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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Stellungnahme / comment

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Lacher, W. (2018). *Tripoli's militia cartel: how ill-conceived stabilisation blocks political progress, and risks renewed war.* (SWP Comment, 20/2018). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-57442-2

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Mitglied der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

SWP Comment
NO. 20 APRIL 2018

Tripoli's Militia Cartel

How Ill-Conceived Stabilisation Blocks Political Progress, and Risks Renewed War

Wolfram Lacher

Since the establishment of the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, in March 2016, a handful of local militias have gradually brought much of the Libyan capital under their control. Although nominally loyal to the GNA, these armed groups today in fact dominate the government. They have grown into criminal networks straddling business, politics, and the administration. The pillaging of state funds – a hallmark of Libya's political economy – now benefits a narrower group than at any previous point since the 2011 revolution. Actors excluded from this arrangement are building alliances to alter the balance of power in Tripoli by force. New security arrangements for the capital are urgently needed to avert renewed conflict and prepare the ground for a broader political settlement.

In March 2016, three months after the signing of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), the Presidency Council of the GNA arrived in Tripoli. Its main backers — the UN and Western governments — had strongly encouraged the nine-member Presidency Council to move to Tripoli quickly and create facts on the ground, even though it did not command any regular security forces to protect itself in the capital. This led the Presidency Council to rely on selected armed groups from Tripoli and Misrata for protection. The move was controversial and contributed to the LPA's failure. Two Council members who had already begun boycotting the body's meetings would never rejoin the Council in Tripoli.

In the year that followed the Presidency Council's arrival, a handful of armed groups that backed its establishment in Tripoli took over much of the capital, gradually dislodging their rivals in a series of clashes. Since then, these groups have acquired an unprecedented degree of influence over state institutions in Tripoli. The four largest are the Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade, led by Haitham al-Tajuri; the Nawasi Brigade, led by the Qaddur family; the Special Deterrence Force (SDF), led by Abderrauf Kara; and the Abu Slim unit of the Central Security Apparatus, led by Abdelghani al-Kikli.

The transformation of Tripoli's security landscape — from a complex patchwork of multiple groups into an oligopoly of large militias — has vastly improved security for the average citizen. The UN and Western embassies, which had tacitly supported the aggressive expansion of the pro-GNA militias, have demonstrated their confidence in the status quo by gradually re-establishing

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themselves in Tripoli. However, the militia cartel threatens to thwart the UN's ongoing attempts at brokering a more viable political settlement and risks provoking a major new conflict over the capital.

The Cartel's Rise

At the time of the Presidency Council's move to Tripoli, few armed groups there had committed to supporting it. Those groups that supported the remnants of the General National Congress, elected in 2012, and its associated government rejected the Presidency Council as being externally imposed. The large armed groups from Misrata based in Tripoli partly joined their city's political leaders in support of the Presidency Council and partly opposed it. Haitham al-Tajuri — whose armed group was then just one of many in the capital but has since grown into Tripoli's largest militia — publicly mobilised against the Presidency Council as late as two weeks before it arrived. Many other armed groups in the capital kept their options open.

The Presidency Council's arrival forced armed groups in the capital to take sides. Which side a group found itself on was not always a matter of principle. Before the move, the Presidency Council had focussed on gaining the support of the Nawasi Brigade and the SDF, both of which were based in the Suq al-Jum'a district and controlled the area around the naval base in which the Presidency Council took office. The SDF also controlled the capital's only functioning airport. In a knee-jerk reaction, Tajuri's group joined the Presidency Council's supporters during the night of its arrival. Within days, Abdelghani al-Kikli's group in the Abu Slim district entered this coalition. All four groups were in rivalry with other local militias over territory and assets; their rivals found themselves in the other camp by default. The Presidency Council rapidly fell under the influence of the militias protecting it and made little effort to reach out to others.

These four militias then began to expand. The lines of conflict were defined in part by allegiances to the two competing governments in Tripoli; in part by ideological divides, as the SDF is dominated by Madkhali Salafists, who consider political Islamists to be renegades; and in part by turf rivalries. By March 2017, the four militias had taken over most of central Tripoli; in May 2017, they dislodged their remaining opponents from positions in southern Tripoli. Only in the eastern district of Tajura did they continue to face tenacious opposition from local armed groups.

The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) backed the militias' expansion with its tacit approval, as well as with advice to GNA officials who liaised with the armed groups. This support rested on the expectation that the Presidency Council would gradually build its own force, the Presidential Guard, to protect itself. But the rapidly increasing influence of the four big militias ensured that the Presidential Guard could not grow into a significant force.

The Economy of Expansion

What allowed these four armed groups to take over much of Tripoli within a year? The budgets they received from the state cannot account for this. As with most other Libyan armed groups, the four militias were — and are — formally part of state security institutions; Tajuri's, Kikli's, and the Qaddur family's groups are all part of the Central Security Apparatus, through which they cover salaries and operating costs. However, the heyday of militia expansion through government funding was in 2012/2013. Budgets for militias declined after the civil war that erupted in mid-2014 led state institutions to split. This did not change with the formation of the GNA. The Central Bank has granted the Presidency Council only limited access to funding.

Instead, the financial basis for expansion lay in the revenue streams that armed groups developed as state funding contracted from 2015 onwards. One effect of shrinking budgets was a sharp uptick in kidnappings in Tripoli during 2015 and 2016. Militias

also began establishing protection rackets during this period, such as taxing markets.

More consequentially, armed groups seized opportunities presented to them by Libya's worsening economic crisis, which prompted them to gradually penetrate the infrastructure of the financial system. From late 2014 onwards, confidence in the Libyan dinar eroded due to the collapse of oil production that started in 2013 and the split through state institutions since mid-2014. The gap between the official and black market exchange rates widened, offering growing profit margins for those who could access hard currency at the official rate. This led armed groups in Tripoli to start "protecting" bank branches, to obtain privileged access to foreign currency at the official rate — initially, through small-town schemes such as getting banks to issue credit cards, then travelling abroad to withdraw foreign currency and returning to exchange it on the black market. A more sophisticated scheme was to obtain letters of credit (LCs) that supply foreign currency at the official rate for the importing of goods, then to import less than the declared amount — or even nothing at all — and reconvert the foreign exchange into dinars on the black market. Militia leaders would extort branch managers or gain their complicity to obtain LCs for front companies.

The increasing influence of armed groups over banks led to trust in the banking system dropping further, as rumours spread that bank employees were colluding with kidnapping gangs to provide information on deposits. Fraud schemes also led the authorities to tighten access to foreign currency at the official rate, prompting traders to withdraw their deposits and obtain foreign currency on the black market. Together with inflation, stoked by the declining exchange rate, these developments combined to create a cash crisis. Since early 2016, long queues at banks have been a permanent sight in Tripoli.

The liquidity crisis offered yet more opportunities to armed groups, which were in the advantageous position that they could withdraw their salaries in cash as soon as banknotes arrived at a branch. Commanders established clienteles among ordinary citizens by offering privileged access to cash withdrawals, and they made profits by buying cheques from citizens at a discount, then converting them into cash for their face value. In addition, armed groups collected monthly payments for protecting bank branches, in addition to the state salaries their members received. Paid contracts to provide security also became the norm at all major state-owned enterprises and office buildings.

These changes in the financial basis of Tripoli militias meant that their rivalries among each other had a strong economic dimension, and that territorial expansion could sustain itself, since new areas offered new sources of income.

From Militias to Mafias

Under the Presidency Council's watch, the militia oligopoly in Tripoli has consolidated into a cartel. The militias are no longer merely armed groups that exert their influence primarily through coercive force. They have grown into networks spanning politics, business, and the administration.

The fraud schemes involving LCs were a major driver in this evolution. Businessmen associated themselves with militia commanders to profit from LC fraud, then invested part of their gains in the armed group they allied with. The regulatory framework for LCs grew more complex because the Central Bank tightened oversight, the GNA's economy ministry also established a committee overseeing LC procedures, and the Audit Bureau suspended an increasing number of approved LCs. To continue, actors engaging in LC fraud had to exert influence within these different institutions, as well as in bank branches and the customs administration.

To pursue these and other fraudulent practices, commanders in Tripoli's large armed groups began placing agents throughout the administration. Since late 2016, new appointments in ministries and other

government bodies have been overwhelmingly made under pressure from the militias. Through their representatives in the administration, the networks associated with the militias are increasingly able to operate in a coordinated manner across different institutions. According to politicians, militia leaders, and bureaucrats in Tripoli, the Presidency Council and the GNA have become a mere façade, behind which the armed groups and their associated interests are calling the shots. The vast majority of the new appointees are from Tripoli itself, undercutting the formula of geographical proportionality on which the GNA had been based.

The stranglehold over the administration exerted by the militia cartel means that the profits from the pillaging of state funds now benefits a smaller groups of actors than at any point since 2011. Unsurprisingly, this is fuelling serious tensions. A handful of Misratan militias are also present in Tripoli and support the status quo there, but the bulk of that city's armed groups, and many of its politicians, increasingly resent their marginalisation by the Tripoli cartel. In Zintan, which hosts the second-largest forces in western Libya, after Misrata, such resentment is combined with the long-held desire to return to the capital and efface the humiliation suffered in 2014, when Zintani forces were forcibly dislodged from the capital by a Misratan-led coalition. The recent appointments of Zintani figures in senior positions in Tripoli are not sufficient to assuage these ambitions. Yet another force with designs on the capital is based in Tarhuna.

Throughout the first months of 2018, actors from these three cities have attempted to build an alliance to enter Tripoli by force. The complexity of the alliances around the capital and engagement by UNSMIL have, to date, prevented such an offensive from happening. But the longer the current situation in Tripoli persists, the more likely it is that such forces will start a new conflict over the capital.

Conclusions

Over the past year, GNA officials and Western diplomats have shared a sense that Tripoli is stabilising. But the current appearance of stability is deceptive. The way in which it has been achieved risks provoking new conflict. The entrenchment of the militia cartel in state institutions will also pose an obstacle to any future political settlement. A new agreement on power-sharing or a handover to elected institutions will be hard to achieve as long as the occupants of formal government positions know that they will be strong-armed by the militias controlling their ministries.

Western governments and the UN share responsibility for the state of affairs in Tripoli. They tacitly backed the establishment of the militia oligopoly in a mistaken belief that this would allow the GNA to govern and establish its authority. The gradual re-establishment of the Western diplomatic presence in Tripoli also lends support to the militia cartel. A change of direction is urgently required. The UN should mediate between the stakeholders in and around the capital and attempt to negotiate new security arrangements. These arrangements cannot wait for progress in the political process to happen; in fact, they are a precondition for such progress.

There are no quick, straightforward solutions for security arrangements in Tripoli. Regular security forces can only begin to form and take responsibility once a more sustainable political agreement is reached. The current political situation only allows for temporary, ad hoc solutions. One option may be to negotiate rotating, joint deployments of two or three forces, starting with a few key locations, then rolling them out across the capital if they prove successful. Whatever formula is found, UNSMIL would likely need to adopt an active role in supervising its implementation. A longer-term strategy for engaging with Libya's armed groups can only grow out of a serious effort to deal with the acute challenges they pose.

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ISSN 1861-1761