

EU LIAISON AND PLANNING CELL LIBYA
AL ZAWIYA – WESTERN COASTAL ROAD UPDATE – 30th MAY 2023

AIM

Following the drone attacks in West Zawiya starting on May 25, 2023, this paper is meant to provide an update on the security evolution along the traditional unstable Western coastal road connecting Tripoli to the Tunisian border.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Concerns about unpredictable effects from the Sudanese crises are slightly moving the recurrent waves of violence characterizing Libya's Western littoral region; the latest clashes reported from al Zawiya might be seen as an additional hard nut to crack for the UN SRSG's security ambitions for Libya, more than the security along the roads agreed to be opened by the JMC in the Central Region in the context of the 23rd October 2020 Ceasefire Agreement.

Repetitive militias' tit-for-tat posture in the key positions along the coastal road connecting Tripoli to Tunisia has remained coherent with the last four years data in terms of number of incidents; however, the events reported since the end of March 2023 might anticipate the beginning of a new season of increasing instability, with the potential for popular mobilization, especially in the most inhabited areas, such as al Zawiya.

Obvious effects of the ongoing power struggle in the Great Tripoli Area have additionally intensified. The GNU Mol announced ambitions for restructuring the security directorate and combating smuggling across borders and ports have triggered the anxiety of Western Libya militia stakeholders, who are currently engaged in a possible reshuffle of traditional alliances to secure the status quo.

The expansion of Libya's official authority in the Western Littoral remains highly ambitious. The issue is symptomatic of the current ability to progress on the way of an effective security reform process due to its impact on fundamental wannabe achievements, such as defense, public order, border and coastal security, Armed Groups (militia) categorization and reintegration, as well as soft security issues (e.g., irregular migration, fuel smuggling, economic security, human rights, radicalization and organized crime). The developments since the 25th of May could expose GNU to an increasing wave of disobedience or even insurgency in the West of Tripoli, while new alliances and militia dynamics might be in progress.

This internal instability, dealt with military instruments by the GNU, further jeopardize the progress of peaceful conditions before, during and after the expected elections. The role of the international community to effectively implement the UN-arms embargo while coherently progressing in the framework of the UN-led Security Working Group, the unifying agenda of the Joint Military Commission and preserve human rights, is at stake. In the meantime, the LNA monitors the evolution, with some of its proxies in the vicinity of Tripoli carefully ready to take sides as needed.

BACKGROUND**Floating balance of powers in controlling the informal economy**

Community-based Armed Groups (AG) that held control over towns such as Zawiya, Sorman, Sabratha, Zuwara, and parts of Warshefana, included the Sabratha Security Room and al-Wadi Battalion in Sabratha, the Western Criminal Investigation Directorate (CID) in Sorman, the Zawiya Security Directorate and CID, along with the al-Nasr and Abu Surra Martyrs Battalions in Zawiya and the 55th Brigade in Warshefana. Although these politico-military groups mostly lacked access to the kind of resources available to those that flourished in Tripoli, local resources were available:

- Zawiya University and the Zawiya Refinery were sources of funding and influence for the powerful Awlad Buhmeira network, to which the al-Nasr and Abu Surra Martyrs Battalions are affiliated;

- Municipality funds for locally contracted services were another potential source of earnings for local armed groups, in addition to the ability to include members on the state payroll through employment by a GNA/GNU Ministry.

Since 2017, despite the law-enforcement model prevailing, the black economy has evolved into a key revenue generation source for many of these groups, including the smuggling of fuel, drugs, and human trafficking. The means of profiting are various and depend on specific conditions; they include direct involvement at the highest level, taking advantage of their own private initiatives semi-independently, and providing protection to other criminals. A multitude of politically powerful Armed Groups started to act as managers of the criminal underworld, playing the roles of informal law enforcers and quasi-governors.

In terms of human trafficking, in the period after 2017, as militias disengaged from direct protection of smuggling activities, the business was transformed from one driven by large, logistically complex, military-political networks operating almost in the open, to smaller clandestine gangs operating from the shadows, adopting strategies to avoid detection, or leveraging protection arrangements that were far less overt than they were pre-2017.

In Zawiyah and the surrounding coast, which was less disrupted than Sabratha in terms of conflict, there was a gradual evolution of the law-enforcement model as the continuation of pre-existing trends, with the Awlad Buhmeira network. In particular, it was able to balance competing interests and managing the exposure from human trafficking, among other illicit activities, to ensure local stability and maximize its own relevance. The uninterrupted dominance by the Awlad Buhmeira network since 2017 allowed for the consolidation of this loose governing structure and the entrenchment of associated smuggling operations, in contrast with Sabratha.

In this context, in autumn 2020, the arrest of the Zawiyah Coast Guard Commander, Abdulrhman al-Milad (aka Abdo Bidja), responsible for one of the most relevant ports for illegal migration in the West region, was the final act of a series of controversies over his reputation. He had already been sanctioned by the UN in 2018 for carrying out violent acts against migrants and for evidence of his connection with smuggler networks. The investigations revealed al-Milad's connections with Mohamed Kashlaf, the leader of Zawiyah's al-Nasr Bde (his cousin), in charge of controlling Zawiyah's oil refinery and al Nasr detention facility, where most of the migrants were brought by the Coast Guard. It is worth mentioning that all detention centers, including the al Nasr one, were controlled by the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM), led by Mabrouk Abd al-Hafiz under the authority of the Mol (currently by Mohammed Al-Khoja that served as al-Hafiz's deputy for a number of years in a climate of uncontested impunity). In some cases, these detention centers were directly connected to the Stability Support Apparatus (SSA) of Abdelghani al-Kikli throughout his Ghneiwa Militia¹ (in Tripoli).

Since 2018, there has been a general reluctance to violently topple the status quo, despite any political consideration. Regarding the Stability Support Apparatus (SSA), al-Kikli's refusal to get involved in a conflict against the rival faction within this body reflected the need to shore up his advances in Tripoli. Relations between al-Kikli and the Rada Special Deterrence Force, the other main beneficiary of the routing of pro-GNS groups, were not cordial, and there was a widespread expectation that Rada could turn on al-Kikli and try to clip his wings, should an opportunity present itself. This led al-Kikli to be cautious in pressing his advantage against the Western faction of the SSA, both militarily and administratively, even aware of the competition between the GNU Mol Trabelsi and the SSA Chief.

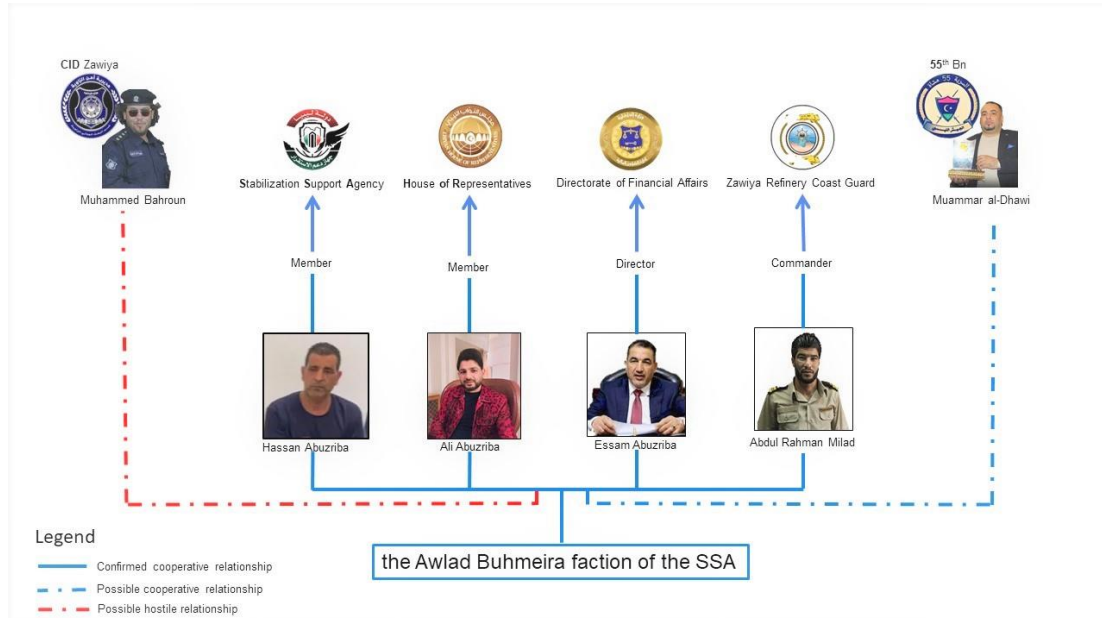
Finally, the recent past was also characterized by restrictions imposed by the Turkish authorities' interventions in dampening down local forces. The availability of Turkish drones in the West allowed the freezing of the local forces disposition, preventing further destabilization.

¹ Abdelghani al-Kikli, already drafted into the pro-Tripoli alliance by former Prime Minister Sarraj in 2021, was given the title of Stability Support Unit Cdr.

Bashaga vs Dbeibeh struggle of 2022

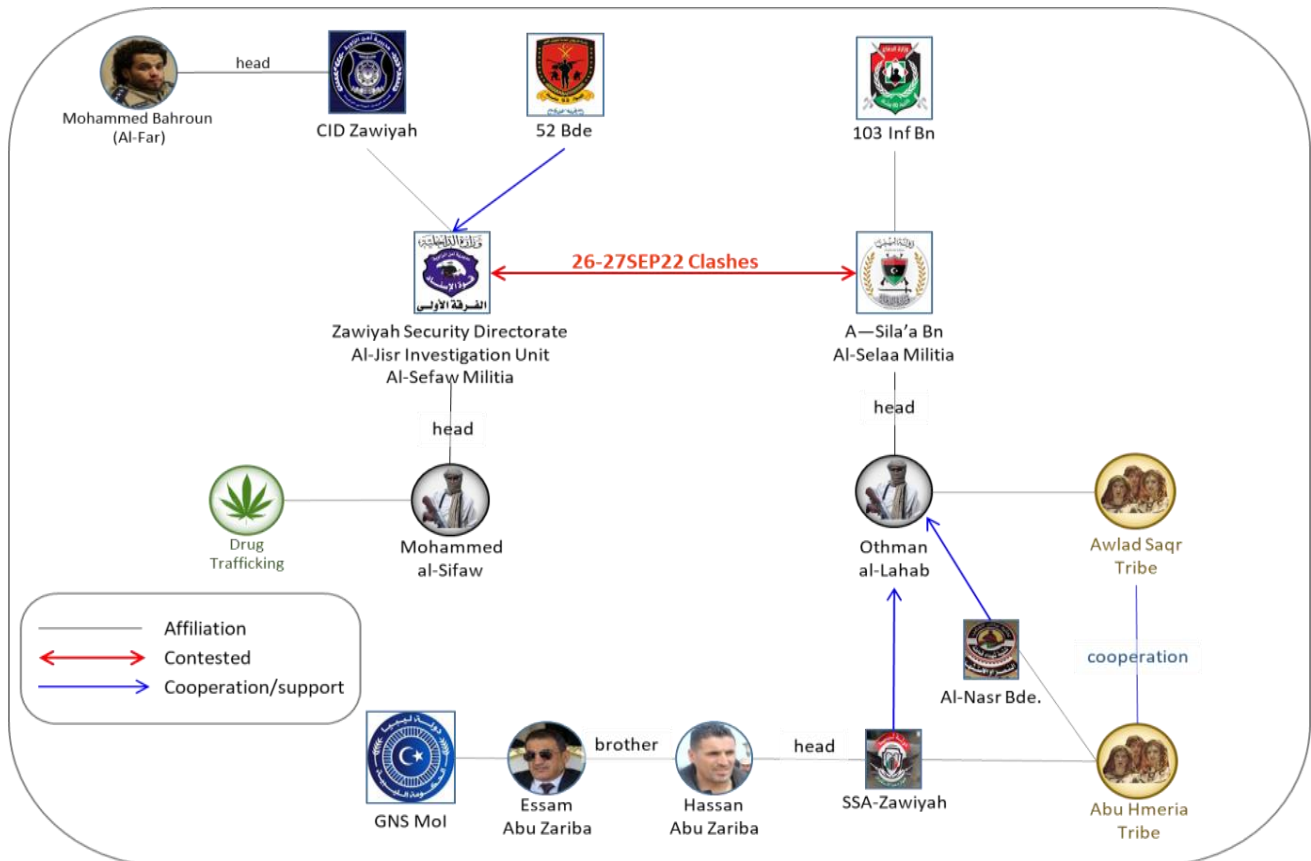
Despite the enduring volatility of local alliances, Bashaga’s failed attempts to enter Tripoli in 2022, created a sort of polarization amongst West Libya powerbrokers and militias, reflecting Tripoli’s ongoing competition.

To summarise that balance of forces:



- the pro-GNS coalition of Western forces:
 - the Awlad Buhmeira faction of the SSA;
 - the Awlad Saqr Commander, Othman al-Leheb;
 - Ali Abuzreiba, a HoR member, and his brother Hassan as a militia leader in Zawiya, known to be a close affiliate of Muammar al Dhawi;
 - Muammar al-Dhawi, along with remnants of militias expelled from Tripoli (largely in control of the inland coastal territory from Warshefana through Zawiya to the border). Currently, they have only maintained indirect control of a few small but logistically significant locations, including around the Zawiya Refinery and the al-Maya Port further East;
 - the pro-GNS Zintani military commander Usama al-Juwaili dominating from Zintan up to Bir al-Ghnam and north-west to Aziziya, on Tripoli’s South-eastern flank. Al-Juwaili thickened the network of checkpoints between Zintan and Bir al-Ghnam after his military setbacks;
- the pro-GNU coalition:
 - Muhammed Bahroun² dominating most coastal territory from Sabratha, through Surman to Zawiya;
 - Mohammed Bin Rajab, in control of the coast road between Zawiya and Janzur, having gained control of the important Gate 27.

² Aka ‘al-Far’, also nominated as he head of the Zawiyan Criminal Investigations Directorate (CID).



It goes without saying that the territory to the West of Tripoli is not compartmented by strong borders. Rather, power is projected in a patchy way from communal strongholds and certain strategic assets, which act to deter or complicate the ability to operate in a specific area. Often, access and control are a matter of negotiation between these dominant groups.

The main point of the developments since August 2022 was Bahroun's success in establishing himself in Sabratha as a Dbeibeh ally, alongside the gains of Bin Rajab in Janzur at Gate 27. That, undermining the SSA's West claim to rule the coastline from Warshefana to the border of Zuwara.

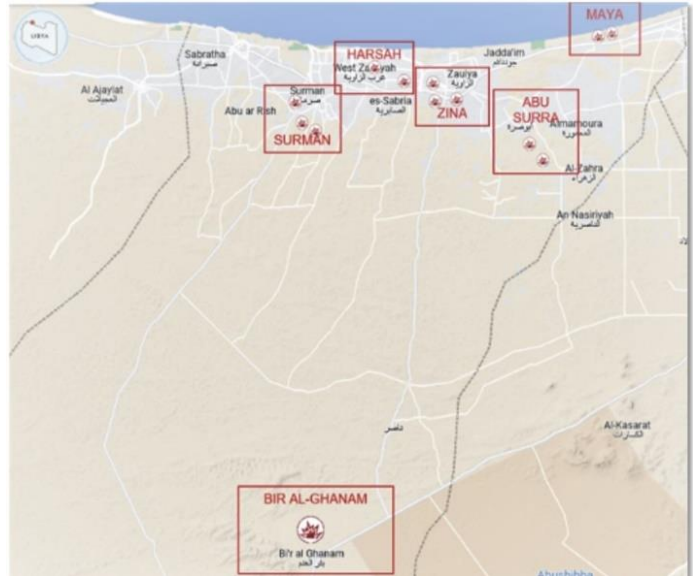
Therefore, from 2021, the most powerful Armed Groups in Western Libya have increased their lobbying role within the Tripoli political arena, while trying to expand their influence and territorial control over oil facilities, ports, and lines of communication along the littoral. This phenomenon appears more visible in Western Libya, possibly due to the political uncertainty characterizing Tripoli's formal leadership, compared to the Eastern Haftar led region.

DRONES' ATTACKS STARTING ON THE 25th OF MAY (Apr-May 2023 events in the Annex)

- On **MAY 25**: at around 13.30, drone strikes were conducted against multiple locations West of Zawiya, which has seen a rise in criminality and unrest in recent months. The drone strikes, part of a GNU-sponsored larger offensive, targeted sites in the areas of Busura, al Matrad, al Harsha and the port of al-Maya, causing casualties and damage. This offensive was believed to target sites suspected of being used for smuggling fuel and irregular migrants in Zawiya.
 - The first strike targeted a site belonging to Salem al Taif, in the Sayed Zinab area West of Zawiya;
 - A second strike was reported in the Abu Surra area;
 - A third strike was reported close to the port in the Maya area, also west of Zawiya.

- On **May 26:**

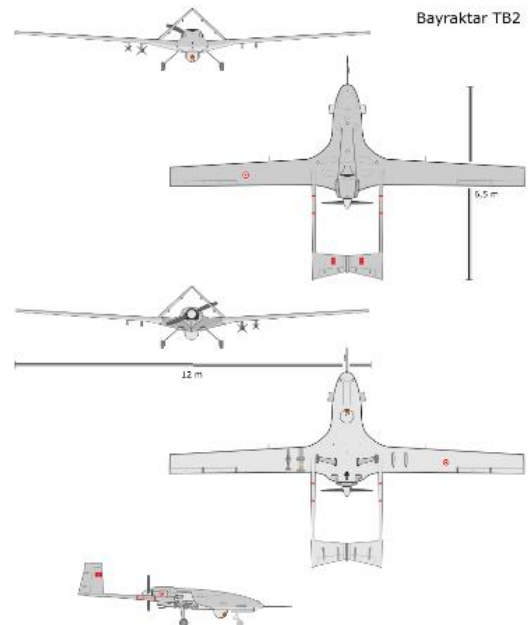
- Airstrike against an oil smuggling site at the Zuwara port;
- An airstrike targeted a Al-Sifaw HQ, likely south of the bridge in Bir Al-Ghanam, Zawiya; **Comment:** Reports suggest a weapons depot was targeted;
- Surface-to-air small arms fire (ZSU-23) was reported in the area in association with airstrikes in Bir Al-Ghanam, Zawiya;
- An airstrike targeted a suspected TRB position in Surman, Zawiya;
- An airstrike targeted an armed group location in Harsha, Zawiya, affiliated to Ottoman al-Lahab;
- Latest strikes launched at dawn on Friday targeted the Al-Kabwat militia and an ammunition depot belonging to Muhamed Sifaw, one of the biggest drug lords in the western region;
- An illegal immigration hideout in the Harsha area was also attacked by the air force;
- Several Sifaw militants, including African mercenaries, were allegedly killed in the airstrike;
- A meeting was reported at the home of Muammar al Dhawi, Commander of **55th Bn** in Warshefana with the presence of Essam Abu Zreiba (also spelled as Bouzriba) (**GNS Mol**), Othman Lahab (Commander of **103rd Bn**), Abdul Rahman **Milad** (Coastguard Commander) Zawayah, Mohammed Hussein al-Khadrawi, Hassan Bouzriba (Commander of the **Abu Surra Martyrs Bn**), Essam al-Daik, Mohamed Kahlaf (Qasb - Commander of **Nasr Bn**), Hani al-Shak, Samir Kenz, Haythem al-Mufjar, Mohamed al-Ari, Abdul Salam al-Rajbani. **Comment:** The same guest list attended an Iftar dinner on April 23rd, hosted by the Bouzriba's as part of reconciliation efforts within Zawayah and Warshefana. Although his new pro-GNU posture is still questionable, Al Dhawi has been recently publicly praised for his reconciliatory role in Zawayah and this last meeting seems to confirm his intent to build a new image of himself in order to serve GNU compromising role in the area.



- On **May 27-28** drone strikes targeting militia smuggling sites and operations have continued during the weekend, in a number of locations in Al-Ajailaat.
 - On 27 May, the PC showed resentment that the members of the Security Committee had no knowledge of the bombing;
 - On the evening of 28 May, a drone strike targeted the Al Maya port resulting in three fatalities and seven injuries including a member of Al-Zawiya's Stabilisation Support Agency (SSA) and a member of the 55th Brigade (Warshefana).
- On **May 28:**
 - Locals from Al-Zawiya closed off the coastal Road at the 17th and 27th Bridges at approximately 19:45hrs. In addition, reports indicated it was closed off near Al-Mayah;
 - Harsh statements were reported from the Abu Zreiba clan, with Ali Abu Zreiba (HoR MP) stressing that "*the time had come to declare war on the GNU*".
- On **May 29:**
 - As reported, a government source told Al-Masar TV: Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Al-Haddad confirmed to the UN mission, in contact with it, that he had not issued any orders to bomb Zawiya;
 - Muammar Al-Dhawi, the Cdr of the 55th Infantry Battalion allegedly declared that the response would be harsh to the bombing of the cowardly Turkish drones under the pretext of fighting the dens of corruption and crime";

- The coastal road between Al-Muraded and urman has been closed with earthen mounds, with a gathering of "armoured vehicles";
 - Groups loyal to MP Ali Bu Zriba closed fuel supplies from Zawiya refinery to power stations which will lead to blackouts across the country, while demanding the dismissal of Dbeiba government.
- GNU has declared the end of the **1st phase of the Operation**, claiming the destruction of seven boats (allegedly used for the smuggling of migrants), six depo of drugs and weapons, and nine oil depo (allegedly used for the smuggling of oil).

UAV: In the recent past, isolated actions in the same area were reported to be executed with the Turkish unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) known as Bayraktar TB2. It is a medium-altitude long-endurance unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) capable of remotely controlled or autonomous flight operations. Manufactured by the Turkish company Baykar Makina Sanayi ve Ticaret A.Ş., its primary role is in favour of the Turkish Armed Forces and exported to implement the so called **Tur UAV diplomacy**. Its performance includes 150 kg of payloads, a maximum speed of 222 km/h, a cruise speed of approximately 130 km/h and a maximum range up to 4,000 km. The communication range (line-of-sight propagation) is estimated at about 300 km. The system can operate for approximately 27 hrs at an operational altitude of 18,000 ft (5,486m). The line-of-sight propagation of the communication range allows the users in Western Libya to reach an extremely wide spectrum of potential targets.



FURTHER COMMENTS

The overall wave of events starting in April 2023 has confirmed the resistance of local power brokers to the Central Authority's attempts to extend its authority out of Tripoli.

The reported visit paid by GNU Chief of the Army Staff, Gen. Al Haddad, to Zawiya initially showed Tripoli Institutions 'commitment to listen to the voice of the protesters, while opening discussions to an all-inclusive effort to find solutions. Therefore, with his personal intervention, Gen. Al Haddad might have been forced to contain the potential negative effects of the growing narrative resulting from the exploitation of the alleged evidence of abuses suffered by Libyan Arabs because of African immigrants.

Considering the new round of systematic UAV strikes were not in line with the same GNU CoS Gen. Al Haddad expectations, that could imply a fracture within the same Western military and institutional actors willing not to get embroiled in the GNU political disputes and preserve the unification of efforts.

However, the insistent rumours on Dbeibah - Haftar talks and the dismissal of Bashagha as well, could have an impact on the long-lasting Western Tripoli alliances too. In fact, the decision to let opposing actors progressively eliminate disturbing entities could enable plans of common interest in the area during an uncertain electoral process. Zintan's recent rise in readiness, not far from Zawiya, remains a critical indicator.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The airstrikes started on the 25th of May have already been exploited by the media, and, of course, have the potential for a further escalation. However, more worrisome could be the triggering of an internal conflict between the GNU (MoI) and Western security actors. While the Zawiya branch of the SSA has already declared that it considers the airstrikes acts of aggression, violating the international law and the Ceasefire Agreement, depicting the weakness and impartiality of the arms

embargo, the GNU and LNA are still maintaining an apparent neutral posture classifying them as part of reinforced and necessary law enforcement operations.

Again, the rise of Commander of the 55th Bn, Muammar al-Dhawi relevance in the fussy game of local alliance needs a careful analysis to interpret his initial apparent neutrality, not excluding that the May drone attacks are connected to a local reshuffling of the above mentioned balance of power.

The intricate connections of the Libyan powerbrokers could justify the strategic puzzle at stake. The magnitude resulting from the illegal revenues could explain future turbulences in the area as orchestrated by the local players, even with efforts aimed to provoke mobilization of the lowest ranks of Western Libyan society and undermine the ongoing electoral process.

Sources have already reported about the possible reinforcement of the Zawiyan tribes' alliance, and the interruption of fuel supply. This could sound like a renewed intention to take action locally, taking advantage of the local pro-Arab sentiments, to prevent GNU efforts from extending its authority along the Western coastline.

On the contrary, the UN and foreign countries have been cautious in their declarations, comparing the possible progression, results and extreme use of force to the wider security perspective. Following the UN statement on May 26, "*These events illustrate the urgent need for Libya to unify and enable accountable security and military institutions to ensure safety and stability for Libyan people across the country*" and "*any law enforcement measures should respect relevant national and international laws*", US and UK followed on the 29 May with a similar invitation to de-escalate and protect civilian lives.

Therefore, the control of the Western coastal axis leading to the Tunisian border and the Western coastline platform for illegal/irregular migration remains key for the current competition.

ANNEX: Security related events in Zawya's area in April – May 2023.

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

Disclaimer: This report is based on security events and reports from multiple open sources, whose accuracy may not always be verified. Therefore, the information and conclusions expressed are subject to change without notice.