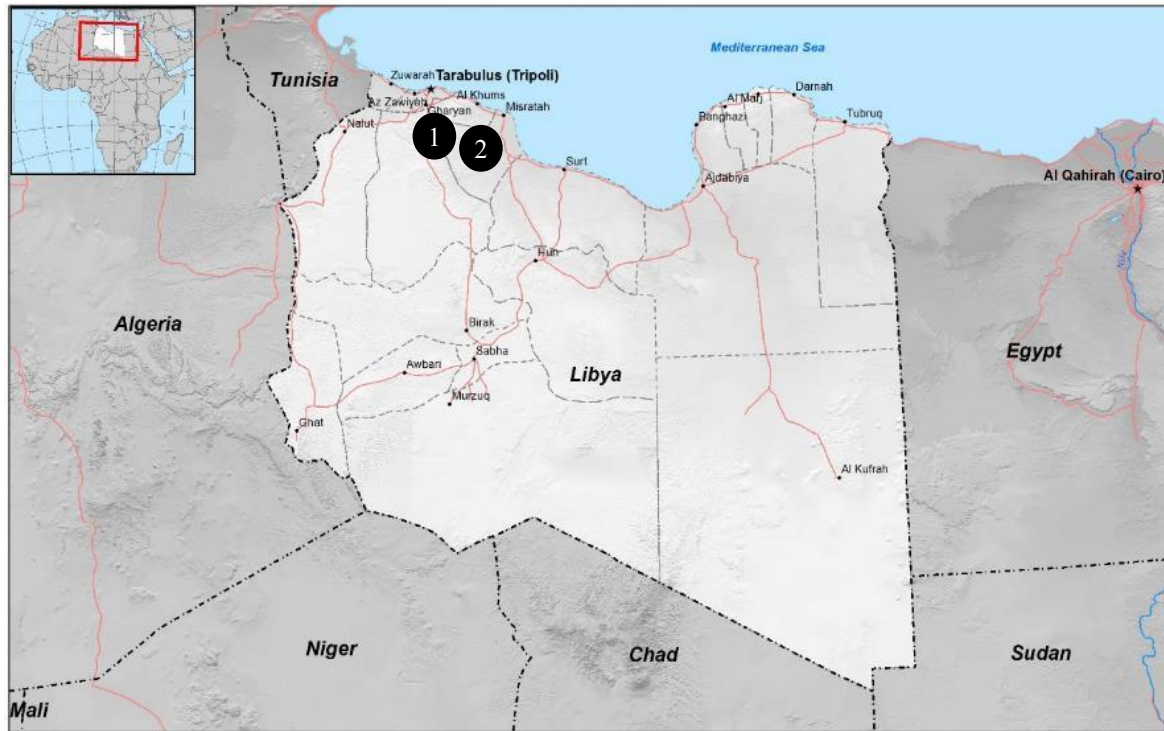


EU LIAISON AND PLANNING CELL LIBYA

Weekly Report 12-27APR 2022

Authors: LTC DEMANGE, MAJ LAGUARDA

Revised by: LTC ASCIONE - LTC VAN DEN HEUVEL



1	Militia commanders pledge neutrality over the GNU-GNS' power struggle
2	Resurgence of Islamic alliances

SUMMARY

In the Greater Tripoli Area, the security situation remains relatively unstable. Militias repeatedly declared that the political struggle should not impact on the security realm to safeguard the current balance of power and avoid any escalation. However, local clashes continue to take place, especially along the Western Coastal Road, not directly related to the current political stalemate, while the 5+5 JMC has completely frozen any Ceasefire Agreement commitment.

GNU PM Dbeibah has continued to build up and try to increase his support both internally and externally. His approach towards the Grand Mufti, Al-Sadiq Al-Ghariani and other religious related initiatives appears to possibly exploit further contrast and instability.

The oil blockade continues hardening economic and social conditions under the shadow of illegal smuggling all along the country and the wish of the IC not to hamper the current energy crisis.

1 CURRENT SITUATION

1.1 Militia commanders pledge neutrality over the GNU-GNS' power struggle

The GNS and the GNU continue their attempts to achieve internal and international recognition, also through the affiliation of local armed groups. This situation has led the two Prime Ministers to further polarize their positions. Before a new Bashaga attempt to enter the capital from the Southern-Western side, with the alleged complicity of Zintani forces, the GNU reacted with a new deployment of Misratan and Zawiyani militias to prevent this. In a new peak of the struggle between the GNS and the GNU, GNU PM Abdel Hamid Dbeibah has declared he will not hand over power to an illegitimate government.

However, the various military leaders have apparently rejected the use of forces as it could be ignited by political interests.

In this context:

- on 11 April, according to local sources the Daman Battalion operating under the Western Region General Staff and belonging to the Stability Support Agency rejected the model of a state with militias controlling state institutions, looting public money and limiting human rights acting as gangs;
- on the same day, after GNU PM Dbeibah met with 166th Bn Cdr Mohammed al-Hussan and Counter-Terrorism Force (CTF) Cdr Mukhtar Al-Jahawi, that announced their rejection against any attempt of division and initiation of war between Libyan people. The same leaders met days later with GNS PM Bashaga;
- on 12 April, after GNU PM Dbeibah called on 5+5 JMC to remain apolitical, GNU CoS Mohamed al Haddad stated that JMC mission is very clear and should continue carrying out its duties;
- on 16 April, the same military leaders of 166th and CTF reaffirmed their refusal of violence to solve the current political stalemate, avoiding actions leading into clashes;
- on 17 April, after the latest Basagha failed attempt to enter the Capital (on 16 April), the Nawasi Bde also issued a statement warning about the threat of an armed confrontation as a result of the political rivalry between the two leaders. They also asked to keep the conflict as a political one, considering them responsible for any bloodshed that might result from their vying for assuming power;
- on 21 April, LTG Muhammad al Haddad warned that the country was very close to a new war. He said he was willing to mediate with parties to prevent another conflict. Although Al-Haddad is still supporting GNU PM Dbeiba, he noted that his forces are keeping distance from political quarrels.

Comment

On 24 April, local sources informed on the dismissal of "Libyan Army" CoS LTG Muhammad al-Haddad. The speculation follows previous unconfirmed reports of the dismissal of LTG Usama al-Juweili as Head of the Military Intelligence Department.

Assessment

The declarations of the Heads of the militias and the Chief of Staff of the Libyan Army are so far unheard. Although no militia Chief wants to lose their achieved positions, they are clearly distancing themselves from the political dispute between the main leaders. It is likely that in an attempt to enter Tripoli by GNS PM Bashaga, militias will be able to allow a transition without causing heavy losses. However, the risk of escalation could increase by the presence of newly forces (such as the Constitution and Elections Support Forces – CESF) that do not have a consolidated position.

1.2 Resurgence of Islamic alliances

GNU PM Dbeibah, is increasingly approaching religious elements, chiefed by the Grand Mufti, Al-Sadiq Al-Ghariani.

In this perspective, the following main events are of interest:

- on 14 April, Gharyani reiterated his support to the GNU sustaining his policy to withhold LNA salaries and being critical against the UN;
- on 15 April, Prime Minister (GNU) Abdulhamid Dbeibah has granted permission to Grand Mufti, Al-Sadiq Al-Ghariani, to establish religious schools for the basic and secondary levels of education;
- on 24 April, local sources informed of the releasing of 84 members of Islamist armed groups, belonging to the Benghazi and Derna Shura Councils and Libya Revolutionaries' Operations Room. According to the source, the release was ordered by GNU PM Dbeibah at the request of Grand Mufti, Al-Sadiq Al-Ghariani and the commander of the 33rd Bn Bashir Khalaf Allah;
- on the same day, it was reported that Abdel Hakim Belhaj, former Emir of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and former commander of the Tripoli Revolutionary Brigade (TRB), arrived on 21 April at Mitiga Airport. It was also reported the alleged arrival of Abu Obaida Al-Zawi, who is the former leader of the Libya Revolutionaries' Operations Room;
- on 26 April, Belhaj stated that all armed groups and security services in Tripoli are committed to preserve the political process but they need a figure capable of leading a dialogue between them. Belhaj stressed that he would not hesitate to participate in efforts to prevent fighting between Libyans.

Comment

Libya's Grand Mufti Al-Sadiq Al-Ghariani has addressed the issue of the general elections in the last weeks and has openly supported the GNU and GNU PM as a great ally (see Weekly Report 31MAR-11APR22).

Concerning the GNU PM Dbeibah permission to establish religious schools for the basic and secondary levels of education, it is worth noting this as an old goal of the Islamic leaders. They had unsuccessfully attempted to establish Islamic classes in the public school during the GNA ruling, but they failed due to interference with the Ministry of Education and for the risk to fuel radical educating programs.

In addition, by the same token, the Internal Security Agency (ISA) concur with a significant Islamic foundation to their work that, combined with the growing visibility and number of operations conducted by the ISA, creates the possibility for GNU PM Dbeibah to strengthen his power base, also from a law enforcement perspective (see Weekly Report 24-30 MAR22).

As per Abdel Hakim Belhaj and Abu Obaida Al-Zawi, they have extensive experience in combat and the leading of extremist groups in Libya. There is also an old relationship between them and Al-Qaida. Specifically, Abdelhaquim Behalj fought against Russia with the Taliban in the 80's and some of his comrades reinforced the ranks of Al-Qaida. Abdel Hakim Belhaj was allowed to come back to Tripoli although an arrest warrant against him was still in force because of his relation with Qatar, not because of his relation with Al-Qaida. It appears that the arrest warrant issued by the Libyan Public Prosecutor (still valid), would be very unlikely to be implemented.

After the 2011 uprisings, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) arose as Libya's largest Islamist party. It held its first meeting in Benghazi just weeks after Qaddafi was captured. In March 2012, it formed the Justice and Construction Party, led by Mohammad Sawan, to run in elections. Other Islamists created a few smaller parties. One of the most important was the Al Watan Party led by Abdel Hakim Belhaj. In recent declarations to Turkish media, he stated that Turkey is playing a very positive role keeping open all the options. He also added that Turkey's commitment to its security and economic agreements with Libya has achieved a balance in the country's military scene. It was also reported that Belhaj had been living for years in Turkey.

Assessment

GNU PM Dbeibah is struggling for power and he is likely trying to increase and consolidate his power base.

Next to other initiatives such as visits to local mayors and promising financial support, using religion to build support in local communities appears to be a major tool .

For these reason we can assess that there is a plausible possibility that GNU PM Dbeibah is using Islam as a political instrument. He is likely looking to be reinforced by the Muslim Brotherhood, to get the political and economical support of Qatar, and to be reassured of Turkey's support as well.

It is highly likely that the government led by GNS PM Bashaga (supported by Saleh and Haftar) will not accept the approach that GNU PM Dbeibah is making to Islamist circles, considering the GNS stance against Islamists. These developments can result in GNS allegations against GNU PM Dbeibah that his government consists of and supports 'terrorists', legitimizing the intervention of armed forces 'to protect normal Libyans'.

2 OTHER SIGNIFICANT SECURITY RELATED EVENTS

- a. On 11 April, the Director of the Audit Bureau's General Department for Oversight of the Sovereign Sector, Mr. Reda Qarqab authorised the delayed payment of LNA salaries for January and February. Days later, the LNA complained about the payment and accused the Audit Bureau of not being legally authorized to do the payments.
- b. On 12 April, negotiations between Mohammed Bahrin (al-Far), Cdr of the First Support Force in Zawiyah, and the GNS have collapsed. It was related to the LNA's withdrawal from the JMC 5+5 and the subsequent statements released by the LNA delegation within the JMC (see Weekly Report 31MAR-11APR22).
- c. On 12 April, the UNSMIL Mission Coordinator Raisedon Zenega met with the five LNA representatives of the JMC 5+5 in Benghazi. He tried to re-establish conducive conditions for the JMC 5+5 to be re-unified. Zenega stressed the importance of the JMC 5+5, to avoid escalation and called on the JMC members to continue cooperating with the UN's mission to monitor the ceasefire. Days later, the UNSMIL Mission Coordinator met the Western representatives of the 5+5 JMC in Tripoli. They expressed the need to avoid any politicization of the Commission.
- d. On 15 April, GNS PM Bashaga allegedly met with the US AFRICOM Cdr, General Stephen Townsend, 166th Bn Cdr, Muhammad al-Hassan, and Western Military Region/Joint Operations Room of the Western Region/Head of the Military Intelligence Department LTG Usama al-Juweili.
- e. On 16 April, PM Dbeibah and Interior Minister, Major General Khaled Mazen, visited the Internal Security Apparatus (ISA), meeting ISA Head BG Lotfi Al-Harari. Harari stressed the role of the ISA in maintaining the State's security and economic stability.
- f. On the same day, the LNA General Command announced that the Deterrence Operations Group of the Central Region Branch and the Saiqa 15th Bn were placed under TBZ Bde operative control.
- g. On the same day, GNU PM Dbeibah met with the Tunisian Ambassador to Libya Al-Asaad Al-Ajili and Counter Terrorism Force (CTF) Commander MG Muhammad Al-Zain. They considered how to increase security cooperation between Tunisia and Libya. This included border security.
- h. On 18 April, GNU PM Dbeibah travelled to Algeria with a number of ministers, as well as the Chief of General Staff, Chief of the General Intelligence Service and Head of the Internal Security Agency (ISA) in order to develop cooperation with Algeria. Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune expressed his support for the GNU.
- i. On 23 April, Armed clashes erupted in Zawiyah. Allegedly, between the Qasab armed group and the Fadel Al-Zarrouk armed group (affiliated with the Zawiyah branch of the Criminal Investigation Department - CID). The clashes can be related to the killing of an affiliate to the Qasab armed group.
- j. On the same day, unconfirmed sources reported the seizure of a vessel suspected of being involved in oil smuggling activities by the Western Coastal Guard allegedly in coordination with the Attorney's

General Office, in the north of the Kammash area. Controversial reports have later revealed that the vessel, owned and managed by a Turkish company, was legally carrying fuel for private use.

- k. On 26 April, GNU sources reported that a scheduled PM Dbeiba's visit to Tunisia has indefinitely been postponed at the request of the Tunisian Government. GNU PM Dbeibah decided to divert his trip from Tunisia to United Arab Emirates (UAE) aiming to seek support for his parliamentary elections plan.

l. Oil Blockade persists

- On 16 April National Oil Corporation (NOC) declared *force majeure* on Mellitah crude until further notice, citing the entry of "a group of individuals" and prevented entry of employees into El-Feel Oil Field provoking the suspension of production at the field;
- on 18 and 19 April, NOC announced first the *force majeure* at Zueitina Terminal and connected fields, as well as Sharara Oil Field, while also warning of a "painful wave of closures at the time of the oil and gas price boom". Afterward the same precautionary measure was also extended at the Brega Port, while also warning that the shutdown of Sirte Oil Company production will have implications for the stability of the electrical grid/ power generation, especially in the Eastern Region, due to the reliance of most power plants on gas produced from the Company's fields;
- on 23 April, NOC informed of damage at 29 sites, including oil derivatives tanks and several other tanks, in the Zawiyah Refinery, due to April 22-23 armed clashes occurred in the area during the previous days;
- on 24 April Oil Crescent locals expressed support for the GNS and complained about the non-payment of salaries, particularly in the Eastern region. The participants issued a video statement with 10 conditions to resume production which include, i.a., the GNS assuming power from Tripoli;
- on 25 April, GNU Oil and Gas Minister Mohamed Aoun during an interview to foreign media outlets, blamed foreign countries for interfering in Libyan affairs. Aoun pointed out "loyalists to foreign parties" as the main problem of the Libyan state. Meanwhile, Aoun noted that the ongoing blockades have resulted in a financial daily loss of approximately \$60 million;
- on 26 April, the Head of the Oil Workers Union at the Zueitina terminal stated that export operations remain halted at the terminal and the recent visit of GNS PM Fathi Bashagha to the Oil Crescent region and his meeting with protesters failed to secure positive results in this regard.

Comment: As a result, in few days the Libyan oil production was reduced by half, at a time when the price spiked due to the UKR/RUS crisis.

m. LNA counter terrorist operations in the South

- On 13 April, the LNA Sabha Military Region Cdr, MG Fawzi Al Mansouri released a press statement that the LNA continued security operations targeting terrorist elements in the Southern Region; emphasising that the GNU has no role in the operations;
- on 18 April, a car bomb attack was launched on a LNA TBZ Desert Patrol checkpoint near Sabha, resulting in the killing of two TBZ members as well as a subsequent chase between the perpetrators and LNA-aligned security forces in the Mansheiyah and Jadid areas . The attack was claimed by IS/Daesh as part of the 'revenge for the two Sheikhs campaign' which is believed to relate to the killing of Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi and the group's spokesperson, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi in Syria by US Forces in Feb 2022;
- on 25 April, according with LNA information LNA TBZ Bde engaged with IS/Daesh militants who were trying to infiltrate in Ghadduwah, close to Murzuq. One of the militant was recognized as the explosives expert Hisham Bin Hashemi. The same day, the LNA's 73rd Infantry Bde stated that its

members confronted another group that attempted to infiltrate Sabha via Ghadduwah, before fleeing towards the South of Murzuq;

- On 26 April, skirmishes between IS/Daesh elements TBZ Bde forces continued near Ghadduwah resulting in mobilization of the 128th Bde to secure the area of Murzuq.

Comments: As already stated in previous reports, the presence of IS/Daesh militants in the South of Libya is confirmed. Also for this reason, LNA keeps on maintaining a constant operational focus on the area aiming to highlight his capability to effectively counter terrorist threat in Libya.

Assessment: Therefore, confirming the assessment expressed in the Weekly Report dated 31MAR-11APR22, terrorist actions remain successfully contained.

3 CONCLUSION

The current situation has hardened the security standstill between the parallel Libyan institutions. The alleged GNS PM's last attempt to enter Tripoli has provoked some reactions by the GNU PM influencing the relationships with neighbouring countries. At the same time, some relevant armed actors expressed their reluctance to wage war in Libya, inviting the two primary contenders to solve the stalemate without triggering any violence.

As a result, it seems that the repeated failed attempts to take the reins of the country from the GNU in Tripoli, have marred Bashagha's relations with his inner supporting circle, namely the LNA and the HoR, both willing for a stronger stance before an electoral solution long to be framed and executed.

The increasing internal instability, adjoined to the suspension of the military track within the JMC 5+5, have resulted in multiplied criminal short-term events, especially in the Western part of Libya and along the Coastal Road.

However, worries are founded on the return on the scene of former Islamist representatives because of a GNU PM attempt to garner farther internal support. That could anticipate a longer-term internal dispute that highlights the volatility of a Libyan led and owned peace process under the auspices of the International Community. The upcoming UNSMIL renewal mandate outcome will measure the temperature of such IC wish and capability to affect the Libyan file.

Besides, the oil and gas blockade and smuggling, remain the most remarkable factors affecting both the Libyan revenues and the energy crisis in Europe. That, together with the illegal migration exploited by criminal gangs, are expected to impact heavily on the overall security domain in the incoming season. in coordination with the regional security interests of external parties.

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.