

Commentary, June 25, 2014

ARMED GROUPS IN LIBYA AFTER THE ELECTIONS - WHAT CAN BE EXPECTED?*

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The political developments in Libya are heavily influenced by numerous armed groups. As this will remain unchanged after the upcoming elections it is useful to assess their capabilities, political affiliation, alliances and future intentions.

It is quite difficult to grasp the "Libyan Army". At its core it consists of some remaining elements from Gaddafi's former armed forces that defected early after the outbreak of the revolution (e.g. the Saiqa Special Forces in Benghazi). Whereas it is easy to list the naval and air force units based on their typical equipment, which can be operated only by trained specialists (i.e. former members of Gaddafi's forces), this is by far more complicated with the army.

The bulk of the remaining former Gaddafi army formations are under their required strength, although some of them were filled up with new recruits. The few entirely new units established by drafting individuals were frequently created with foreign support¹.

¹ See e.g. the "General Purpose Force" Initiative (USA, Italy, UK and other)

Due to the fact that numerous new "army brigades" were created by absorbing structured militias as a whole it is difficult to draw a line between "regular forces" and militias acting as "official" army units, as auxiliary units (e.g. the "Libya Shield") or "on behalf" of the MoD.

There is no firm command and control structure within this "Libyan Army". Many units obey only to their own commander and – in several cases – to their own local leadership. Therefore it is necessary to assess them individually and not within the framework of the "Libyan Army", which is – for the time being – not a major factor in the Libyan "power play".

The situation is quite similar with the police and other official security forces.

The militia "landscape" is complicated and fractured. A major block consists of Islamist militias, ranging from moderate groups to radical Salafists². The Ansar

² The Salafi movement is a movement within Sunni Islam following the example of the earliest Muslims, the salaf ("ancestors"). They are not necessarily radical or violent, but there are also militant extremists.

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* The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not reflect the position of the Austrian MoD.



al-Sharia is the best known Islamic extremist militia in Libya. It emerged in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution and became more and more influential over time. This group includes several skilled fighters with experience from Iraq and Afghanistan. As a consequence the overall training standards are comparatively high.

Other radical Islamic extremist groups in the Cyrenaica allied with Ansar al-Sharia are the Omar al-Mukhtar Brigade, the 17 February Brigade and the Libya Shield No. 1 Brigade, which is as a part of the Libya Shield forces also an auxiliary force of the Libyan Army. The Islamic extremist militias field together less than 10,000 fighters, probably no more than 8,000.

Ansar al-Sharia has also a significant presence in Tripolitania. Furthermore there are other groups in western Libya with a similar Islamist agenda, e.g. the LROR³ in Tripoli.

Depending on the outcome of the elections and the subsequent formation of government all these militias will either support (if it is dominated by Islamists) or challenge its legitimacy (if this is not the case). In the case they are driven underground outside their strongholds terrorist attacks on the hydrocarbon industry are very likely. It cannot be expected that they will voluntarily disarm any time soon.

The core units of Khalifa Haftar's Operation Dignity forces in the Cyrenaica are a part of the Libyan Army, led by defected former Gaddafi officers, like Khalifa Hiftar himself. But they are also supported by various "anti-Islamist" militias and the federalists.

It needs to be seen if this coalition stays together after the elections. If the future government is not dominated by Islamists and is willing to fight the Salafi terrorists it has a good chance to get a real influence on several partners of Operation Dignity, eventually on General Hiftar himself. This could mean that this forces could be (re-)integrated into the Libyan Army.

The reaction of the federalists and their armed groups

³ Libyan Revolutionaries' Operation Room

will depend on the policy of the future government with regard to de-centralization and the work of the constitutional commission.

If the Cyrenaica is increasingly used by Egyptian terror groups as training, staging and support area it is almost certain that the Egyptian Armed Forces will get more and more engaged in Libya. This will include direct support to General Haftar.

The most powerful military powers in Tripolitania are the Misrata and the Zintani.

The Misrata⁴ are quite close to the Muslim Brotherhood leadership and other moderate Islamists. It seems to be that many Misrata have realized that a "stone-age" Islamic state is not in their interest. Altogether the militias of the city number about 10,000 to 12,000 fighters (excluding reserves). Since the revolution the Misrata have been supported by Qatar. But as the Qataris were frequently accused of interfering too much into Libyan domestic politics this support is now somehow more in the background.

The anti-Islamist Zintani⁵ militias are a relatively small, but well trained force. Their most famous Brigades are the Al Qaqa, the Al Madani and the Al Sawaiq. At the core the Zintani militias number about 3,500 – 4,000 fighters, but they have support also from outside their tribe. As many Zintanis had prominent roles in Gaddafi's army there are still strong links to its remaining elements in the new Libyan Army⁶, in particular to the Saiqa Special Forces. Several Zintani leaders have personal ties to more liberal politicians⁷. Allegedly the Zintanis are still supported by Qatar's gulf rival the UAE⁸.

As many Berber are traditionally followers of the Ibad-

⁴ Misrata is with a population of 280.000 the third-largest Libyan city.

⁵ Zintan is a city (50,000) in the Jabal Nafusah Mountains in the north-west of Libya. The Zintanis are a formerly semi-nomadic Arab tribe. Several Zintanis live in Tripoli, some also in the Fezzan.

⁶ But there are differences with Khalifa Haftar as a person.

⁷ In particular to the liberal-leaning National Forces Alliance of former PM Mahmud Jibril

⁸ United Arab Emirates



ism⁹ Islam, they are opponents of the Salafists. This could keep them in the more-secular alliance with the Zintani which emerged during the fight against Gaddafi, although they were hostile to each other for centuries.

The Toubou minority and their Arab adversaries in the Fezzan and in Kufra are also historic enemies contesting about trans-Sahara trade routes and smuggling. This is still a major factor today. Although the Toubou are inferior in numbers they show frequently superior fighting skills. They have quite good relations with the Zintani and Khalifa Haftar's Operation Dignity.

It is unlikely that the tribes in the south will play a direct role in the power-play in Tripoli, but keeping the importance of the hydrocarbon and water resources as well as the smuggling and border control problem in mind, the situation in the south will heavily affect the stability of the whole country.

Some parts of the south-west of Libya are used as a safe haven by AQIM¹⁰ terrorists. They are operating in neighboring countries, but did not yet conduct any major assaults in the Fezzan. If AQIM is being hunted down on Libya by the Libyans, Algeria or western countries, revenge attacks on oil fields and pipelines are to be expected.

Some former loyalist tribes (like the Al Ghaddadfa and the Al Maqarba) are trying to use favorable opportunities to enhance their security situation by fostering their position by force. Nevertheless it is highly unlikely that they will be able to play a prominent nation-wide role in the near future again.

The equipment of most of Libya's armed groups is quite similar. The most common "heavy" equipment are pick-ups with various mounted weapons ranging from heavy machine guns (e.g. 14,5 mm), light AAA¹¹ (23 mm) to 106 mm recoilless anti-tank guns. Several use also Grad-type 130 mm rocket-launchers although their

crews frequently lack proper training. A few militias like the Zintanis, the Misrata and the 17 February Brigade have some quite modern patrol vehicles (e.g. South African Ratel, Nimr from the UAE). A part of these was delivered after the revolution. In 2013 the (regular) army received about 20 Italian Puma APCs¹². It seems to be that the bulk of the remaining MANPADS¹³ are not in an operational condition any more, although some militias like to show them in the internet. Several armed groups have tanks (mostly T-55) and other tracked fighting vehicles (in particular BMP-2 IFV¹⁴ and SAU-122 tracked howitzers) in their stocks, but very few are in a running condition.

The manpower of the units mentioned by their leaders and in the media is frequently way too high. This figures are used in order to impress and to underline the own importance. Nevertheless many militias have a significant number of less-trained reserves.

The vast majority of the about 150,000-160,000 militia members consists of former "thumar", persons that participated in the armed struggle against Gaddafi. They are eligible for payment by the government - although in fact only about 60,000-80,000 really fought in the war. Additional payments are made to militias belonging to the Libyan Army, the auxiliary forces or other "official" security forces.

In theory the government could use the "power of the purse" and stop payments to militias that are not loyal to the government. Unfortunately, as several examples show, this is not realistic as long as it is so easy to blackmail the state.

While assessing the future intentions of Libya's armed groups it is mandatory to understand the complexity of the local conflicts. It is not only Islamists versus anti-Islamists or thumar against former Gaddafi loyalists or a fight about smuggling routes or about historic differences or about maintaining the own position

⁹ The Ibadis are a denomination of Islam, separate from Sunni and Shia.

¹⁰ Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

¹¹ Anti-aircraft Artillery

¹² Armored Personnel Carrier

¹³ Man Portable Air Defense System

¹⁴ Infantry Fighting Vehicle



achieved in the revolution, but in most cases a combination of several of these (and others).

Most of these issues remain unsolved. Therefore it can be expected that the vast majority of Libya's armed groups will pursue their own agenda also after the elec-

tions. Based on the outcome some groups could eventually get some more legitimacy. It is crucial that a working legitimate government is established soon.

But nevertheless properly conducted parliamentary elections are major stepping stone towards a better future for Libya.