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LIBYA

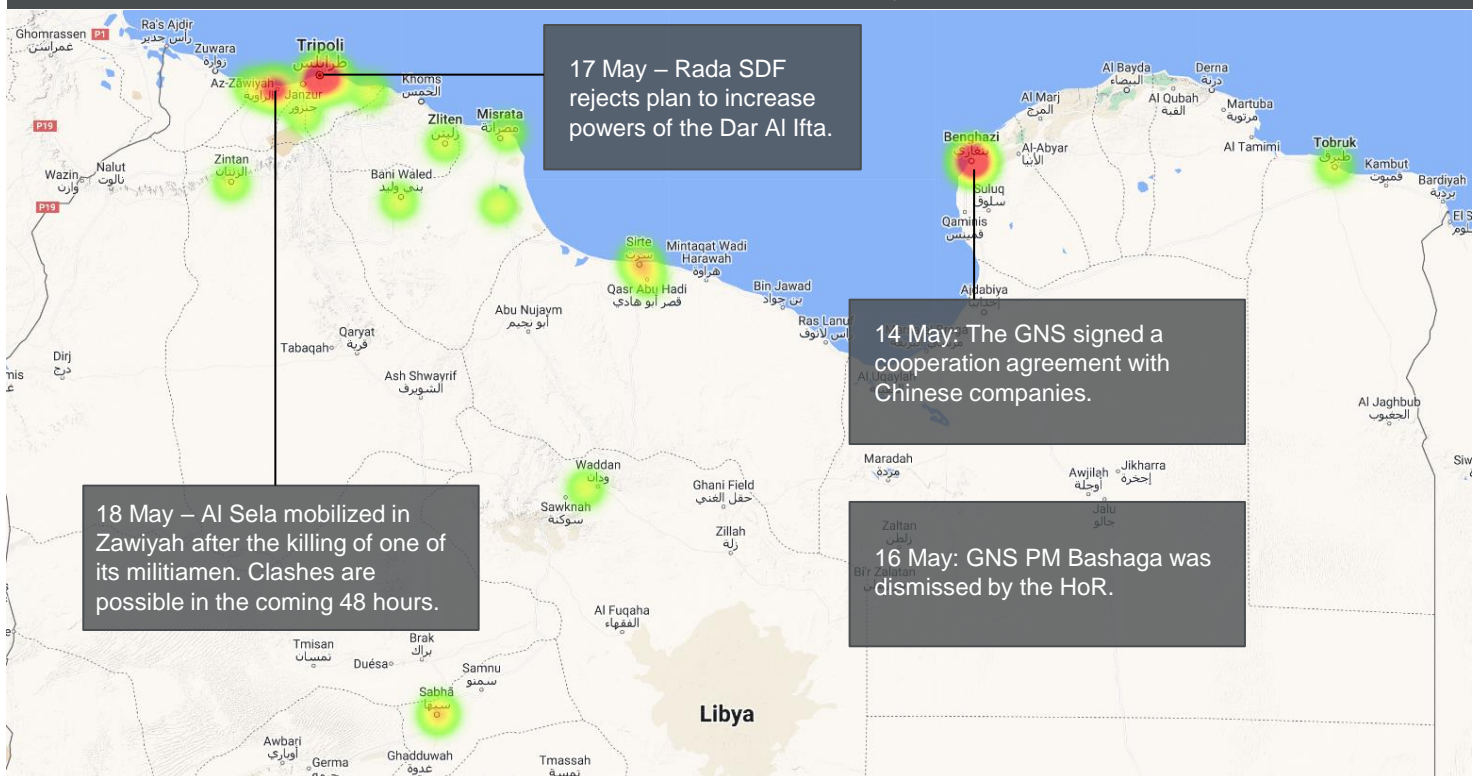
Weekly Political Stability,
Economic And Security
Threat Assessment

13-19 MAY 2023



COUNTRYWIDE OVERVIEW

FIGURE 1: INCIDENT ACTIVITY IN LIBYA, 13-19 MAY 2023



KEY DEVELOPMENTS

- In the last week, Russian diplomats re-engaged with Libya after a long pause due to the start of the conflict in Ukraine.
- On 16 May the House of Representatives (HoR) dismissed GNS Prime Minister Fathi Bashaga. He was replaced with GNS Finance Minister Osama Hammad.
- On 17 May, GNU PM Dbeiba launched an initiative to increase the powers of the Dar Al Ifta (led by the ousted Mufti Sadiq Al Ghariani) and marginalize the role of the General Authority for Endowments.
- On 14 May the GNS, which at the time was still led by Fathi Bashaga, signed a cooperation agreement with a group of Chinese companies for investments in Libya.

OUTLOOK

- The renewed open involvement of Russia in Libyan politics signals a change in Moscow's recent approach to Libya and likely increased Russian political and diplomatic involvement in the months to come.
- Some observers say that the removal of Bashaga might create the conditions for a reshuffle and the formation of a unified government with Dbeiba as PM, and personalities close to Haftar as Ministers. Alternatively, a new parallel government will be formed in the east, and the current phase of stability based on east-west non-interference will continue.
- This dynamic is already spilling over in the political and militia environment. An escalation of this dispute would likely result in an increased likelihood of targeted attacks against mosques and personalities involved in the dispute.
- The deals are unlikely to be implemented in their current form, because they put the Haftar family in an awkward position. However, the chance to strike deals with China gives Khalifa Haftar leverage to ask for additional concessions from the US.

COUNTRYWIDE OVERVIEW

RUSSIA RE-ENGAGES LIBYA

In the last week, Russian diplomats re-engaged with Libya after a long pause due to the start of the conflict in Ukraine:

- **13 May:** The Special Representative of the Russian President for the Middle East and Africa and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, met the Director of Libyan Affairs of the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, Ahmed Abdul Majid. The two agreed to continue their consultations.
- **14 May:** A Russian delegation reportedly met Emad Al Sayeh, head of the High National Elections Commission (HNEC), at the HNEC HQ in Tripoli. The Russian delegation claimed to support elections and stability in Libya.
- **18 May:** The head of the Libyan National Security Council, Ibrahim Bushnaf, met with the Russian Ambassador to Libya in Tunis.
- **19 May:** Sources reported that Bushnaf will visit Moscow in the next few days to meet with his Russian counterpart, Nikolaij Patrushev, who is close to Vladimir Putin but more conservative than him.

The renewed open involvement of Russia in Libyan politics signals a change in Moscow's recent approach to Libya and likely increased Russian political and diplomatic involvement in the months to come. The change in approach matches the current situation in Libya and international context. Russia de-escalated its political and diplomatic involvement in Libya significantly after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The US tried to fill the vacuum left by Russia, engaging all Libyan parties with the intent to deny Russia the chance to destabilize NATO and the EU's southern front in the short and long-term. However, Libya is key in Russia's geostrategic vision too, as a platform to project influence in and across the Mediterranean, the Sahel and east Africa. Therefore, Russia is now trying to catch up.

It is interesting that Russia publicly met with Al Sayeh, as opposed to some of the eastern power brokers which have historically been closer to Moscow, like Khalifa Haftar or Aqila Saleh. This might indicate two things:

- The US engagement with Haftar has been effective in undermining his relationship with Moscow.
- Moscow deliberately chose to engage Al Sayeh to re-enter Libyan politics softly, with the pretext to support elections.

GNS PM BASHAGA REMOVED FROM DUTY

As anticipated, on 16 May the House of Representatives (HoR) dismissed GNS Prime Minister Fathi Bashaga (see page 5 for more details). He was replaced with GNS Finance Minister Osama Hammad.

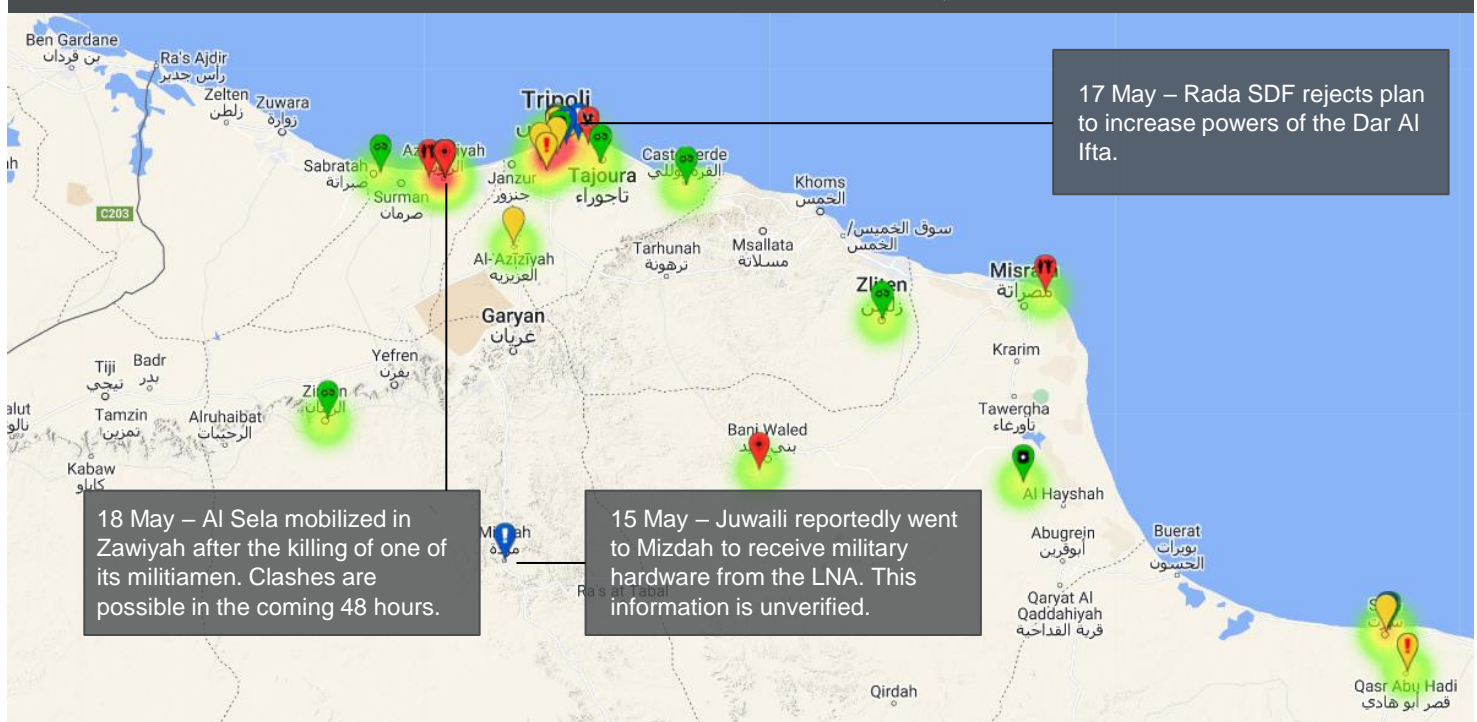
- Hammad is close to Khalifa Haftar, hence his appointment is unlikely to encounter any significant opposition.
- Bashaga is currently not assessed to have enough political clout or armed support to challenge the decision.
- The GNS is relatively not influential, and this development is not expected to have negative repercussions on the security or political environment in Cyrenaica.

Some observers say that the removal of Bashaga might create the conditions for a reshuffle and the formation of a unified government with Dbeiba as PM, and personalities close to Haftar as Ministers. This hypothesis is based on unconfirmed reports of ongoing talks between Belkacem Haftar and some Tripoli-based militia leaders, supported by the UAE, Egypt and the US. All be it unlikely to materialize, this hypothesis is consistent with the already reported international efforts to stabilize Libya. Alternatively, a new parallel government will be formed in the east, and the current phase of stability based on east-west non-interference will continue. Critically, even in case a unified government is created, elections remain unlikely before the end of 2023.

While this might mark his definitive political demise, Bashaga found himself in similar situations in the past, and he just withdrew from the public scene while waiting for a new opportunity and thinking to the next move. He might do the same this time. He retains a small support base in Misrata, where he might go back to. Bashaga might establish himself there and restart plotting to take over from GNU PM Dbeiba in the medium term. He already failed once with a very similar plan, and he likely has even less chances of success now.

TRIPOLITANIA

FIGURE 2: INCIDENT ACTIVITY IN TRIPOLITANIA, 13-19 MAY 2023



RELIGIOUS DISPUTE UNDERWAY IN TRIPOLI, POSSIBLE SECURITY CONSEQUENCES

On 17 May, GNU PM Dbeiba launched an initiative to increase the powers of the Dar Al Ifta (led by the ousted Mufti Sadiq Al Ghariani) and marginalize the role of the General Authority for Endowments. The initiative launched by Dbeiba is reportedly an idea of Walid Al Lafi, GNU Minister of Communication, who wants to empower the Dar Al Ifta with the management of Islamic affairs, religious education and Zakat funds. The Dar Al Ifta and the General Authority for Endowments have been at odds with each other, mainly due to sectarian reasons. The General Authority for Endowments has a strong Madkhali Salafi component, while the Dar Al Ifta follows the Maliki school of Islamic thought.

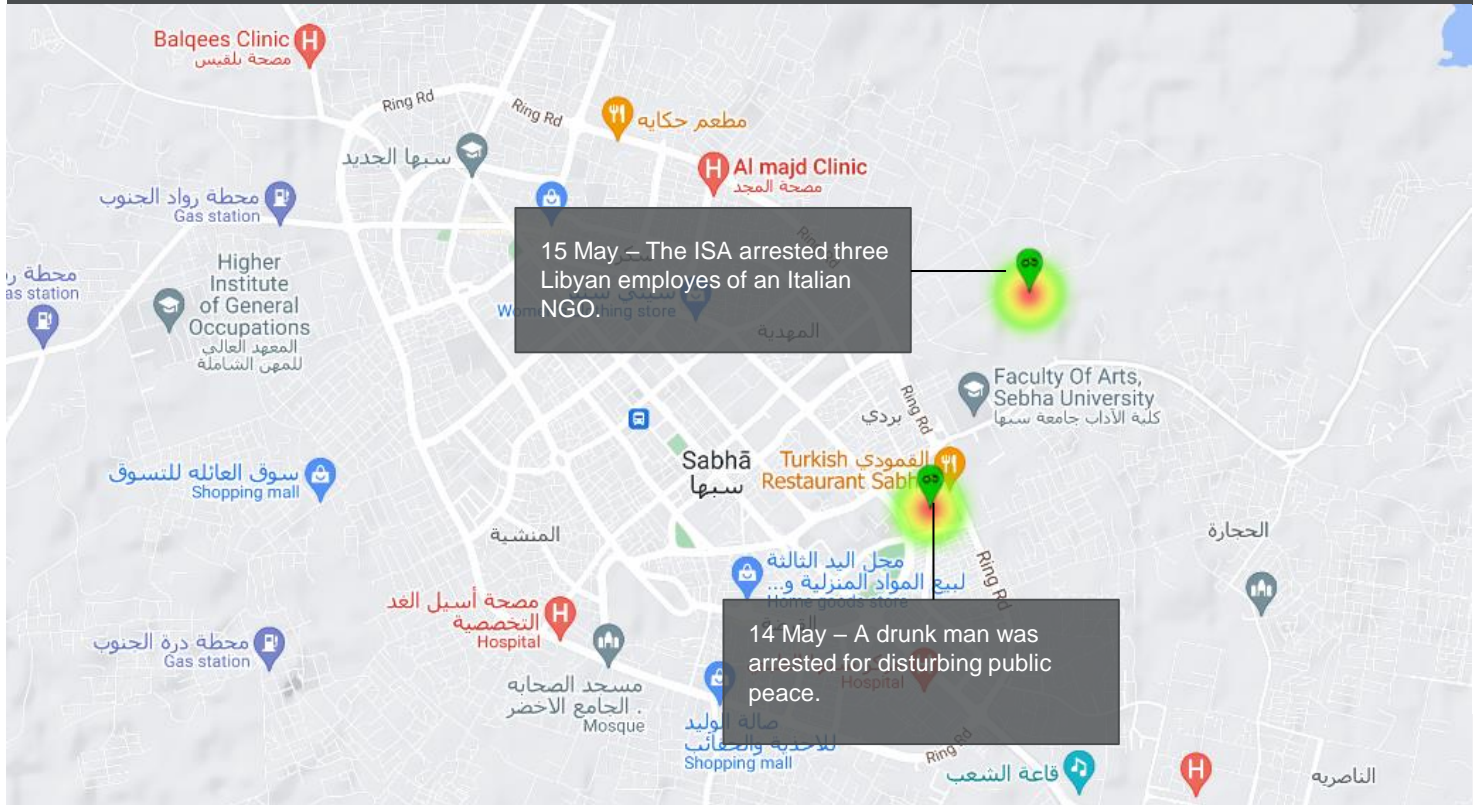
These differences are already spilling over in the political and militia environment. An escalation of this dispute would likely result in an increased likelihood of targeted attacks against mosques and personalities involved in the dispute. For example, the Rada SDF openly rejected the plan expressed by Dbeiba and Al Lafi in a statement. On the same day, in Tajoura, the Imam of the Al Houmah mosque was assaulted and prevented from leading the prayers. After the episode, the General Authority for Endowments released an official statement accusing the Tanasuh foundation, led by Mufti Sadiq Al Ghariani, of being responsible for the attack.

The Rada SDF has a strong Madkhali Salafi component, and it will likely back its statement with action unless Dbeiba listens to its warning. However, it is a key pillar of the Madkhali Salafi branch of Islam not to challenge the existing political authorities. Rada SDF's action should therefore be directed against people and organizations directly involved in the dispute, as opposed to the GNU itself.

UPDATED REPORTS ABOUT OSAMA JUWAILI'S MOVES

Unconfirmed sources reported that on 15 May Osama Juwaili met with LNA officials in Mizdah and received unspecified military hardware from them. In line with the unconfirmed reporting line of the last two weeks, the sources said that the hardware is to enable a military offensive led by Juwaili. As already said, it is unlikely that Juwaili will attack Tripoli; he is posturing to extract concessions from the Tripoli-based government. Juwaili has already used these tactics in the past. It is also unlikely that Juwaili wants to attack a city other than Tripoli. He might possibly try to join forces with other groups close to Zintan based west of Tripoli, for example Muammar Al Dawi's 55th Brigade or the National Mobile Forces. This would be concerning for large militia groups in Tripoli such as Rada SDF and the SSA, and would fuel tensions in Tripoli. There is currently no appetite for a destabilization of Tripoli, and in this scenario Juwaili would be seen as responsible for it.

FIGURE 3: INCIDENT ACTIVITY IN SABHA, 13-19 MAY 2023



ISA ARRESTS EMPLOYEES OF AN ITALIAN NGO

Sources reported on the morning of 15 May that the Libyan Internal Security Agency (ISA) arrested three employees of an Italian NGO in an unspecified area of Fezzan. The employees are Libyan, and their arrest likely took place in the area between Sabha, Murzuq and Ubari. No update was provided on the situation of the three employees.

The ISA claimed that the NGO was trying to integrate migrants in the local social fabric, upsetting local balances. According to ISA, the NGO circumvented Libyan laws while carrying out its activities. The arrest of the NGO employees and the concerns for a destabilization of the social fabric were likely preventative. No particular signs of tribal and ethnic tensions were picked up from Fezzan in the past week.

Notably, these events follow the recent announcement about a crackdown on foreign NGOs carrying out "suspicious activities in Libya" (see 12 May Weekly Threat Assessment). Similar episodes might take place in other areas controlled by the LNA, including in Cyrenaica.

NO SIGNIFICANT DEVIATIONS FROM NORMAL SECURITY TRENDS

No significant deviations from usual security trends were recorded in Fezzan during the reporting period. The region remains affected by a deep security vacuum, and incidents remain under-reported. The highest risk in the region is posed by a combination of widespread crime and sparse security presence, especially outside of urban centers.

FIGURE 4: INCIDENT ACTIVITY IN CYRENAICA, 13-19 MAY 2023



THE GNS DEALS WITH CHINA AND WHY THEY LIKELY REQUIRED BASHAGA'S REMOVAL

On 14 May the GNS, which at the time was still led by Fathi Bashaga, signed a cooperation agreement with the BFI Co. Consortium, China Railways International Group Company (CRI), and Arup International Engineering Company. The agreement aims to implement investment projects in the fields of transportation and healthcare in Libyan cities.

The GNS has no available funds to pay for these projects, indicating that the Chinese companies might have been looking to implement the same model already used in many Chinese investments in Africa. Namely, the Chinese companies build strategic infrastructure and then maintain direct control over it as a form of payment.

The signing of these deals provides context to the removal of Fathi Bashagha as PM of the GNS. The deals put the Haftar family in an awkward position, both domestically and internationally. Therefore, they are unlikely to be implemented in their current form.

More details are provided below:

- Domestically, the GNS signing such contracts without a public endorsement from the LNA makes the LNA look weak and not in control of the situation, undermining the leadership of Khalifa Haftar.
- Internationally, the LNA wants its Military Investment Authority (MIA) to remain the only viable partner for foreign investors willing to do business in eastern Libya. Since Bashaga struck the deal outside the MIA's framework, he was dismissed. This hypothesis, initially included in the 15 May Libya Daily Update, was later confirmed by closed sources to an Italian press agency.
- Also internationally, the US and other western countries are already concerned about Russian influence in Libya. The LNA cannot allow that Bashaga gives China such a significant foothold in the country; this would undermine the US support for a scenario in which the Haftars remain in power indefinitely in eastern Libya. However, the chance to strike deals with China gives Khalifa Haftar leverage to ask for additional concessions from the US.

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