action, the BBC's international development charity, on projects in Egypt, Iraq, Libya and Tunisia. In Libya, he helped to set up and manage BBC Media Action's bureau from 2013 to 2014.

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Cover image: Members of a military unit deployed in Zawiya, Libya, on 14 May 2023, following clashes between armed groups. Picture taken during a media tour organized by the Libyan defence ministry's media office.
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