



#### List of Acronyms

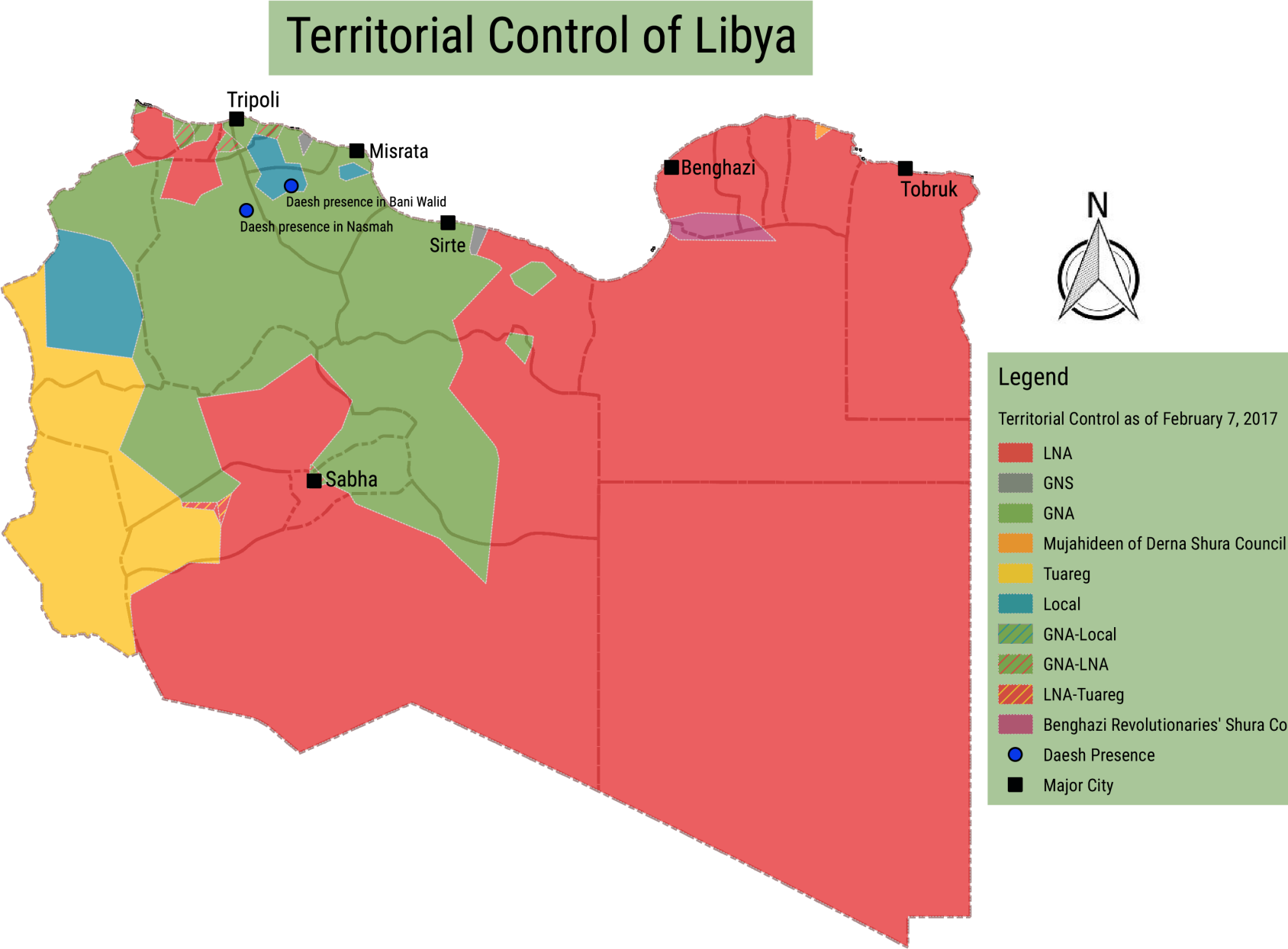
Ansar al-Shari'a	AS	Al-Qa'ida	AQ
Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade	ASMB	Al-Bunyan al-Marsous	BAM
Benghazi Defense Brigades	BDB	Benghazi Revolutionaries' Shura Council	BRSC
Government of National Accord	GNA	General National Congress	GNC
Libyan Islamic Fighting Group	LIFG	Libyan National Army	LNA
Special Deterrence Force	Rada	Violent Extremist Organization	VEO

#### Executive Summary

Violent extremist organizations (VEOs) have played a central role in the Libyan crisis since the country's revolution erupted in 2011. They flourished following the outbreak of the so-called Second Libyan Civil War in 2014, reaching their high-water mark in 2015 when Daesh controlled the urban centers of Derna and Sirte, and Al-Qa'ida (AQ)-affiliate Ansar al-Shari'a (AS) firmly embedded itself in Benghazi. However, both VEOs suffered serious defeats in 2016, with the Bunyan al-Marsous (BAM) coalition ousting Daesh from its stronghold in Sirte in early December 2016, and Gen. Khalifa Haftar's anti-Islamist "Operation Dignity" confining AS and its allies to a few neighborhoods in Benghazi.

Following its defeat in Sirte, reports indicate that Daesh is establishing insurgent cells to the south and east of Tripoli, with the organization focusing on small-scale terrorist attacks targeting Libyan infrastructure. This strategy has proven effective thus far at depriving essential services from civilians which in itself undermines the legitimacy of the struggling UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). Should the GNA fail and a new power struggle ensue, VEOs in Libya, including both AS and Daesh, will greatly benefit from the subsequent instability. Moreover, staunch anti-Haftar Islamist militias aligned with the GNA might rally around AS's banner, bringing moderate Islamist forces into the more radical fold.

Providing national security, political agency, and economic opportunity are paramount to preventing a resurgence of VEOs in Libya. However, military escalation between the GNA and Gen. Haftar and further economic deterioration mean that, in early 2017, it is possible that VEOs might yet succeed in steering Libya down an extremist course.



## Background

The blight of violent extremist organizations in Libya captured the world's attention in February 2015 when Daesh released a video showing its members summarily executing 21 Egyptian Coptic Christian civilians on the shores of the Mediterranean. Following the executions, a Daesh spokesperson declared that the organization "will conquer Rome," pointing his knife across the sea towards Europe.<sup>1</sup> This tragic, dramatic display of violence shocked the international community, drawing significant attention to VEOs operating in Libya. However, extremist groups had been playing a role in the Libyan political crisis since the very outbreak of the Libyan Revolution in February 2011. Al-Qa'ida affiliates the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and Ansar al-Shari'a (AS) both fought to overthrow Muammar al-Gaddafi's regime,<sup>2</sup> and the former even participated in the election of the General National Congress (GNC) in 2012. Following the resumption of conflict in 2014 and subsequent political vacuum (the so-called "Second Libyan Civil War"), salafi-jihadist organizations in Libya thrived. At the zenith of VEO control in 2015, Daesh had established strongholds in Derna and Sirte, while AS was firmly entrenched in Benghazi. Since then, both Daesh and AS have suffered a series of defeats at the hands of anti-extremist coalitions and rival Islamist organizations alike, including non-jihadist salafi militias. Nevertheless, Libya's jihadist milieu still poses a significant threat to the country's security and economic stability, as well as to that of European nations.



*Figure 1 : Daesh operatives leading 21 Coptic Christian civilians to be executed*

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- 1 "A message signed with blood to the nation of the cross," Al-Hayat, 13 February 2015.
  - 2 As reported in the Sinjar Records, a significant number of LIFG members gained battlefield experience fighting alongside Al-Qa'ida in Iraq in the 2000s. These fighters later returned to Libya and took part in the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011.

## Islamic State (Daesh)—Wilayats Barqa, Tarablus, and Fezzan

In December 2014, Daesh “Caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi officially recognized Daesh’s presence in Libya, announcing the establishment of wilayats (provinces) roughly approximating the borders of Libya’s Roman provinces: Wilayat Barqa (Cyrenaica, east), Wilayat Tarablus (Tripolitania, west), and Wilayat Fezzan (south). Prior to its losses in late 2016, Daesh operated out of two urban strongholds, Derna in Wilayat Barqa and Sirte in Wilayat Tarablus. However, Daesh proved ineffectual at manipulating tribal rivalries or co-opting the Libyan revolutionary spirit, and as such, the organization’s power remained predominantly confined to Sirte and Derna where it recruited both marginalized youth and defectors from rival Islamist groups. Moreover, even in these cities, Daesh’s reliance on foreign leadership to carry out its extremist *manhaj* (ideological method) alienated many locals,<sup>3</sup> with the organization eventually suffering its first defeat when it was ousted from Derna by the Abu Salim Martyrs Brigade (ASMB), an anti-Daesh militia comprised primarily of Islamists and former LIFG members.



Figure 2 : Daesh’s map of Libya, showing the three “provinces” of Tarablus, Barqa, and Fezzan

Retreating from Derna, Daesh re-established itself in Sirte, from which it staged a series of deadly suicide attacks in Libya’s western region of Tarablus (Tripoli), while small groups of Daesh operatives also embedded themselves in the eastern city of Benghazi. In the latter, Daesh fought alongside the Islamist Benghazi Revolutionaries’ Shura Council (BRSC) against Gen. Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) and the anti-Islamist “Operation Dignity”.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Daesh was able to poach fighters from other Islamist groups in Benghazi, such

3 Following his recognition of Daesh’s presence in Libya, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appointed the high-ranking Iraqi Daesh leader, Abu Nabil al-Anbari, emir of the nascent Libyan wilayats. Additionally, Baghdadi sent the Yemeni judge, Abu al-Bar’a al-Azdi, to lead the organization’s shari’a courts in Libya. While Libyans composed the majority of Daesh’s operatives the country, a substantial proportion of its rank-and-file were foreign fighters from across the Islamic Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa. Several hundred fighters came from Tunisia alone.

4 AQ affiliate AS is a member of the BRSC, meaning Daesh indirectly cooperated with AQ in Benghazi.



as AS and Libya Shield, another VEO member of the BRSC coalition. However, as was the case in Derna, the competition for members caused significant friction between Daesh and other VEOs, weakening the former's position. Nevertheless, the group's most crippling defeat did not come until December 2016 when the anti-Daesh BAM coalition, led by the UN-backed GNA, successfully liberated Sirte. Over 2,500 Daesh fighters were killed in the battle for Sirte, with the organization's operational capacities left drastically diminished as a result.<sup>5</sup>

However, hundreds of Daesh operatives were able to flee Sirte prior to the city's liberation, and reports suggest they have since established insurgent cells in the Bani Walid region southeast of Tripoli City. Additionally, around 70 Daesh operatives broke through the LNA's siege lines in Benghazi's Ganfouda district and fled south towards Ajdabiyya on 5 January 2017. While Operation Dignity forces captured and killed a number of militants, reports conflict on how many Daesh fighters managed to escape. Those who did manage to successfully flee are likely to have joined the Daesh cadres in Bani Walid or, indeed, may have established additional cells south of Benghazi from which to stage attacks on Libya's vital "Oil Crescent" region.

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Attacks on Libya's oil facilities would fit well into the group's emerging strategy of targeting vital infrastructure in order to disrupt daily life. Since BAM ousted Daesh from Sirte, the organization has conducted two attacks targeting Libya's Great Man-Made River (al-Nahr al-Sina'i al-Adhim) which supplies water to urban centers in the North.<sup>6</sup> Though small in scale, these attacks have proven highly effective, denying con-

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sistent potable water to residents of Tripoli City and surrounding areas for nearly a month. Furthermore, and equally important, the attacks highlighted the GNA's inability to provide security or guarantee essential public services, corroding the body's authority and support. The GNA's continued failure is likely to further destabilize the situation in Libya, presenting Daesh with an opportunity to exploit yet another wave of

political chaos and social discontent (See: TSN Special Report: A Primer on Libya's GNA).

For now, however, it is likely that Daesh will continue conducting small-scale attacks, biding its time until open conflict between eastern and western Libyan factions provides an ideal opportunity for Daesh to replenish its ranks with new recruits, enhancing the organization's offensive capabilities. Additionally, Daesh is likely to utilize camps and cells in Libya to recruit operatives to plan terrorist attacks in Europe. One such camp was the target of a US air strike launched on 19 January which killed 80 militants. Former US

5 "Al-Ghasri: 2500 IS radicals were killed in Sirte battle," The Libya Observer, 18 December 2016. <https://goo.gl/TrDiuS>.

6 The Great Man-Made River is a series of pipes which provides water to some of Libya's desert regions, sourced from the Nubian Sandstone Aquifer. It is the world's largest irrigation project.

Defense Secretary Ashton Carter suggested that the targeted camp was connected to an attack on 19 December 2016 in which a Tunisian terrorist drove a truck into a crowded Christmas market in Berlin, killing twelve.<sup>7</sup> Following this air strike, former US Department of Defense Press Secretary Peter Cook stated that the US “remains prepared to further support Libyan efforts to counter terrorist threats and to defeat ISIL (Daesh)...preventing them from establishing safe haven.”<sup>8</sup> Although US AFRICOM’s anti-Daesh “Operation Odyssey Lightning”, aimed at eradicating Daesh from Sirte, has been completed, it is likely that the US will continue providing air support in the GNA’s battle against the group.

### **Ansar al-Shari’a (AS)—Al-Qa’ida’s foothold in Libya**

Libya’s most prominent VEO after Daesh is AS, the perpetrator of the 2012 attack on the US diplomatic mission in Benghazi, which killed Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. As mentioned above, AS has participated in the Libyan conflict since violence erupted in 2011. Subsequently, the group has cultivated prestige as a champion of the Libyan revolution. Furthermore, Libyans compose the group’s membership and leadership.



*Figure 3 : A man in Benghazi waving an AS flag*

Harnessing its nationally-focused “revolutionary” image, AS is able to attract local support more effectively than Daesh, and in the first two years of the Second Libyan Civil War, the group enjoyed significant military success.<sup>9</sup> However, like Daesh, AS has suffered a series of defeats throughout 2016, culminating in a drawn out siege in Benghazi by Gen.

Haftar’s forces. Previously, its Misratan backers were able to resupply the AS-dominated BRSC by sea, prolonging the siege; however, the LNA’s no-sail-zone and the Misratans’ capricious support for BRSC drastically reduced the group’s ability to combat Gen. Haftar’s forces. His Dignity Coalition methodically snuffed out BRSC resistance throughout Benghazi, and on 25 January 2017, LNA commanders announced the complete liberation of the Ganfouda district, BRSC’s last major foothold in the city.<sup>10</sup> Now that it has been largely ousted from the city, BRSC is likely to continue the fight against Gen. Haftar’s Dignity Coalition in the

7 Paul Cruickshank, “US bombing in Libya was linked to Berlin truck attack,” CNN, 23 January 2017, <https://goo.gl/KbG5Yo>.

8 Peter Cook, “Statement by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook on Airstrikes in Libya,” U.S. Department of Defense, 19 January 2017, <https://goo.gl/Up7eB6>.

9 In response to Gen. Haftar’s anti-Islamist offensive at the onset of the war, in June 2014 AS helped form (and dominate) BRSC as an extremist umbrella group. In the following months, BRSC reversed the Dignity Coalition’s initial gains and seized control of large swaths of Benghazi.

10 Ahmed al-Mismari, Twitter Post, 24 January 2017, 2:33 PM, <https://goo.gl/P5aUYZ>.

rural areas surrounding Benghazi and south of the Oil Crescent, albeit in a limited capacity.<sup>11</sup> To an even greater extent than Daesh, AS and its BRSC allies stand to benefit from the GNA's fragility. Should the UN-backed government fail, its allied militias, many of whom are Islamist, are highly unlikely to simply surrender to Gen. Haftar and his anti-Islamist coalition. As such, the AS-dominated BRSC would represent an ideal banner around which anti-Haftar forces could coalesce. As mentioned above, Misratans have sporadically supported BRSC since 2014, and both groups are highly Islamist in nature. Should the Misratans turn from the floundering GNA and look to form a new coalition, AS and BRSC may likely reap the benefits, bringing moderate Islamists into their more radical fold.

### Non-Jihadist Islamist Actors

Though Daesh and AAS are Libya's primary VEOs, many other non-jihadist Islamist militias are active in the country. While the extremist LIFG is now defunct, many of its former members have joined other Islamist militias such as ASMB in Derna, as mentioned above. Tripoli's former grand mufti and salafist advocate, al-Sadeq al-Ghiryani, staunchly supports ASMB in addition to other Islamist groups such as the Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB) who fight alongside BRSC against Gen. Haftar's LNA. Though BDB have attempted to paint themselves



Figure 4 : Special Deterrence Force operative in Tripoli

as a moderate counterweight to Gen. Haftar's forces, many of the group's cadres are in fact hard-line salafists. The LNA is purging BDB as well as BRSC from Benghazi, but the group is looking to continue its fight against Gen. Haftar on other fronts.<sup>12</sup>

In the West, numerous Misratan and Tripolitan militias are both Islamist-dominated and fiercely anti-Haftar. Many of them joined the anti-Daesh BAM coalition while others, such as Tripoli's Special Deterrence Forces (Rada), function more in a local security capacity. Rada has positioned itself as Tripoli's de facto police force, and the group regularly conducts raids on kidnapping rings, drug dens, and weapons caches. The GNA has praised Rada for these efforts and recently tasked the militia with protecting cooking gas

11 In early December, an armed group launched a failed assault to capture the Oil Crescent ports of Ben Jawad and Nufliya. No group has claimed responsibility for the attack; however, senior LNA officers accuse the GNA's Defense Minister-designate, al-Mahdi al-Barghathi, and the Petroleum Facilities Guards (PFG) commander, Ibrahim Jadhran, of commanding the assault force composed of BRSC, BDB, and PFG units. For more, see "LNA retake Ben Jawad and Nufliya," Libya Herald, 7 December 2016, <https://goo.gl/6syaHJ>.

12 The LNA Air Force conducted a strike on 3 January 2017 targeting alleged BDB and BRSC camps in the Jufra region south of Sirte. However, ranking Misratan and BAM officials were wounded in the attack, leading to accusations from the LNA that Misratan forces were colluding with BDB and BRSC.

distribution centers from possible attacks.<sup>13</sup> Many of Rada's rank-and-file follow a peculiar, apolitical brand of salafism inspired by the Saudi cleric, Rabi' al-Madkhali. Commonly known as Madkhalis, these salafis condemn all forms of political Islam and are staunchly opposed to Islamist groups, moderate and jihadist alike. As such, many Madkhali salafis have joined Gen. Haftar's coalition to combat BRSC, BDB, MDSC, and other Islamists in the East, clearly indicating that the secular/Islamist dichotomy does not uniformly apply to Libya's factional divisions.<sup>14</sup>

Like the clashes between ASMB and Daesh, the Madkhali opposition to Islamist and jihadist groups underlines the complexity of the various coalitions operating in Libya and their heterogeneous relationships with Islamist actors. Libya's Islamist-jihadist dynamic is also characterized by a three-tiered divide between the country's generations of Islamists. The first generation, which fought Soviet forces in Afghanistan, established the LIFG in 1995. Many LIFG militants are now reformed or retired jihadis, and, as previously mentioned, former members participated in Libya's post-revolution political transition. Their participation in and acceptance of the democratic process was largely rejected by Libya's second and third generations of jihadis, which fought in Iraq in 2003, and in Iraq and Syria beginning in 2012, respectively. While older Libyan jihadis are willing to work within the democratic process to achieve their political objectives, the two younger generations categorically reject democratic institutions and advocate for the immediate imposition of shari'a law. It is these two younger cohorts who are most receptive to the swift manhaj of Daesh and, to a lesser extent, that of AQ. Furthermore, Libya's youth suffers from crippling unemployment, last reported in 2014 by the World Bank at 38.7 percent amongst Libyan males aged 15-24. Considering the country's economic deterioration since that time, the actual rate stands to be much higher now.<sup>15</sup> Without economic opportunities or political agency, Libya's youth will become increasingly more susceptible to indoctrination and incorporation into the extremist milieu.

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## Conclusion

While Daesh and AS no longer control significant territory, both organizations will continue to operate as insurgent networks, striking at Libya's infrastructure and targeting the various military coalitions when they are able. They no longer existentially threaten Libya as they did in 2014-2015, and their ability to hold an urban center is almost non-existent. However, the likelihood of full-scale military conflict between the GNA and Gen. Haftar's LNA—Libya's

13 Sami Zaptia, "Armed security for Tripoli's cooking gas cylinder depots," Libya Herald, 18 January 2017, <https://goo.gl/YmtWNX>.

14 Mary Fitzgerald & Mattia Toaldo, "A Quick Guide to Libya's Main Players," European Council on Foreign Relations, <https://goo.gl/cmHJq1>.

15 "Unemployment, youth male (% of male labor force ages 15-24)," The World Bank, accessed 23 January 2017, <https://goo.gl/vAq7qF>.



twin political poles of legitimacy—is growing rapidly. Skirmishes between the two sides broke out in December 2016 and January 2017, and a broadening of clashes between the GNA and the LNA, were it to come to pass, would be disastrous for the country’s stability. Though the majority of Libya’s Islamists are relatively moderate and willing to function within the democratic process, military escalation and any subsequent chaos would provide ideal conditions, similar to those in 2014, for Daesh and other VEOs to actively recruit and re-establish themselves as major players in Libya’s future.



Amman  
Dubai  
Erbil  
Istanbul  
Tunis  
Washington



# THE STABILISATION NETWORK

