

# EU LIAISON AND PLANNING CELL (EULPC) LIBYA

## Leadership–loyalties–dynamics of different armed groups in Greater Tripoli

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### 1. FOREGROUND

The presence of an external threat, called it Gaddafi regime in 2011, al Kani militia and Jahbat al Soumud rebellion in 2018, as well as the LNA/LAAF attack in April 2019 made it clear that commanders of armed groups or militias in Tripoli can succeed in quickly forming alliances, or at least coalitions, to fight external threats. However, there was not one unified front on the western side during the Tripoli War (2019-2020) when different coalitions covered several parts of the frontline in an attempt to **secure their influence and power**.

As we see today, the absence of an external threat swiftly leads these coalitions to break apart in an attempt to **maximise their own benefits** in quite an opportunistic manner, even fighting one another. This can be through access to government funds, smuggling and trafficking and other types of irregular revenues, or political predominance/external influences. Consequently, competition emerges between these groups.

### 2. SITUATION

**Factions' affiliation** is currently mostly based on institutional affiliation (Presidential Council, Defence or Interior Ministries), communal ties, ideology, positioning vis-à-vis foreign powers or common enemies.

Affiliation could materialise in the form of having on the second level commanders in charge of a general security directorate of the Ministry of Interior, CID office, etc. This allows the forces of this armed group/militia to operate within the framework of the law. Several armed groups have connections within the Ministry of Defence too. There have also been several attempts by the Presidential Council to create institutional umbrellas to regroup armed forces. The Joint Force, Stability Support Agency, etc. fit this description.

#### 2.1. TENSIONS BETWEEN THE SSA AND THE SDF

In January 2021, Fayez Serraj established the **Stability and Support Apparatus (SSA)** to protect state institutions and counterbalance Fathi Bashagha's influence in Tripoli (former Mol Minister). The SSA is headed by Abdelghani al Kikli, aka Gheniwa (also head of **Abu Salim Central Security Forces**) with three deputies:

- Ayoub Abu Ras, head of the **Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade**;
- Hassan Abu Zariba, commander of the **Abu Surra Martyrs Battalion**, in Zawiya;
- Moussa Mahmoud, head of the Amazigh **National Mobil Force**.

The SSA has also the support from other Tripoli militias like **Dhaman Battalion** and **Bab Tajura**, as well as some militias from Zawiya or Warshefana (**55 Infantry Battalion**). SSA and SDF political affiliations and links as at **Annex 1**.



*Abu Salim Central  
Security Force*



*Tripoli Revolutionaries  
Brigade*



*Abu Surra Martyrs  
Battalion*



*Bab Tajoura  
Battalion*



*Dhaman Battalion*

Since March 2021, frictions and tensions between the **Special Deterrence Force (SDF)** and the SSA, both under the Presidential Council, have been frequent. The SSA growth in capacity is perceived as a threat by the SDF, which was considered Tripoli's most powerful faction apart from external actors such as Misrata and Zintan.



*Special Deterrence Force*



*444<sup>th</sup> Fighting Unit*

The SDF has been able not only to keep its influence in Tripoli but also to expand it beyond the capital thanks to the **444<sup>th</sup> Fighting Unit**, affiliated with the Government of National Unity (GNU) MoD.

During 2021, the 444<sup>th</sup> Unit has expanded its territorial activities within and beyond Tripoli, with detachments spread to Bani Walid, Tarhuna, Nasmah, Al Araban, Meslah, Garaboulli, Souq Al-Khamis, Qasr bin Ghashir and Salaheddine.



SSA allies



ABU SALIM



TRB



BAB TAJOURA



DHAMAN BN



ABU SURRA  
MARTYRS BAT



55 INFANTRY  
COMPANY



SDF allies



444<sup>th</sup> Unit



301<sup>st</sup> Battalion



166<sup>th</sup> Battalion



CTF

A draft geographical layout of Greater Tripoli state of play as at **Annex 2**.

These tensions have provoked a Security Sector polarisation between the SSA and the SDF. Smaller armed groups in the **Western Coastal Region**, **Warshefana** or **Tarhuna** have taken advantage of this polarisation to pledge allegiance to a bigger organisation and thus become stronger with regard to their domestic rivalries.

In the Western Coastal Region, armed groups from Zawiya, Sabratha, Zuwara and al Ajaylat have grouped around these two main coalitions:

- SSA → **Shalfuh militia** from al Ajaylat, **al Gsab militia** and **al Kassab militia** from Zawiya and **al Kaboat** from Sabratha;
- AL FAR militia (Mohammed Salem Bahroun) → **Al Kabbu militia**, **al Selaa militia** and **Uqba Brigade**, and Mohammed Koshlaf's **al Nasr Company** all of them from Zawiya.

In Warshefana there are two main armed groups:

- The **55<sup>th</sup> Infantry Company**, led by Muammar al Dhawi and from the Awlad Embarak tribe, supports the **SSA** and has links to Osama al Juweili;
- The **3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade**, led by Ramzi Laffa' from the Awlad Issa tribe, has received the support from Fathi Bashagha and the Misratan-led 301st Battalion.

## 2.2. POLARISATION BETWEEN TRIPOLI, MISRATAN AND ZINTAN GROUPS

This polarisation is in line with the loss of influence in the capital and the traditional rivalries between Tripoli and foreign groups, mostly with Misrata and Zintan centres of power.

Misratan armed groups are considering once again to become key players in the political and security tracks in Tripoli, chiefly by increasing their influence in some areas of the capital thanks to the presence of officials in senior positions at the GNU and the General Staff of the Libya Army (GSLA), such as Abdulhamid Dabaiba or Mohammed al Haddad.

For its part, Zintan has been active in Tripoli since the fall of the Gaddafi regime in August 2011. Zintani militias benefited when Osama al Juweili became defense minister in late 2011 and when Serraj appointed him as Western Military Region commander. Nevertheless, with the Namroush's

appointment on 15AUG2021 as Western Coastal Region commander, Zintan risks of losing ground in the capital.

Despite the March 2018 agreement to cease hostilities between Misrata and Zintan, their rivalry remains and plays a role in their militias' loyalties in the capital.

On 25APR21, forces affiliated with Salah Badi mobilized from Misrata to Tajura. This mobilization has triggered concerns about a possible united front against other groups in the capital that were getting increasingly powerful, such as the 444 Fighting Unit, the SSA or the Special Deterrence Force (SDF).. Immediately, the main security actors in Tripoli held a meeting to discuss about the unity of security and military actors and the prevention of clashes between those units.

On 08MAY21, there were two events that exacerbated the tensions between some Tripoli armed groups and militias from Misrata and Zintan, causing that their respective leaderships gathered around the Corinthia Hotel:

- The **appointment of Hussein Mohammed A'aeb** as the head of the Intelligence services, replacing the Zintani Emad Trabelsi (General Security Apparatus head);
- The MoFA **Najla Mangoush's statement** against the Turkish presence in Libya.

At that time, the **Greater Tripoli Union Council (GTUC)** issued a statement condemning the threats against the political institutions in Tripoli and expressed its support to their decisions. The GTUC had the support of the **Special Deterrence Force (SDF)**, the **Nawasi Battalion** and the **Tripoli Military Region authorities. Janzour Knights, Abu Salim Central Security Force**, and some elements from the **Joint Force** agreed with the nomination as well.

On the opposite side, the Misratans **166<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 301<sup>st</sup> Battalion** and the **Counter-Terrorist Force Reserve**, the Zintani Emad Trabelsi and the chairman of the Libyan Audit Bureau –Khaled Shakshak, rejected Aa'ib's appointment.

While the SDF was closed to Misrata in its antagonism with the SSA, in this occasion, the SDF supported Tripoli's authorities as a clear example of **opportunistic shifting of allegiances**.

### 3. CURRENT EVENTS

On 31AUG21, unconfirmed militiamen reportedly stormed the Administrative Control Authority (ACA) premises in Tripoli downtown, with the objective of arresting Khaled Saeed, ACA's deputy president. Another armed group tried to repel the aggression by counterattacking.

Conflicting reporting do not shed light on which militia stormed the ACA building and which one repelled the attack, but it is highly likely that elements from the SSA and the Nawasi Battalion were involved in this confrontation. It is likely that after the skirmish, the SSA took control over the ACA building, confirming its territorial, and political influence expansion, as security control over locations of State bodies and institutions.

On 3SEP21, elements from the Stability and Support Apparatus (SSA) tried to storm the 444 Fighting Unit headquarters at Tekbali camp, located 10 km away from Tripoli's downtown. Unconfirmed reporting argued that the trigger of these clashes was the detention of some SSA members by the 444<sup>th</sup> Unit.



Executive authorities will have to cope with the current situation, since they have shown their **inability or unwillingness** to end up with the militias' reign. These authorities have instrumentalized the militias on their own benefit.

The 444 Unit has provoked frictions with other armed groups in the capital. This fighting is highly likely related to the increase of power and influence of the 444 Unit in the Tripoli area. The **risk of escalation is significant** since both sides are likely to receive support from other areas within and beyond Tripoli.

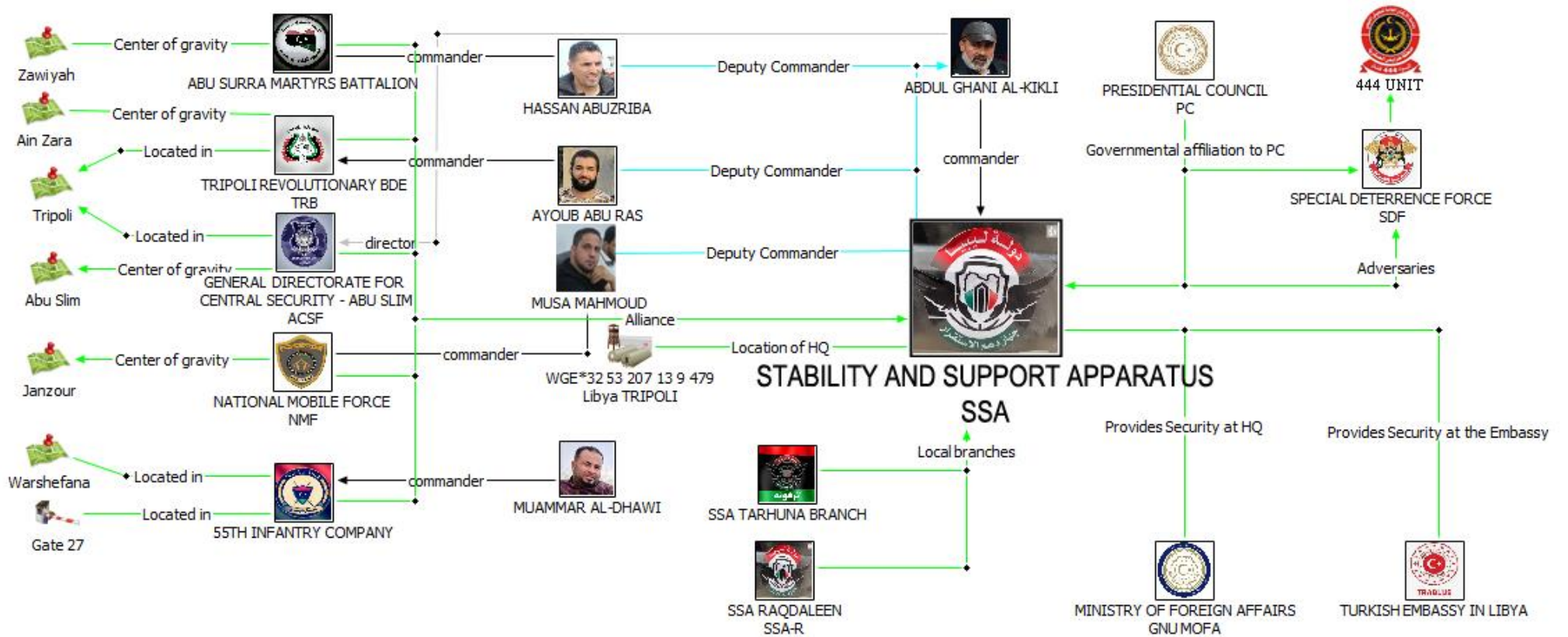
Current events they confirm the need to reactivate a Tripoli Security Plan.

The **most dangerous course of action** (COA) is that those armed groups in the Western Coastal Region and those from the Misrata area join the fighting in support for the SSA and the SDF respectively. In that case, both main **evacuation routes**, namely the Western Coastal Road and Mitiga Airport will **highly likely be compromised**.

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



### Annex 1. SSA AND SDF, POLITICAL AFFILIATIONS AND LINKS



Annex 2. GREATER TRIPOLI STATE OF PLAY (Source: Libya Analysis Team OCTOBER 2020)

