

## List of Acronyms

Government of National Accord	GNA	General National Congress	GNC
Government of National Salvation	GNS	Jabhat al-Samud	JAS
Libyan National Army	LNA	Libyan National Guard	LNG
Special Deterrence Force	Rada	Tripoli Revolutionaries' Brigade	TRB

## Executive Summary

Although two different governments—the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Government of National Salvation (GNS)—operate out of the Libyan capital of Tripoli, the most powerful actors in the city are in reality local militias and gangs. These armed groups take on many shades, ranging from de facto security and law enforcement units to illegal smuggling, drug trafficking, and kidnapping rings. It is therefore unsurprising that these militias and gangs regularly clash with one another, exacerbating the city's endemic instability.

Conflicts between armed groups and divided loyalties to the two governments have split Tripoli between East (GNA) and West (GNS) with each half controlled by a rival government and its militia allies, resulting in a municipal schism which serves as a microcosm of the GNA's national-level failures. The UN-backed unity government is wholly reliant upon militias for military teeth, it has failed to unite a polarized country, and it has been unable to stabilize Libya in the face of the crises that have plagued the country since the 2011 Revolution. If the GNA is to succeed in resolving the Libyan political crisis and uniting the country, it must make greater strides to disarm the rampant militias and must reintegrate them into the government's fledgling security apparatus, the Presidential Guard. Demonstrating to the rest of Libya and the international community that the GNA, not local militias, is in control of Tripoli would greatly enhance the unity government's position; otherwise, the GNA's viability, both inside Libya's capital and throughout the country, will continue to erode.

## Background

Tripoli ostensibly represents the Government of National Accord's (GNA) base of power; however, the real kingmakers in Libya's capital are the myriad militias and gangs which run roughshod over the city. The GNA, headed by PM Fayez al-Sarraj, is only able to conduct its affairs in Tripoli with the backing of powerful militias such as the Special Deterrence Force (Rada) and the Tripoli Revolutionaries' Brigade (TRB). Even then, the UN-backed government's position in the capital is precarious, imperiled by violent clashes between rival armed groups fighting over territory, economic interests, and political affiliations. As such,

Tripolitan militias play roles both as facilitator and spoiler as the unity government attempts to resolve the Libyan political crisis. Additionally, the Sarraj government's dependence on allied militias, coupled with the body's inability to subdue the criminal gangs and rival militias which control much of the city, highlight the GNA's weakness and undermine its credibility. In order for the GNA to advance its core mission of resolving the Libyan political crisis, it must secure its position in Tripoli by integrating the city's militias into the government's nascent security force, the Presidential Guard, through which it might stabilize the capital and thereafter, the rest of the country.



Figure 1 : The Rada Special Deterrence Force—SDF

Tripoli's strongest militias have their roots in the 2011 Libyan Revolution, during which many of their leaders and rank-and-file fought to overthrow Mu'ammar Gaddafi's regime. After Gaddafi was deposed, the ensuing security vacuum saw the victorious revolutionary militias used as stopgap security forces. As such, the National Transitional Council (NTC) and its predecessor, the General National Congress (GNC), continued paying militias to keep the peace in Tripoli, and armed groups proliferated following the Gaddafi regime's fall. According to a post-Revolution 2011 International Crisis Group report, over 125,000 Libyans were armed,<sup>1</sup> while by 2014, on the eve of the Second Libyan Civil War, the Libyan Programme for Reintegration & Disarmament reported at least 30 percent of Libyan families owned firearms.<sup>2</sup> After nearly three years of civil war, as militias on all sides have further entrenched themselves, this figure stands to be even higher.

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To a certain degree, all of Tripoli's armed groups operate outside the express confines of the law;

however, differentiating between the city's militias and criminal gangs is key. For many Tripolitan militias, their raison d'être is providing security in an otherwise lawless city. For instance, Rada functions as the GNA's de facto police force, combatting terrorist threats and criminal activity across the city. Smaller militias function as defensive forces and operate largely within the confines of their own neighborhoods. To fund themselves, many armed groups impose "protection fees" on civilians while others, especially hardline salafi militias, are also bankrolled by wealthy Libyans living abroad. The most prominent and powerful groups, such as Rada and the TRB, are government-funded. On the other hand, in addition to extortion in the form of "protection fees", criminal gangs also profit considerably from kidnapping, smuggling, and drug trafficking operations. Additionally, some gangs organized along ethnic lines, such as the Amazigh (Berber) organizations in West Tripoli, also strive

1 "Holding Libya Together," International Crisis Group, 14 December 2011.

2 "Integration and Disarmament Programme Strategy," The Libyan Programme for Reintegration & Development, July 2014.

to protect the interests of their respective ethnic groups. These ethnically-oriented gangs embody a widespread lack of faith in Libya's competing governments to safeguard the rights of ethnic minorities, but they also further destabilize Tripoli and present an obstacle to national reconciliation.

### The GNS, Ghwell, and the Libyan National Guard

Today, armed groups largely determine Tripoli's political, economic, and social dynamics, with the capital divided between militias loyal to two competing governments—PM Sarraj's GNA and former PM Khalifa Ghwell's resurgent Government of National Salvation (GNS). Since the latter's attempted coup d'état in October 2016 (also known as the Rixos



Figure 2 : Col. Mahmoud al-Zagal meets with LNG commanders in Tripoli

Coup) the city has witnessed bursts of violence between GNA and GNS-aligned forces. The ongoing competition between the two governments to gain control of Tripoli is the underlying impetus of these clashes; however, initial bursts of violence more often resemble gang-like turf wars and tit-for-tat retaliations rather than strategic moves in a political chess match.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Tripoli has witnessed several tense months of sporadic

inter-militia fighting, culminating with GNS-aligned groups announcing the formation of the Libyan National Guard (LNG) which pledged to stabilize Libya and protect the country from terrorism.<sup>4</sup>

Headed by Col. Mahmoud al-Zagal, the LNG is composed predominantly of Amazigh gangs from West Tripoli and Islamist militias from Misrata. The Amazigh gangs flourished in the security vacuum following Gaddafi's ouster, and they have prospered financially from the drug trafficking and kidnapping industries endemic to post-Revolution Tripoli. As such, the gangs have been a primary target of Rada's anti-trafficking and anti-kidnapping efforts. Following Rada's arrest on 14 January 2017 of high-profile Amazigh gang leader Adel Sifau, nicknamed "al-Sheetta", the gangs banded together and declared their territory in West Tripoli a closed military zone. Interestingly, they also affirmed their commitment to combatting Daesh's terrorist operations in the region.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, in a separate

3 Intermittent clashes between militias are, at times, motivated by rival governments pitting their militia allies against one another, but more often than not, inter-militia fighting is characterized by gang-like competition for territory or retaliatory measures against a member being kidnapped or killed by a rival group. In early February 2017, intense fighting between two militias from the Tripolitan neighborhoods of al-Janzour and Wershefana broke out when a member of the latter militia was caught and killed attempting to steal a car from the al-Janzour militia. Tit-for-tat inter-militia clashes are common throughout Libya with recent eruptions of violence in Sabha and al-Zawia resulting in dozens of deaths.

4 "Declaration Announcing the Foundation of the 'National Guard'," Libya Panorama, 9 February 2017, <https://goo.gl/cINuHD>.

5 salem.Ghanem3, Twitter Post, 16 January 2017, 4:29 AM, <https://goo.gl/1PEhtK>.

statement, Amazigh leaders declared their opposition to eastern Libya's strongman, Gen. Khalifa Haftar. In their statement, leaders from the High Council of Libyan Amazigh accused what they derisively call the "Libyan Arab Army", more commonly referred to as the Libyan National Army (LNA), of usurping Libya's sovereign power. Gen. Haftar's LNA is the blunt end of his anti-Islamist Operation Dignity, launched in 2014, which clashed with Amazigh forces in Tripoli. Though neither the LNA nor Operation Dignity are exclusively Arab, Amazigh gangs see Gen. Haftar's forces as an existential threat to both Amazigh and Tripolitan autonomy.<sup>6</sup>

The most prominent Misratan militia under the LNG banner is Saleh Badi's Jabhat al-Samud (JAS), a long-time backer of Ghowell's rump government. Badi came to prominence during the 2011 Revolution and was elected to the GNC in 2012. However, with the outbreak of the Second Libyan Civil War in 2014, Badi led JAS as a constituent militia under the Libya Dawn coalition, an Islamist-dominated umbrella group formed to combat Gen. Haftar's Operation Dignity. Despite the dissolution of Libya Dawn and the creation of the Sarraj-led GNA in 2015, Badi and JAS have continued their staunch support for Ghowell. Following the October 2016 Rixos Coup, JAS has clashed with Rada and other GNA allies attempting to dislodge Ghowell and the GNS from Tripoli.

Leading up to the LNG's establishment, other Misratan armed groups who, until December 2016, were members of the anti-Daesh al-Bunyan al-Marsous coalition, reinforced JAS in Tripoli. Now, with the LNG's combined force of Amazigh gangs and Misratan armed groups, Ghowell and his allies control large swaths of western Tripoli. The LNG, particularly its Misratan component, is rabidly Islamist in nature and is supported by Libya's former Grand Mufti, al-Sadeq al-Ghiryani. The cleric is a vehement opponent of the GNA and Rada, and has previously argued that the sins of consuming drugs, alcohol, or pork would all be preferable for Libyans to maintaining Rada.<sup>7</sup> Though the political and economic drivers behind this coalition differ from group to group, they are united in their hatred of their common enemies: Daesh, Gen. Haftar, the GNA and Rada.

### The GNA and its allied militias

As demonstrated through its anti-trafficking and anti-kidnapping campaigns, as well as its periodic confrontations with GNS-aligned forces, Rada is determined to combat what it views as destabilizing forces in Tripoli. Additionally, since the GNA's arrival in Tripoli in March 2016, Rada has been one of the UN-backed government's most effective partners in combating crime and terrorism in the capital. Led by Abdul-Ra'uf Kara, Rada has broken up Daesh cells, kidnapping rings, and drug and weapons trafficking operations alike. Recently,

6 Abdulkader Assad, "Amazigh High Council expresses preparedness to fight so-called Libyan Arab Army," *The Libya Observer*, 6 February 2017, <https://goo.gl/SnbDMj>.

7 Sami Zaptia, "Drugs, alcohol and pork are preferable to Rada or attacks on BDB: Mufti Ghariani," *Libya Herald*, 10 January 2017, <https://goo.gl/xgBhBX>.



the GNA even commissioned Rada to protect cooking gas distribution centers, highlighting the Sarraj administration's reliance on Rada to enforce basic law and order in the city.

However, despite Rada's influential position in Tripoli, Kara and his forces affirm that they are an apolitical fighting unit, primarily concerned with re-establishing the rule of law in the capital.<sup>8</sup> Though the militia is highly Islamist in nature, Kara and many members of Rada follow a unique brand of salafism espoused by the Saudi cleric Rabi' al-Madkhali whose followers, colloquially known as *madkhalis*, reject all forms of political Islam and advocate instead for coordinating with the powers that be. These quietist salafis have willingly worked within the framework of the Libyan government, regardless of whether that meant the now-defunct GNC, the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, or the current GNA. Furthermore, its *madkhali* rejection of political Islamist movements has positioned Rada as an ideal partner for GNA in its efforts to combat Daesh's presence in Libya as well as the kidnapping, smuggling, and weapons and drug trafficking rampant in the capital.<sup>9</sup>

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Nevertheless, Rada's dogged fight against criminal activity often smacks of vigilante justice resulting in the summary execution of drug dealers and kidnappers. Additionally, Kara's salafi ideology heavily influences his militia's zeal for combating all forms of what it deems moral corruption. Dating back to 2012, the group has been accused of brutally assaulting alcohol vendors, women unaccompanied by male guardians, and, in particular, homosexuals.<sup>10</sup>

Haytham Tajuri's TRB, a Rada ally and the largest militia in Tripoli, tacitly backs the GNA, but the militia tends towards political ambivalence. The TRB's primary focus seems to be protecting substantial financial interests stemming from its control of businesses in central Tripoli. Nevertheless, the TRB periodically abandons its neutral tone when the GNA's opponents, particularly Ghwell and his supporters, threaten the Sarraj-government's position in Tripoli. Most notably, when Ghwell and his forces seized control of GNA government buildings, including the Ministry of Defense, on 12 January 2017, the TRB quickly declared a state of emergency in the capital. Tajuri also issued a call-to-arms of his forces,<sup>11</sup> with a combination of TRB and Rada operatives regaining control of the seized buildings shortly thereafter.

In addition to the most powerful Tripolitan militias—Rada and the TRB—the GNA also enjoys the support of smaller groups such as Fursan al-Janzur, the Bab Tajura Brigade, and the

8 Osman Heshri, "SSC still necessary – Abdel Raouf Kara," Security Assistant Monitor, 13 September 2013, <https://goo.gl/d639wf>.

9 For more on madkhali fighters in Libya, see TSN Special Report: Jihadist and Islamist Groups in Libya.

10 Jamie Dettmer, "Meet the Islamic Fanatic That Wants to Kill ISIS," The Daily Beast, 10 June 2015, <https://goo.gl/f90AqZ>.

11 Libyan Observatory Newspaper, Twitter Post, 12 January 2017, 4:19 PM, <https://goo.gl/S7tIF9>.

Abu Saleem Security Force. Many of these militias arose out of the 2011 Revolution and fought within Libya Dawn at the onset of the Second Libyan Civil War. Today, however, as is the case for most of Libya's estimated 1,600 armed groups, they generally function as local security units for their respective towns and neighborhoods due to a lack of a centralized security force.<sup>12</sup> Like Rada and TRB, these armed groups have at times confronted GNS-aligned militias and gangs, and the GNA has also employed some of them to protect commodity distribution centers.

### The Presidential Guard

Disarming and integrating Tripoli's militias into a centralized security apparatus is of paramount importance for the GNA. Beginning in Tripoli, Sarraj's government has made progress in establishing and training its Presidential Guard, the cornerstone of a government-run security force. The Presidential Guard is currently training around 1,000 recruits, and a small number of graduated units have been deployed to protect ministry buildings and members of Libya's executive body, the Presidential Council. However, Gen. Najmi al-Naku'a, the Presidential Guard's commander, indicated that the security force will need between 3,000 and 4,000 troops in order to successfully secure Tripoli and its surrounding region.<sup>13</sup> For now, without the military and security muscle of friendly Tripolitan militias, the Sarraj government's capacity to enforce its policies and enhance its standing in the capital, much less the rest of the country, is negligible. Therefore, it is not surprising that the international community, including the United States, Italy, and Turkey, have emphasized the importance of training the Presidential Guard.<sup>14</sup>



Figure 3 : GNA Minister of Defense Mahdi al-Barghathi inspecting Presidential Guard graduates

### Conclusion

Since the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 and the ensuing political crises, Tripoli's multitude of militias and gangs have flourished and are today more powerful and influential than ever. Both governments present in the city—the UN-backed GNA and the resurgent GNS—depend on armed groups for military support, making them the true ruling forces in Libya's chaotic capital. The armed groups' combative and polarizing nature has exacerbated the security crisis, and as a result, like Libya itself, Tripoli is effectively divided between East

12 "Report: Militias, Tribes and Islamists," Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (Belgium, Netherlands, Norway and Sweden), 19 December 2014, Pg. 7.

13 Célian Macé, "A Tripoli, la création d'une garde présidentielle est devenue une nécessité," Libération, 17 February 2017, <https://goo.gl/bDOph1>.

14 Jonathan Winer (Former U.S. Special Envoy for Libya) in discussion with Fredric Wehrey, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 January 2017, <https://goo.gl/FVbNM4>.

and West with each half controlled by armed groups competing for territorial, economic, and political hegemony.

Both the GNA and the international community realize that before the UN-backed government can effectively address the abundance of issues impeding Libyan reconciliation, the unity government must first get its Tripolitan shop in order. As such, the faltering GNA is working—albeit slowly—to loosen the armed groups’ tight grip on Tripoli by disarming its militia allies and reintegrating them into the Presidential Guard. However, until the GNA’s legitimate security apparatus can effectively enforce the government’s will, the Sarraj administration’s credibility will continue to falter, stability in Tripoli will remain shaky at best, and the militias will maintain their position of dominance in the Libyan capital.





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Istanbul  
Tunis  
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# THE STABILISATION NETWORK

