

# 1. The Big Picture

## Last-ditch political effort amid growing fears of escalation

This week, fears of a Libyan National Army (LNA) intervention continued to grow in the West as key tribes pledge allegiance to the LNA. Uncertainty is high amid waning confidence in a political solution. It remains unclear whether a last-ditch effort by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) to organize the National Conference and elections will be successful. There are emerging concerns among Tripoli residents that even if there is a potential agreement to form a transitional government between the head of the LNA, Khalifa Haftar, and the Government of National Accord (GNA) PM, Fayez Sarraj, escalation would be inevitable due to entrenched differences between their respective supporters.

Given Haftar's recent territorial gains, any agreement struck with the GNA would be viewed as Sarraj's capitulation, which raises the possibility of confrontation in the medium term in the West, especially within Tripoli and between Misrata-based factions and the LNA. Meanwhile, Haftar could put pressure on the political process in a bid to gain the legitimacy that corresponds to his military gains, which would also increase the risk of escalation as factions would lose confidence in the UNSMIL-led political effort.

On the ground, multiple Zintani local groups and dignitaries, including the Council of Zintan and the Sons of Zintan, issued a statement on 05 Mar rejecting outcomes of a recent Zuwara meeting, while expressing their "repeated and full support" for the LNA and its military operations. In a similar development, the Municipality of Alrjban, a town located in the western mountains, announced on 05 Mar that they retracted their support for the statement issued in Zuwara on 03 Mar, claiming the meeting changed from a simple "social agreement" to a strong anti-LNA document. Further, the Council of Surman expressed similar views and attitudes towards the LNA and Zuwara meeting. It is worth noting the Zuwara meeting had brought together western dignitaries and elders who rejected military rule. Overall, support for the LNA in the West appears to be growing, while anti-LNA factions are increasingly being marginalized.

While some analysts suggest internal divisions and combat fatigue can help explain the seemingly passive stance within the Misrata stronghold, there

is no substantial evidence to rule out the possibility of large-scale military operations in the short to medium term.

On the oil and gas front, the National Oil Corporation's (NOC) monthly revenues were down 30% in January. The NOC declared income from crude oil and concession contracts was at approximately \$1.6 billion, \$680 million less than in December 2018. The NOC attributed the drop to Sharara oil field's closure and deteriorating security environment over the past three months, though production has resumed at the field as at 05 March 2019. Production at El Sharara, Libya's largest oil field, has reached 180k barrels per day (bpd) as at 09 Mar, according to the latest estimates. Production was up from the 135k bpd mark on 07 Mar, which indicates a gradual recovery after a prolonged closure and recent LNA control and subsequent handover.

Separately, in an interview with Reuters, eastern-based Central Bank of Libya (CBL) governor Ali Al-Hibri, confirmed the bank has raised 32 billion LYD (\$23 billion) in bonds issued in the East since 2014 to fund the Libyan National Army (LNA) and pay public sector salaries. Al-Hibri added another 7 billion LYD in bonds will be issued in 2019, without the approval of the Tripoli-based CBL. Al-Hibri declared public sector salaries amount to 400 million LYD/month, while 450 million LYD/month is spent on LNA salaries and equipment. The debts represent a liability and could further complicate efforts to unify the country's eastern and Tripoli-based central banks, according to financial experts. Meanwhile, the Tripoli-based CBL also has an estimated 65 billion dinars in debt. These irregularities will prove challenging for the planned audit of both banks, which has been described as an important step in unification. Auditing the Tripoli-based CBL stood as one of the core requirements set by the East in the aftermath of the June-July 2018 Oil Crescent crisis.

### KEY POINTS

- Misrata quiet but escalation possible
- More tribes support LNA in West
- Confidence in dialogue waning



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## 2. National Security Map

### LNA movements South of Sirte; Sirte Protection Force (SPF) raises state of alert to critical

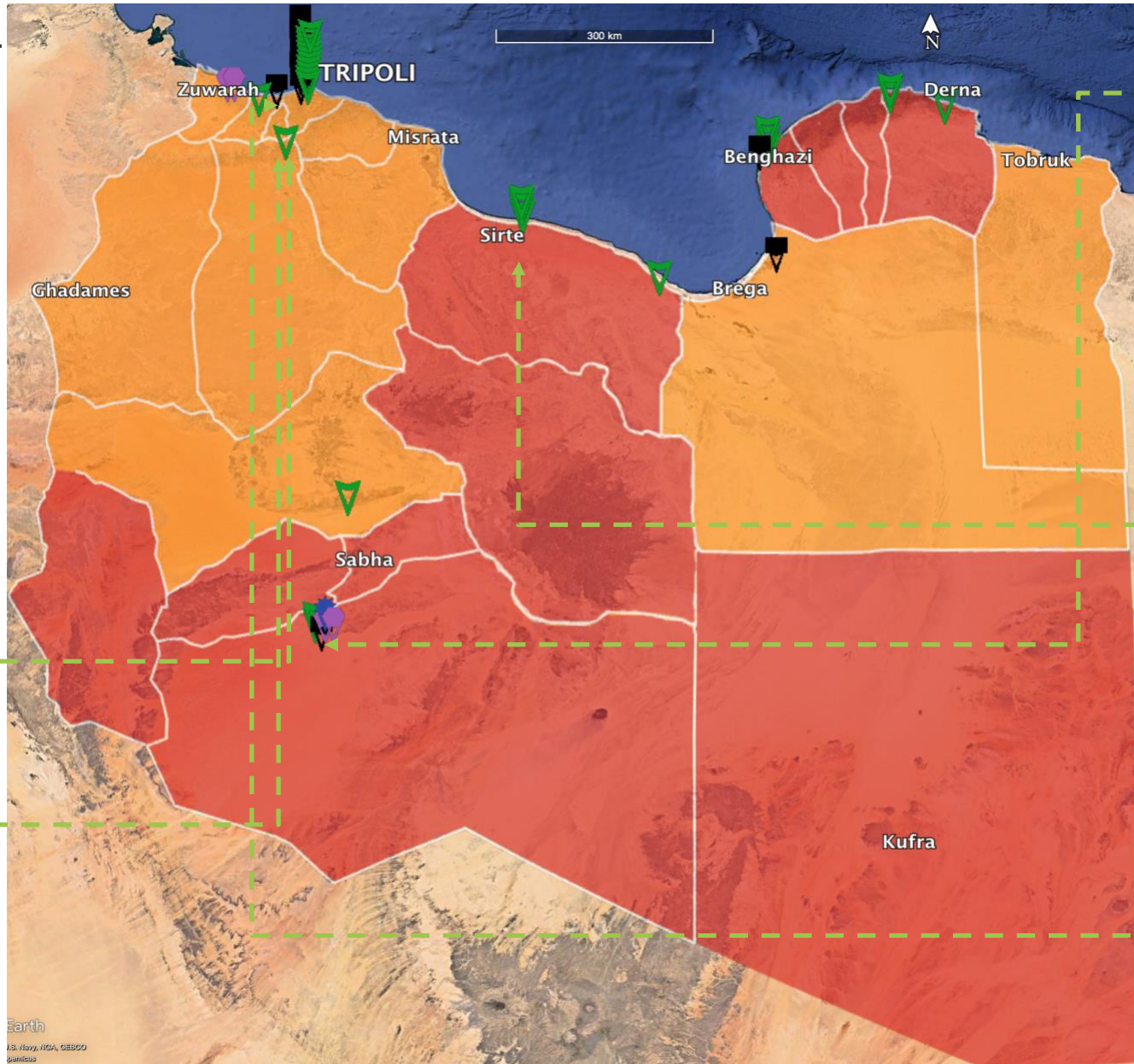
Key

THREAT INDICATORS

- Severe Threat
- High Threat
- Moderate Threat

EVENT INDICATORS

-  IED | VBIED
-  Violent Clash
-  Isolated Gunfire
-  Other



On 08 Mar, reports suggest local Murzuq factions, under the supervision of the Murzuq Social Council, signed a de-escalation agreement after tensions recently escalated between the Ahali and Tebu tribe, resulting in at least four fatalities. Reports of clashes within Murzuq came amid reports the Libyan National Army (LNA) had retreated from the area. However, the LNA denied these claims and confirmed it handed over law enforcement duties to local police, adding that local criminal groups exploited this vacuum.

The Sirte Protection Force (SPF) declared a state of emergency across the Sirte national district after reported LNA movements South of the city. The SPF called on all units, including reservists, to mobilize and raise their preparedness levels. The state of alert would come amid unconfirmed reports of LNA forces controlling a checkpoint near Qasr Abu Hadi (also known as Gate 40), South of Sirte. The SPF denied the LNA's presence near Qasr Abu Hadi, claiming some LNA units filmed their presence in the area but later withdrew.

Reports suggest gunmen affiliated with a local militia led by "Al-Far" in Al-Zawiya killed three men, including an individual affiliated with a rival militia, in a drive-by shooting at approximately 1800hrs 07 Mar. Initial reports suggest the incident is tied to a long-standing rivalry and dispute.

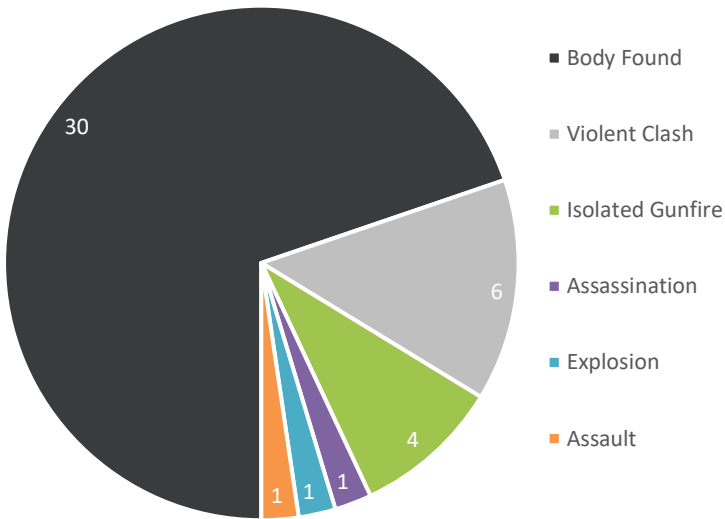
A man was found killed in Gharyan in the evening on 04 Mar. Initial reports suggest the man was a member of the 111th Battalion, which recently declared its support for the Libyan National Army (LNA).

Unconfirmed reports over social media suggest LNA forces entered Al-Asabaa town in the evening on 09 Mar. Local sources reported the security environment in Garyan city remains unchanged with no confirmation of LNA units' presence. Al-Asabaa is already considered pro-LNA, though a full-scale "boots on the ground" LNA presence would risk escalating tensions in Gharyan between pro/anti LNA factions. In a separate development, unconfirmed reports suggest LNA units sent reinforcements to Houn on 09 Mar.

### 3. Nationwide Security Analysis

#### Surge in Tripoli isolated gunfire incidents; 27 bodies found in Murzuq

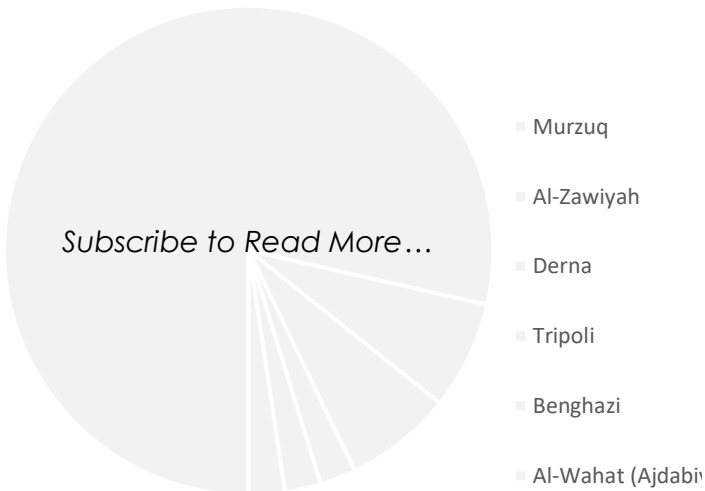
Nationwide fatalities by type of attack (Past week)



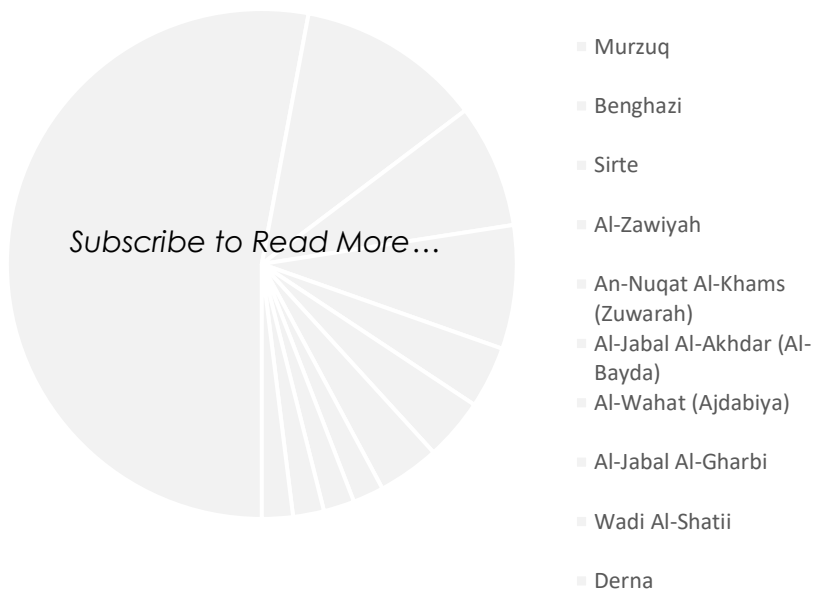
Nationwide incidents by type of attack (Past week)



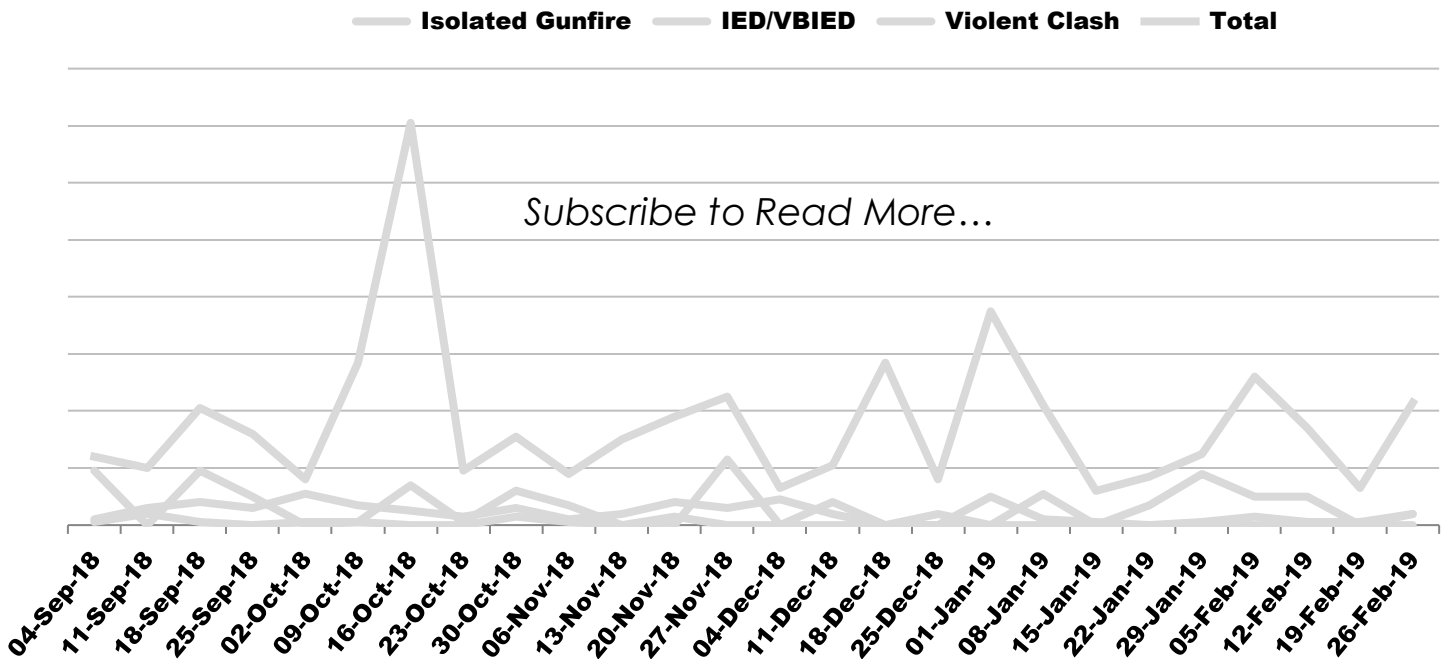
Nationwide fatalities by national district (Past week)



Nationwide incidents by national district (Past week)



## Nationwide Fatalities by Type of Attack (Past 27 Weeks)



### Data Analysis

WB recorded this week a total of 43 confirmed deaths in Libya, which compares to 13 deaths reported last week and 34 the week before. This week was marked by a surge in isolate gunfire cases in Tripoli, which would correlate with an uptick in recorded militia-related criminal activity and extortion attempts in the capital. However, the number of fatalities in Tripoli continue to be relatively lower than other parts of the country. Bodies found made up over half of the nationwide fatalities. Several security incidents were reported throughout the country, 12 cases of isolated gunfire, 3 raids, 4 reports of violent clash, 4 drone-related incidents at MJJ, and a suicide bombing attempt foiled in Shahat.

In Western Libya, WB recorded a total of 32 incidents, including 27 incidents in the capital city, Tripoli. In Tripoli, there was a noticeable increase in sporadic security incidents. Reports suggest a vehicle caught fire on Al-Burj Street, in Tripoli's Hai Alandalus area in the afternoon on 08 Mar. The fire then reportedly spread to a nearby utility pole. In a separate incident, smoke was seen near Tuesday Mall Roundabout, at approximately 1700hrs on 08 Mar. Initial reports indicate the smoke was due to waste incineration near Tripoli's Wadi Al-Mjeneen. Further, a Hyundai Elantra was stolen while parked on Al-Sour Road in Tripoli's Sidi Khalifa area at approximately 1100hrs on 08 Mar. In addition, a group of unidentified gunmen raided a house in Tripoli's Al-Fellah area and arrested a man in the morning on 09 Mar. No further information available. There were reports of sporadic gunfire in Tripoli's Zawiyat Al Dahmani area where gunmen in civilian uniform were seen gathering at Zawiyat Al Dahmani Roundabout at night on 06 Mar. Initial reports suggest sporadic gunfire was related to gunmen affiliated with the Anti-Drug Apparatus manning a CP at the roundabout and firing shots in the air when a vehicle failed to stop.

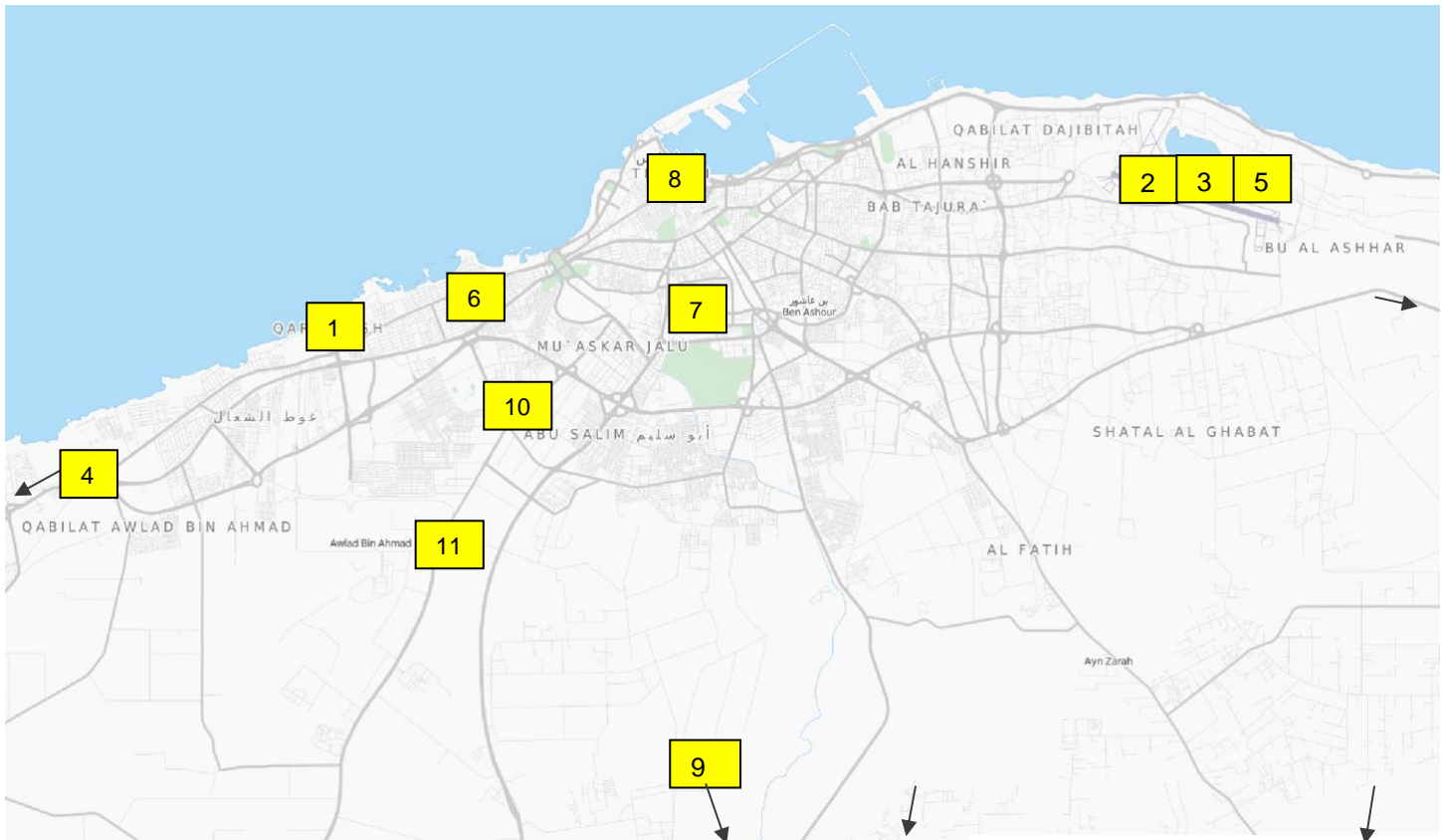
This week in Central Libya was marked by heightened tensions over LNA movements South of the Sirte national district, prompting the GNA and BAM-affiliated Sirte Protection Force (SPF) to raise the state of alert to critical across the national district.

Turning to Southern Libya, reports suggest Chadian gunmen carjacked two unidentified vehicles in Umm Al Aranib in the evening on 04 Mar. Meanwhile, in a separate incident, reports suggest clashes erupted between Chadian gunmen and the Libyan National Army (LNA)-affiliated Khalid Bin Al-Walid Battalion resulting in the injury of a local in Umm Al Aranib on 04 Mar.

In Eastern Libya, the Libyan Red Crescent found three bodies in Derna. Separately, Shahat Security Directorate announced a suicide bombing attempt was foiled on 08 Mar. A 13 year-old Egyptian national was reportedly arrested carrying an improvised explosive device (IED), which he planned to detonate in a busy market.

## 4. Tripoli Neighborhood Report

### Unidentified military UAV results in four recorded airspace closures at MJI



#### KEY INCIDENTS

1. (05 Mar) Vehicle stolen while parked in Gergarish
2. (05 Mar) Unidentified UAV interrupts flights at MJI
3. (06 Mar) Unidentified UAV interrupts flights at MJI for second day
4. (06 Mar) Anti-UNSMIL protest in front of OEA village
5. (08 Mar) UAV interrupts flights & reported near miss with local aircraft
6. (08 Mar) Vehicle catches fire in Hay Alandalous
7. (08 Mar) Vehicle stolen while parked in Sidi Khalifa
8. (08 Mar) Pro-Islamist, anti-UNSMIL, & anti-Haftar/Sarraj protest
9. (08 Mar) Sporadic gunfire in Sog El Khemis; Zintan militia testing weapons
10. (09 Mar) Ghneiwa gunmen raid shops in Al-Fellah area
11. (09 Mar) Dispute between Zintan militia & unidentified gunmen

#### Rogue UAV disruptions at MJI

An unidentified military unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) continued to fly over Tripoli's Mitiga International Airport (MJI), closing airspace from 1900hrs to 2200hrs, and resulting in flight diversions to International Misurata Airport (MRA) and Zintan Airport. Operations at the airport were later resumed. This is the fourth recorded disruption caused by an unidentified UAV at MJI, though there have been multiple sightings in the past month. Reports suggest the rogue UAV has been flying at 5000 feet (1.5 km), exposing aircraft during take-off and landing to a serious risk of collision. The UAV could be on a secret reconnaissance mission, though the identity of its operator remains unconfirmed and GNA authorities have not been notified, which rules out the possibility of US Africa Command (AFRICOM) involvement. However, US involvement remains possible. Reports, citing unidentified US officials, suggest unarmed US surveillance drones continue to fly from Bizerte, Tunis, and into Libyan airspace. Multiple other foreign governments deploy UAVs and other aircraft across Libya in reconnaissance missions. The overall surge in drone activity across Tripoli could be tied to heightened tensions over the Libyan National Army's (LNA) rumoured offensive in the West.

#### Ghneiwa gunmen raid shops in Al-Fellah area

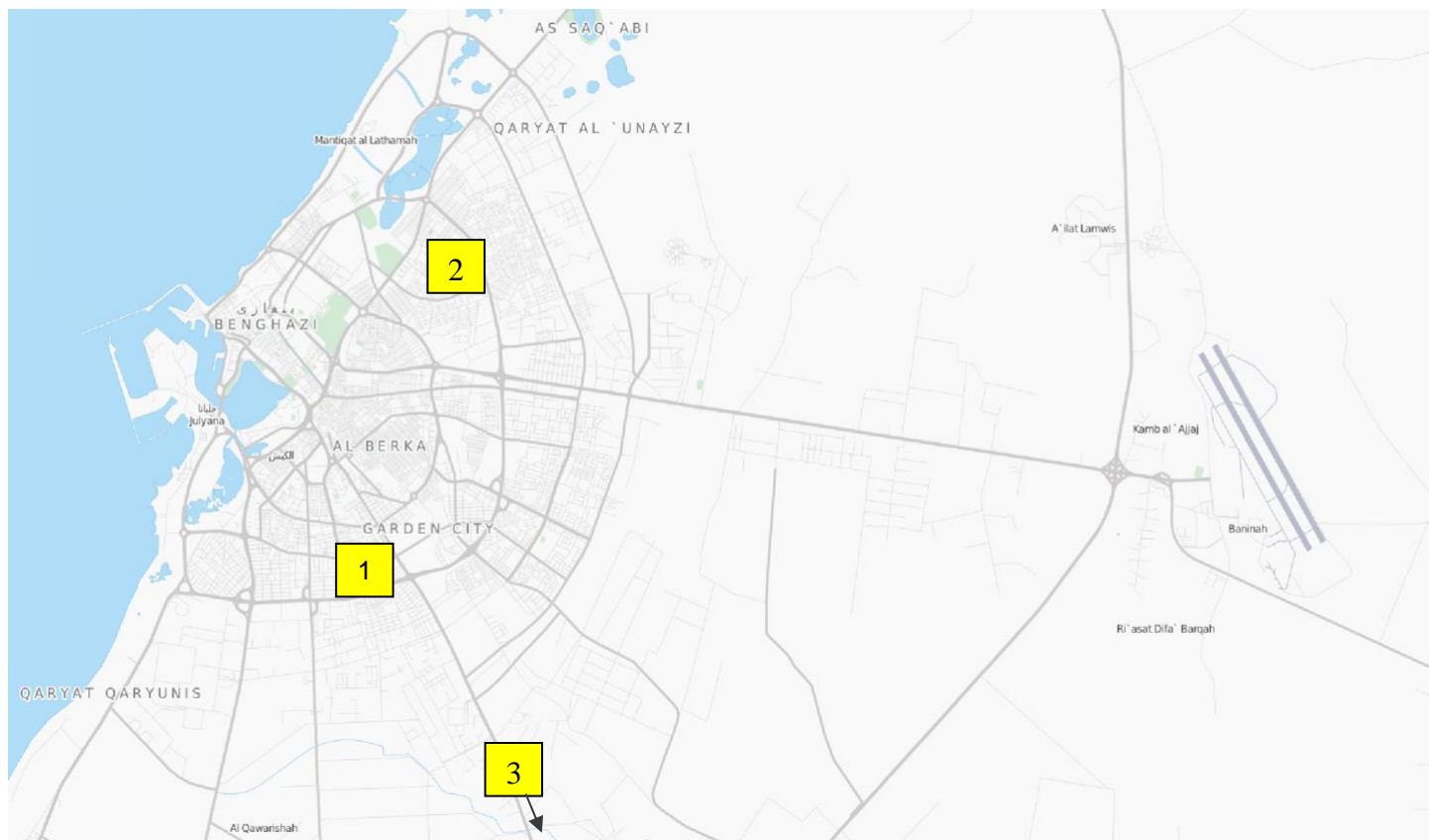
Reports suggest an armed group affiliated with the Ghneiwa militia raided multiple workshops and auto spare part dealerships in Tripoli's Al-Fellah area, near Alahli sports club Traffic Light, in the morning on 09 Mar. The Ghneiwa militiamen forced the owners to close shop, alleging they failed to provide necessary documentation and licenses. Over the past month, there has been a surge in militia-related criminal activity and extortion attempts across Tripoli. Militias' confidence in the GNA-sanctioned security arrangements is waning.

#### Militia raids market in extortion attempt

Reports suggest an unidentified armed group from Tripoli's Qaser Bin Ghashir area, raided the Souq Al-Ahad Market, a local fruit & vegetables market, in the Souq Al-Ahad area, arrested all workers at approximately 1800hrs on 06 Mar. The raid caused panic among market workers and customers, while initial reports indicate the armed group was attempting to extort money from the local sellers. A potential GNA "budget squeeze" could lead to a rise in opportunistic crime, prompting militias to revert to extortion and other methods to ensure survival. WB recently received reports that a prominent militia in the capital city has reverted to extortion.

## 5. Benghazi Neighborhood Report

### Sporadic security incidents; Cement Factory reopening ceremony



#### KEY INCIDENTS

1. (02 Mar) Authorities arrest gang involved in robberies
2. (02 Mar) Sporadic gunfire due to celebrations of LNA soldiers
3. (08 Mar) Benghazi Cement Factory reopened

#### Authorities arrest criminal gang

Benghazi's Security Department arrested a gang involved in armed robberies targeting several shops across the city on 02 Mar. Security forces reportedly seized pistols, grenades and other weapons from the gang.

#### Sporadic gunfire due to celebrations

Reports of sporadic gunfire heard in the Ard Quraish area. Initial reports suggest the gunfire was due to celebrations of the return of the LNA 21 Battalion from military operations in the South.

#### Benghazi Cement Factory reopens

Local reports suggest the Benghazi Cement factory in the Hawari area was reopened on 08 Mar. The reports suggest the LNA Saiqa Special Forces Commander Wanis Bukhmada attended the opening ceremony. It is worth mentioning the LNA Saiqa Special Forces liberated the cement factory from remaining militants in April 2016. The Factory is expected to reach full capacity within a week, according to local reports.

#### Former Mayor granted amnesty

On 05 March, the LNA granted amnesty to the former Mayor of Benghazi and Deputy Intelligence Chief of the Interim Government, Ahmed Areibi. In Oct 2018, unidentified assailants dressed in military uniforms broke into Areibi's house, kidnapping him and his son in Benghazi's Al-Hadaeq Street area at dawn.

## 6. What's next

### UNSMIL National Conference to take center stage; tensions to escalate

#### POLITICAL FORECAST

The week was marked by attempts to provide clarity on the planned UNSMIL National Conference and elections. In an interview with Libyan channel "AL-Ahrar" on 10 Mar, the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) head, Ghassan Salame, stated dates for the National Conference (Multaqa Al-Watani Al Jami'e) will be announced "within days", while the Conference will be held "in less than a month". There are emerging rumours at the time of writing suggesting the National Conference will be held in Ghadames between 24-26 March. Meanwhile, the GNA PM, Fayez Sarraj, stated parliamentary and presidential elections will be held in Libya by year end. In a meeting at the Prime Minister's Office with the Deans of Municipalities of the Western Region, Sarraj explained that during the recent UAE meeting, he agreed with General Haftar on the importance of preserving civil authority and avoiding military escalation, among other points, including the unification of state institutions. In addition, Sarraj reiterated ending Libya's transition is the only viable alternative while warning of the potential for civil war. Meanwhile, multiple analysts suggest Sarraj's mention of elections by year end, which corresponds to the timeline by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya's (UNSMIL) Ghassan Salame, is yet another artificial deadline unlikely to be respected should current conditions persist.

#### WHAT OTHER EXPERTS SAY

Writing for the *Middle East Institute*, Libyan academic Emad Badi analyses Haftar's strategy in the South and future scenarios. He argues "Hifter is aware that, although capturing the city was straightforward, his progress is provisional. In a region where allegiances are fluid, his success will be contingent upon maintaining the alliances he has built, as well as containing hostile sentiments against his forces. Militarily speaking, the negotiated settlements Hifter has crafted expedite is goals and enable him to tactically co-opt pre-existing forces, leading ultimately to their inclusion in the LNA structure." Badi adds "As Hifter advances in Fezzan, his forces are being stretched thin. As a result, he will need to not only acquire military support, but also leverage his victories to influence the political process and muster further international recognition. Hifter's takeover of the oilfields was swiftly followed by a series of meetings in Abu Dhabi, one of which pressed the GNA and the National Oil Company to lift force majeure over the Hifter-controlled fields. This took effect several days later. In practice, Hifter's international legitimacy, especially among Western countries like France, has gradually increased as he has assumed control over key regions of the country, such as the oil crescent. This suggests, tacitly or otherwise, that there is international backing for Hifter's military operation, and a definite tilt toward accepting the legitimacy of military advances made under the auspices of preserving stability."

#### SECURITY FORECAST

In Tripoli, tensions could escalate especially given the noticeable uptick in militia-related activity, including extortion attempts. While the Tripoli Protection Force (TPF) has not issued any statements this week, tensions are high among militias. Distrust will likely continue to grow amid rumours that the LNA is already in negotiations with some militias in the capital. The Islamic State (IS) could exploit the context of uncertainty to carry out an attack in the capital and/or nearby towns. In the wider West, more tribes are expected to pledge their allegiance to the LNA, with the possibility of internal discord and clashes between pro/anti LNA factions across western towns. In the Sirte national district, tensions are at their highest after the Sirte Protection Force (SPF) raised the state of alert to critical following LNA movements South of the city. While direct confrontation between Misrata and LNA units would seem unlikely in the short term, there is a possibility of sporadic skirmishes and hostilities. Meanwhile, militants affiliated to the former Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) in the Saddadah area could also engage LNA units. The LNA could announce a new military operation in the West, especially after the high-level meeting with senior LNA commanders at the Wattyah airbase in Waddan. During the meeting, the senior LNA officials reportedly discussed the next phase in the LNA's operations across the West.

#### LIBYANS AND THE ARAB STREET

In a commentary for *ECFR*, Tarek Megerisi & Andrew Lebovich discuss how France's strategy in the Sahel and Libya could escalate domestic tensions. They argue "In Libya, Elysée support for Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar has extended long beyond the self-declared Libyan National Army's (LNA) "war on terror" in Benghazi – an undertaking that began in 2014 and first attracted France to cooperate with the would-be strongman. Such battlefield assistance and diplomatic support have been an essential component of Haftar's rise in the last five years. And France appears to have maintained this support unconditionally, despite: allegations of war crimes; an increasingly prominent Salafist core in the LNA, which the International Criminal Court has indicted; attempts to sell oil in breach of UN Security Council resolutions; and Haftar's part in prolonging Libya's conflict and undermining the UN-sponsored political process that France publicly backs. Haftar's latest offensive has seen him move into southern Libya, thereby bringing rival militias together in opposition to him, and potentially pushing others, such as the UFR, further south for a time." "Haftar's choice of narrative suggests coordination with France and Déby, making this a regional operation as much as a Libyan one. But such language has isolated and provoked Libya's sizeable Tebu population, which has long been subject to marginalisation and discrimination by widespread Libyan claims that they are Chadian or Nigerien rather than Libyan." They add that Tebus, "provoked to mobilise against Haftar, they could help trigger unrest on a regional scale. Thus, French support for Haftar could yet have severe knock-on effects."

# About Whispering Bell



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