

## EU LIAISON AND PLANNING CELL LIBYA

**15 May 2023 - Muammar al-Dhawi, Commander of the 55th Infantry Brigade  
Note**



### **Evolution of the 55<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion and its leader**

The 55th Infantry Battalion, formerly known as Company 55, is a key security stakeholder in Warshefana, which has gained significance over the past few months.

Muammar al-Dhawi and Ramzi al-Lafa established the 55th Infantry Battalion, at the time Company 55, during the 2014 war. The group, mostly made up of Warshefana tribal elements, was created as an auxiliary combat force for Zintani groups. Warshefana is considered an area with a high criminal density. Many people were robbed and attacked once they crossed the region on their way to Tripoli. It is strategically positioned because the roads to Tripoli run through it.

One of the Zintani group leaders was Eemad Trabelsi, currently Mol and, among others, responsible for the role out of the current Tripoli Security Plan. At that time, the Libya Dawn Coalition pushed the Zintani groups out of Tripoli.

When the coalition tried to push into Al-Azizya, the Warshefana fighters coalesced to defend their positions. As a result, the Fajr coalition withdrew after two months of offensives. Within this context, the 55<sup>th</sup> emerged under the recalled leadership of Al-Dhawi and Al-Lafa. As mentioned above, the battalion was mostly composed of tribal elements, as Al-Dhawi recruited within his own kin, the Awlad Embarek. During the first few years of its existence, in the absence of institutional financial backing, the 55<sup>th</sup> engaged in kidnapping, extortion, and criminality. The Zintani Groups were eventually pushed out of the area by the growing insecurity, which they were unable to control. Multiple sources indicated that, at some point, between 2014 and 2017, Al-Dhawi and Al-Lafa parted ways, with the latter going on to establish the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Company.

In the following years, the Battalion would go on to receive the financial backing of Osama Al-Juwaili, the uncle of Emad Trabelsi, at the time Commander of the Government of National Accord's (GNA) Western Military Zone. Al-Juwaili could also rely on one of the new established forces, the General Security Agency (GSA). Due to its allegiance to Al-Juwaili, in November 2017, Muammar al-Dhawi and his Company 55 joined the GNA campaign to secure Warshefana, also collaborating with the GSA. The coalition, which included Battalion 301 and

the Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade (TRB), was able to push back two groups aligned with the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF or LAF), the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade and the 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade. It is worth emphasising that the late Masoud Al-Dhawi, brother of Muammar, was the Commander of the 26<sup>th</sup>. Masoud Al-Dhawi was a Brigadier General who was allegedly killed by pro-Haftar militias. To ensure Muammar's loyalty, Al-Juwaili placed the group under the Western Military Zone, ensuring its funding.

Throughout 2018 and 2019, the 55<sup>th</sup> Infantry Bn consolidated its alliance with the GNA, establishing close ties with the 301<sup>st</sup> Bn. During the 2018 offensive on Tripoli, led by the Kaniyat Militia, the group positioned itself alongside pro-GNA actors, fearing that a change in Tripoli's security constellation would negatively affect its control over Warshefana. The following year, when the LNA (Libyan National Army<sup>1</sup>) launched its offensive on Tripoli, the 55<sup>th</sup> was among the first groups in Warshefana to deploy in support of the GNA. It is also worth noting that some Warshefana forces, including the 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade, sided with the LAAF. Because of the war, the two Al-Dhawi brothers fell out. During the conflict, as said, Masoud was killed under unclear circumstances, likely by fellow LNA-aligned units (friendly fire). Since the end of the conflict, the Battalion has emerged as the main power broker in Al-Azizya and Al-Jafara. In the process, it also managed to be part of the formal security sector.

Over the course of the last months, the 55<sup>th</sup> Infantry Bn and Al-Dhawi have gained prominence, with the Commander expanding his social presence and legitimacy in the region. In May 2021, the 55<sup>th</sup> joined the Stability Support Apparatus (SSA), establishing and operating the Jafara Branch. This brought Al-Dhawi closer to the Bouzreba brothers and their armed forces in Al-Zawiya. The group also joined the SSA coalition against the Zawiyan Criminal Investigation Department (CID), led by Muhammad Bahrin. With the outbreak of the executive crisis, like its Zawiyan allies, the 55<sup>th</sup> aligned itself with the Government of National Stability (GNS), even holding a parade in support of Fathi Bashagha in February 2022. All the other major militias in Tripolitania were supporting the GNU. In March, the Battalion participated in Bashagha's first attempt to enter Tripoli, in which he did not succeed. However, the group played a key role within the Bashagha camp, opening the way for Zintani forces and their allies to be stationed at 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade Camp, in the South-West of Tripoli.

During the last August 27<sup>th</sup> (2022) clashes, on Bashagha's third attempt to enter the capital, the 55<sup>th</sup> did not engage in the confrontations between the SSA-Zawiya and the pro-Dbeiba camp, made by the 52<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade and the Fursan Janzour Bn. Following the defeat and pushback of the pro-Bashagha camp, the 52<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Coy tried to expand in Warshefana and take over the area of influence of the 55<sup>th</sup> Bn. This could be considered the turning point for Al-Dhawi's support of the GNS led by Bashagha and 'defecting' to the GNU. However, Al-Dhawi was recently seen at a Bouzreba meeting, according to which he has maintained a strategic alliance, despite Al-Dhawi's rapprochement with Dbeiba, in the fall of 2022. Therefore, Al-Dhawi will likely continue to foster good relations with both the GNU and the Bouzreba family in an attempt to stay neutral.

### **Significant turning point**

In mid-September 2022, Al-Dhawi and the GNU Prime Minister appeared on social media in a number of photos together, suggesting that a rapprochement had taken place.

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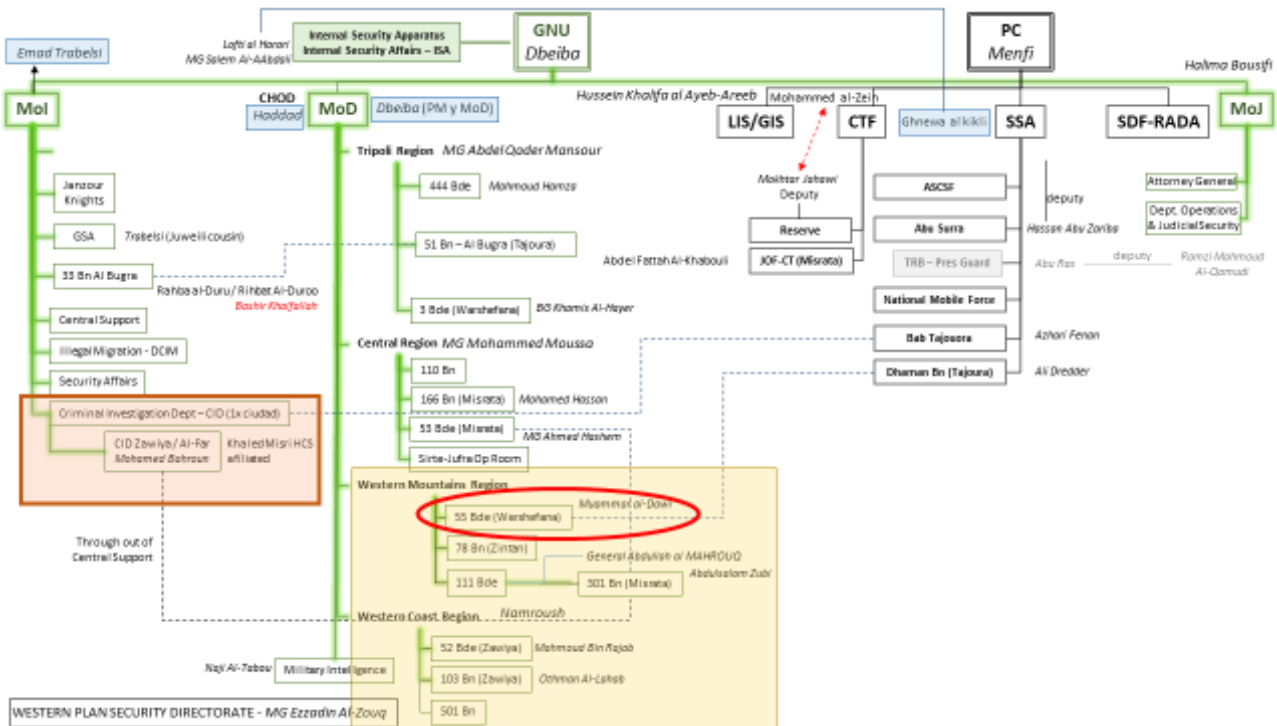
<sup>1</sup> The LNA, led by Khalifa Haftar, despite its claim to be Libya's 'national army' it is a collection of military/militia units and tribal/regional based armed groups.



Fig. 1. GNU PM Dbeiba with Al-Dhawi, 4 Jan 2023

While Al-Dhawi had not officially pledged allegiance to the GNU, it seemed that the Commander and the Company were trying to remain neutral in the political confrontation. In fact, the group has been hedging between the GNU and its Zawiyan allies since then, with its Commander attending a number of meetings of both pro- and anti-GNU forces. In November 2022, Al-Dhawi participated in a meeting organised by the Head of the HCS, Khalid al-Mishri, against the GNU PM. As a result, the Ministry of Defense of the GNU integrated the Company within its forces. Reportedly, the GNU PM issued the decision to turn

Company 55 into the 55<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade in February 2022 but suspended its implementation amid the executive crisis. With that decision, the Company/Battalion obtained regular access to institutional funds, as well as retroactive payment for its ‘gunmen’. It seemed that Dbeiba decided to implement the decision to ensure that Al-Dhawi would not side with Al-Mishri, but instead maintain his relative neutrality.



Finally, following an unconfirmed kidnapping/assassination attempt in Tunisia in late 2022, Al-Dhawi has raised his social profile, by regularly participating in community events and meetings with civilian and security actors. He is developing towards being a politician; however, he is still in charge of the 55<sup>th</sup> as a ‘non-executive commander’. Political and security stakeholders have also given Al-Dhawi significant attention due to his growing relevance in Al-Aziziyah as demonstrated by a number of visitors, because of health-related issues. The GNU PM, the Minister of the Interior, Emad Al-Trabelsi, and other well-known politicians, along

with notables of the Warshefana, visited the Commander. Previously, on 19 December 2022 the head of the Al-Zawya Security Directorate also visited him.

The assassination attempt on Al-Dhawi's life was never confirmed. It was speculated that Ali Bouzreba was behind it. Others reported seeing Al-Dhawi on the same day in Tunis in a car of the Libyan embassy in Tunis. As several employees in the embassy are allies of Bouzreba, this may indicate that Al-Dhawi still has ties with him.

The visit to the Libyan embassy in Tunis is the first meeting of PC member Al-Lafi with Muammar Al-Dhawi in the past two years. Ali al-Lafi is considered an ally of Muhammad Bahrun. The two were competing with Al-Dhawi and Bouzreba over influence and control in the Western region. However, following Al-Dhawi's rapprochement with the GNU, the visit may indicate that Al-Lafi is reconsidering his position. In case of an agreement between the two men, the Zawiya Security Directorate will gain more influence. The Directorate may gain access to Warshefana and other areas under the control of Al-Dhawi, expanding its scope of operations and influence.



The Al-Aziziyah area is a strategic location to enter the Capital, which many actors, including smugglers, have to cross to reach Tripoli. Therefore, stakeholders may be trying to improve relations with the Commander by showing their loyalty and respect. However, residents and social media users criticised some of these visits. The school that took students on a field trip to visit Al-Dhawi received great criticism. Several users on Facebook commented that this behaviour was reinforcing the current dynamics and drawing youth to be involved in armed groups. Other residents condemned all the attention that Al-Dhawi is getting, describing it as further empowering armed group commanders. Despite the criticism, Al-Dhawi will likely gain social legitimacy, due to the increased attention. He will also remain a key actor in the security scene of the Western region, as he continues to balance his alliance with Dbeiba and his good ties with the Bouzreba family.

Not only Al-Dhawi's life was in danger from assassination or kidnapping attempts, but his former ally Al-Lafa survived an attempt on his life on 20 January 2023 in Warshefana as well. The incident created tension and forces mobilization in the area. Recent events point out that

growing tensions between Al-Lafa- and Al-Dhawi-supporters have emerged<sup>2</sup> and they make clear the importance of the ongoing affiliation dynamics and the seeking for control of the most crucial areas.

## **Conclusion**

Al-Dhawi is a rising star on the block. From a local criminal warlord to a leading position at the top of power in Libya. This shows not only national interest but also international interest. The same US Chargé D'affaires, Leslie Ordeman, met with Al-Dhawi in January 2023, alongside the Mayor of Zahra, Naser Abugdera, in Tunis, discussing, according to the 55th Infantry Battalion, issues of common interest. Ordeman was praising Al-Dhawi's efforts towards social and security stability within the Jafara District. The meeting with Al-Dhawi seemingly came as part of US efforts to ensure strategic objectives through engagement with 'relevant and capable actors in Libya'. It reasserts Al-Dhawi's role as an important, on-the-ground security actor, as well as an indication of the geographic importance of the Jafara District, part of the Tripoli cordon (Tawq Al-Asimah) and the Western Coastal Region.



*Fig. 2. Al-Dhawi with Ordeman, Jan 2023*

Having that mentioned, comparisons can be made with men like Trabelsi, the current MoI. It is a fact that GNU PM Dbeiba has been working to incorporate them within the GNU in order to ensure control and implement the Tripoli Security Plan. It is likely that the PM will try to use the influence of Al Dhawi and Trabelsi to attract more armed actors on the GNU side.

Sign-off for release: Brig. Gen. STELLA, V.

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<sup>2</sup> UNSMIL: On 22 January 2023 in Warshefana, a heavy presence of armed vehicles and personnel affiliated with the 55<sup>th</sup> Brigade were seen on the coastal road because of the tension between al-Dhawi and al-Lafa supporters.