

## 1. The Big Picture

### Growing uncertainty as fighting picks up post-Berlin Conference

Libyan National Army (LNA) and Government of National Accord (GNA) forces continue to exchange accusations of breaching the truce as armed clashes resumed and intensified across multiple fronts this week. While fighting has not reached the intensity observed prior to the truce brokered by Turkey and Russia on 12 Jan, reinforcements and alleged supplies of foreign arms continued to flock into Libya and were condemned by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).

In further evidence that an escalation is more likely than a political resolution in the short term, the week was marked by a more pronounced but contested presence of Turkish-backed Syrian fighters alongside GNA forces, brewing tribal tensions threatening to overthrow the GNA, a crippled oil & gas production, sporadic attacks targeting Tripoli's only-functioning airport, and more recently the outbreak of hostilities in the Sirte and Misrata districts.

This context of high uncertainty and deep mistrust complicates any initiative aimed at upholding the ceasefire and the Berlin Conference's outcomes. The so-called 5+5 Joint Military Commission (JMC) will meet in Geneva (Switzerland) on 28 January to establish a permanent ceasefire and discuss the Berlin Process military track. The JMC includes regular military and police officers and draws on past military unification efforts. Both the LNA and GNA have nominated representatives to participate in negotiations. However, analysts are of the view that if this last-ditch effort at negotiation fails, a fight to the end could ensue.

The odds are stacked against the Geneva gathering and other political efforts continue to be far removed from the current reality on the ground. At the international level, Turkey has relatively scaled down the aggressive intervention rhetoric, though the reported influx of Syrian fighters continues to reverberate across the country. Meanwhile, the LNA's latest advance towards Misrata highlights intent to continue fighting. LNA spokesperson Ahmed Al-Mismary, claimed combat in the vicinity of Sirte's Abugrein does not constitute a violation of the truce because the Sirte Ops Room is distinct from the Western Region Ops Room. The statement raises the likelihood of combat in the area in the short term. In fact, even the sporadic armed clashes in Tripoli are technically not considered violations given the Berlin Conference failed to establish a permanent ceasefire.

Another factor reducing the prospect of a permanent ceasefire is the sensitive issue of demobilising armed groups. Any attempt by the GNA to disband armed groups, as required by the Berlin Process military track, will be perceived as betrayal and could lead to infighting. Pro-GNA armed groups are unwilling to lay down arms, particularly Islamist factions from Misrata and beyond. These tensions will add to existing pressure on the GNA. Of note, the GNA stated it is reconsidering its participation

in negotiations due to what it described as ongoing violations of the truce by Haftar's forces.

But more importantly, tribal activity poses the greatest challenge to negotiations. After orchestrating a blockade of key terminals and fields, pro-LNA tribesmen have grown more active and continue to rally support. The head of the Supreme Council of Tarhuna Tribes, Saleh Al-Fandi, stated a meeting is scheduled to be held in Tarhuna bringing all Libyan tribes together to achieve reconciliation. It is unclear if this tribal gathering will complement or compete with the UN-led political effort. In a related development, the head of the Azzwei tribe, Al-Haliq Al-Zwei, a leading figure in the blockade, stated oil and gas production will only resume if GNA recognition is withdrawn, leadership of the Central Bank of Libya (CBL) and National Oil Corporation (NOC) are changed, and oil and gas revenues are fairly distributed.

Despite statements from the US Embassy in Libya, the UK, and the EU condemning the closure of terminals, there is mounting evidence of a change of tone relatively compared with past reactions to O&G disruptions. There are even allegations that some countries have rushed to block a joint statement calling for production to resume. These factors led many observers to suggest the international community is now more comfortable with a potential attempt by Haftar to market oil independently. Of note, the NOC declared oil production fell from 1.2 million barrels per day (bpd) to just above 320,000 bpd, amounting to an estimated loss of 256 million dollars (USD) as a direct result of the blockade on 18 Jan.

Production is unlikely to resume until an agreement is struck in the medium term. The closure of the oil terminals and fields will squeeze GNA budgets, widening the rift between field commanders who demand more funding to fend off LNA forces and the Sarraj-led cabinet. As LNA forces reorganize forces and replenish their ammunition, pro-GNA field commanders will grow more skeptical of negotiations.

The GNA cabinet is already facing immense pressure at home to declare a general state of emergency and mobilise all resources in the fight against Haftar. Some pro-GNA commanders openly criticized Turkey's deployment of Syrians and viewed it as a betrayal because they were promised support from Turkish soldiers. GNA divisions were highlighted this week by the resignation of Mohammed Mirdas (former Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade (TRB) commander) from his role as GNA Deputy Ambassador to Tunisia. Mirdas's resignation is reportedly linked to a recent televised interview where serious corruption allegations were brought against GNA officials, including Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha.

#### KEY POINTS

- 5+5 military committee to meet in Geneva
- Permanent ceasefire prospects remain dim
- Flurry of tribal activity as oil blockade set to continue



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# 2. National Security Map

## LNA temporarily seizes Abu Grein & positions towards Misrata before retreating

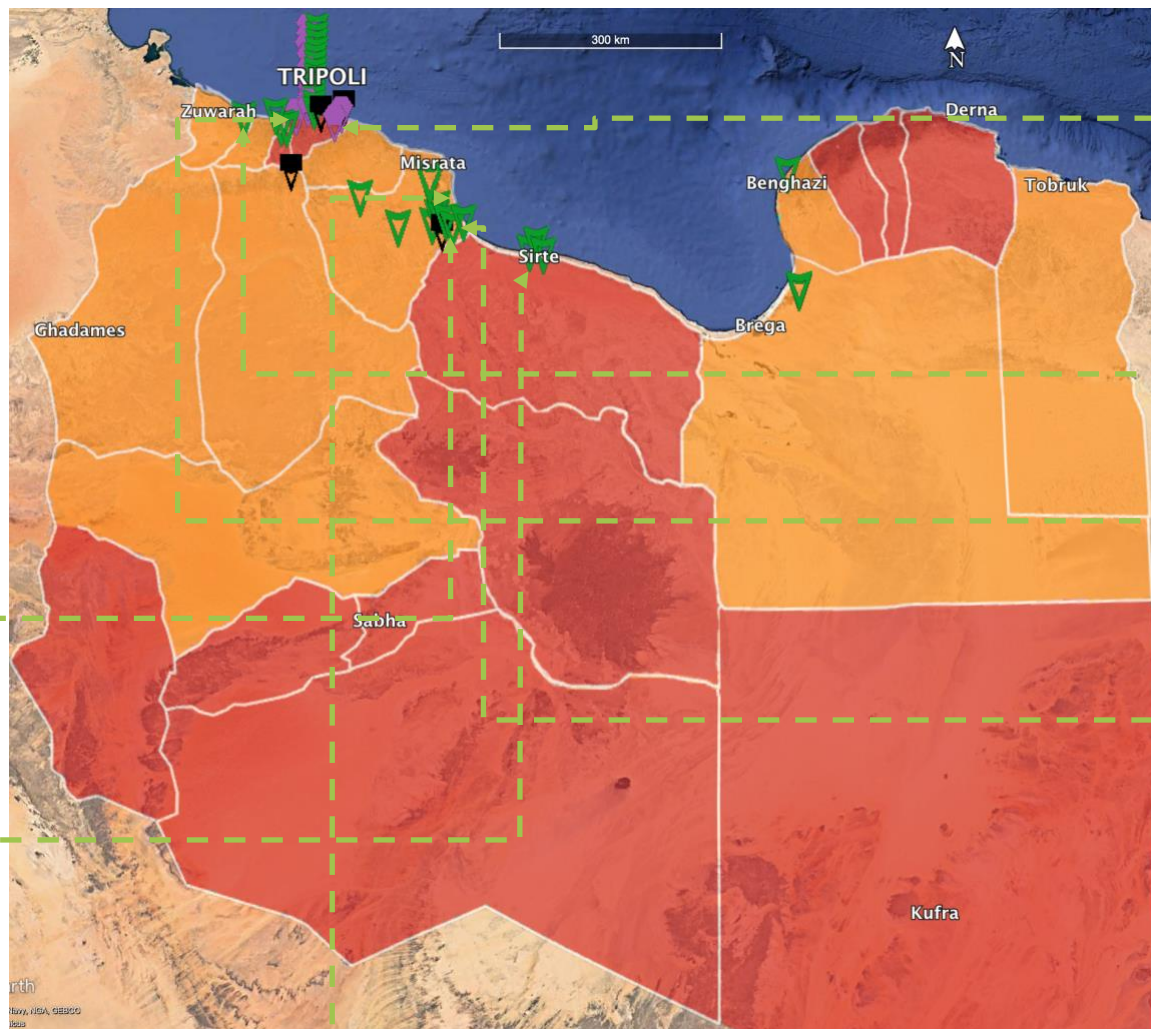
### Key

#### THREAT INDICATORS

- Severe Threat
- High Threat
- Moderate Threat

#### EVENT INDICATORS

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



Reports indicate policemen shot dead an armed man driving a Hyundai Avante with three other gunmen aboard in a vehicle chase near the Garabolli Police Station in the evening on 20 Jan. The police attempted to arrest the gunmen who conducted frequent carjackings in the area. The vehicle chase and subsequent gunfire resulted in the injury of one suspect and the arrest of two others. Unconfirmed reports allege the suspects belong to the Tuareg tribe and are affiliated with the GNA.

Reports indicate the LNA-affiliated western region's Criminal Investigation Department (CID) raided a pro-GNA militia warehouse in Al Ajaylat's Ben Omair area in the morning on 20 Jan.

WB sources reported three gunmen driving a white Mitsubishi Lancer and dressed in civilian clothing established a fake checkpoint on the Jamal Road, linking An Nasiriyah with Naser village in Wershiffanah at approximately 0830hrs on 20 Jan. Initial reports indicate the gunmen stopped all vehicles and stole cash from travellers.

Pro-GNA media outlets reported an LNA Air Force (LAAF) airstrike targeted Al-Weshka area at approximately 1400hrs on 20 Jan.

Reports indicate Tunisian authorities arrested a high-ranked pro-GNA militiaman from Al-Zawiya, identified as Feras Al-Wahshi, at Tunis-Carthage International Airport on 21 Jan. Initial unconfirmed reports allege Al-Wahshi, also known as "Saluki", was arrested upon attempting to enter Tunisia with a Turkish passport.

LNA units mobilised from Sirte and temporarily advanced towards Misrata, seizing Abu Grein and Wadi Zamzam, later retreating as GNA units claimed to have regained their positions in Abu Grein at approximately 1600hrs on 26 Jan. Pro-GNA accounts claim 20 fatalities among LNA ranks and 10 fatalities and 10 injuries on the GNA side.

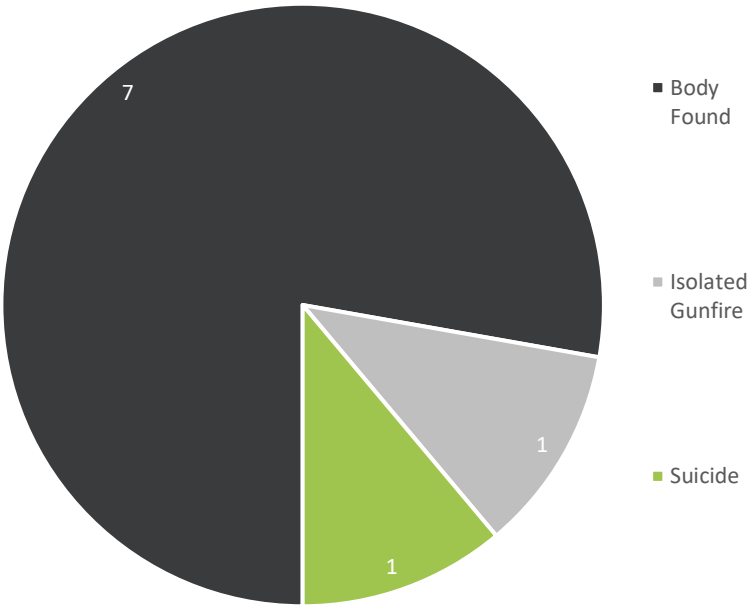
Reports indicate the LNA's Military Police raided the residence of the Municipality of Sirte's former mayor, Moukhtar Al-Maadani, in Sirte's Al-Sabkha area at night on 21 Jan. The Military Police arrested Al-Maadani and transferred him to an unknown location. The latest reports indicate Al-Maadani was released.

Reports indicate an LNA UAV airstrike targeted GNA-aligned Misrata forces near Tawergha at approximately 1300hrs on 24 Jan.

### 3. Nationwide Security Analysis

#### Increased military activity across Misrata district amid LNA advances

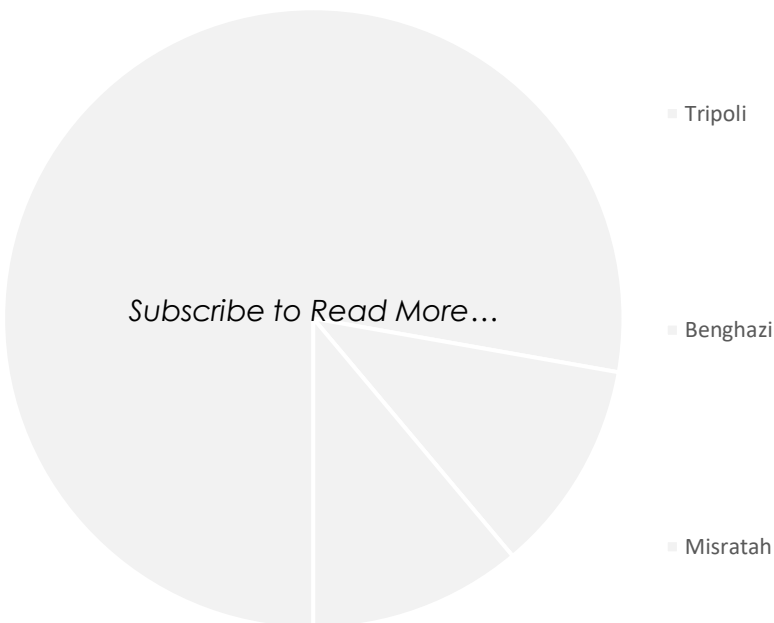
Nationwide fatalities by type of attack (Past week)



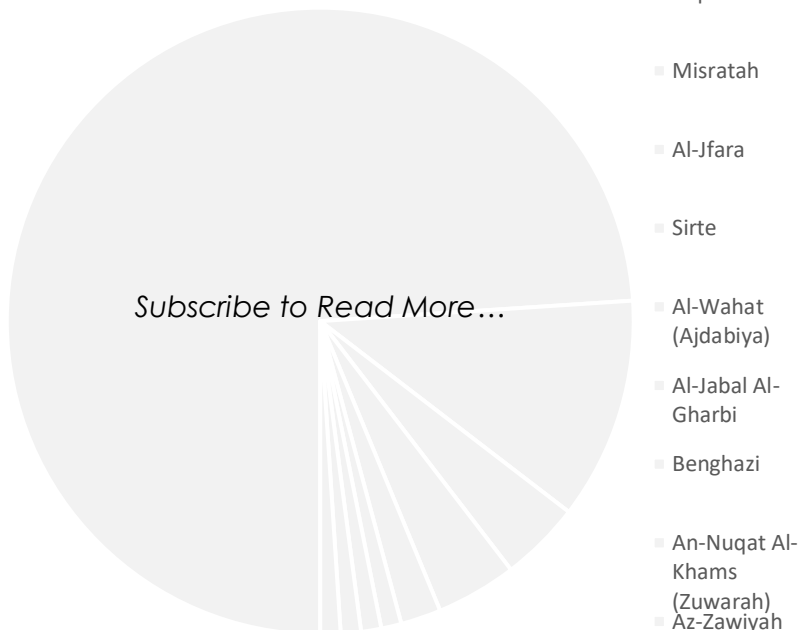
Nationwide incidents by type of attack (Past week)



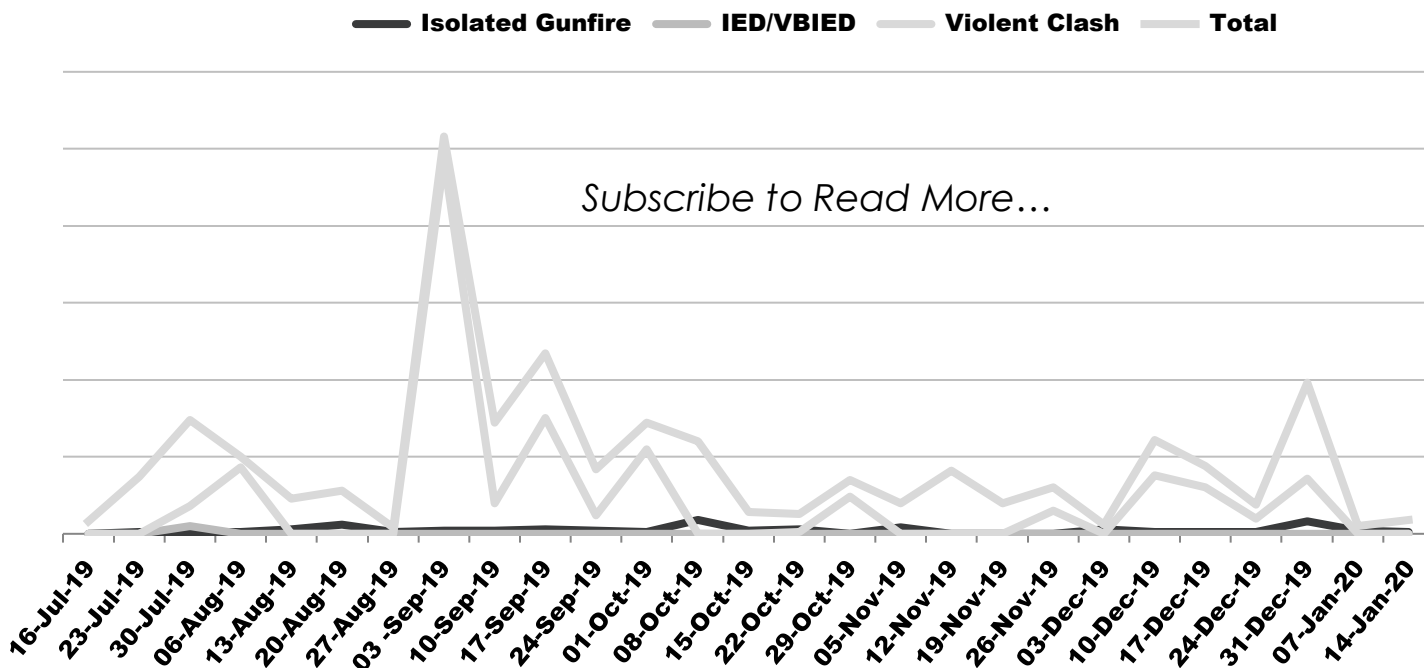
Nationwide fatalities by national district (Past week)



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 9 confirmed deaths in Libya, which compares to 5 deaths reported last week and 98 the week before, marking a slight increase in fatalities recorded in contrast to last week marked by seven bodies found in Tripoli and Bani Walid areas. The number of fatalities is expected to increase in the short term as truce violations continue to date and particularly as the latest reports indicate civilian casualties as a result of renewed indiscriminate shelling across frontlines. In an evident sign of increased military activity from 18 Jan onward, WB recorded a surge in violent clashes, mortar/rocket shelling incidents and subsequent explosions reported across engagement areas. Meanwhile, the number of airstrikes conducted remained relatively the same as last week, with all five airstrikes conducted by the Libyan National Army's (LNA) Air Force (LAAF), including four conducted in Misrata and one in Tripoli. Followed by Tripoli, this week WB recorded an increase in security incidents recorded in the Misrata district which coincides with the latest reports of an LNA advance towards Abu Grein on 26 Jan. Beyond military activity, WB continued to record an uptick in general crime, with seven robberies reported across the country, including three in Tripoli, three in Al-Jfara and one in Sirte. In the particular case of Tripoli, WB recorded an uptick in vehicle thefts in non-engagement areas. Meanwhile, whilst Tripoli continues to dominate the overall security environment, the remaining security incidents were spread across the western, central and eastern regions, though no security incidents were recorded in the south throughout the reporting period. Several incidents were recorded throughout the country including 26 violent clashes, 10 mortar/rocket shelling incidents, 7 robberies, 7 arrests, 6 drones flying over Misrata and Sirte districts, 5 airstrikes, 5 isolated gunfire cases, 2 raids, 2 separate cases of bodies found, 1 protest and 1 suicide case.

In Western Libya, WB recorded a total of 89 incidents, including 71 in Tripoli, marking an evident increase in security incidents recorded in the region corroborating ongoing truce violations and intensified military activity. In Tripoli, beyond combat operations, WB sources reported a parked dark grey KIA Optima was stolen from in front of a house in Tripoli's Ghut Shaal area in the morning on 25 Jan. Similarly, a parked white KIA Sportage 2017 model was stolen in front of a house in Tripoli's Al-Seyaheyya area in the evening on 20 Jan. In addition, a parked dark red KIA Cerato was stolen in front of a house in Tripoli's Al-Furnaj area in the morning on 19 Jan. Beyond, unidentified gunmen reportedly robbed a pharmacy and several shops near Al-Qubub Market in Al-Seyaheyya area. There were also reports of students in Abu Slim protesting against the LNA's offensive on Tripoli and carrying banners against Haftar in support of the GNA in the afternoon on 21 Jan. Other banners included phrases such as "let us study safely" and "where is the United Nations UN) to protect children". Separately, accounting for six out of the nine fatalities recorded this week, Red Crescent teams recovered six bodies on Al-Sedra Road in the Salah Eidden area on 20 Jan. Of note, on 16 Jan, pictures circulated across social media outlets purportedly showing the bodies of six individuals, including a woman, girl, and four men in civilian vehicles, where their bodies had been unattended to for over two weeks. In the wider western region, the Peace Charity Society of Bani Walid reportedly recovered an unidentified body on the Great Man-Made River Road, east of the city, in the evening on 18 Jan. The body was found thanks to local reports and belonged to an undocumented migrant, according to the rescue team.

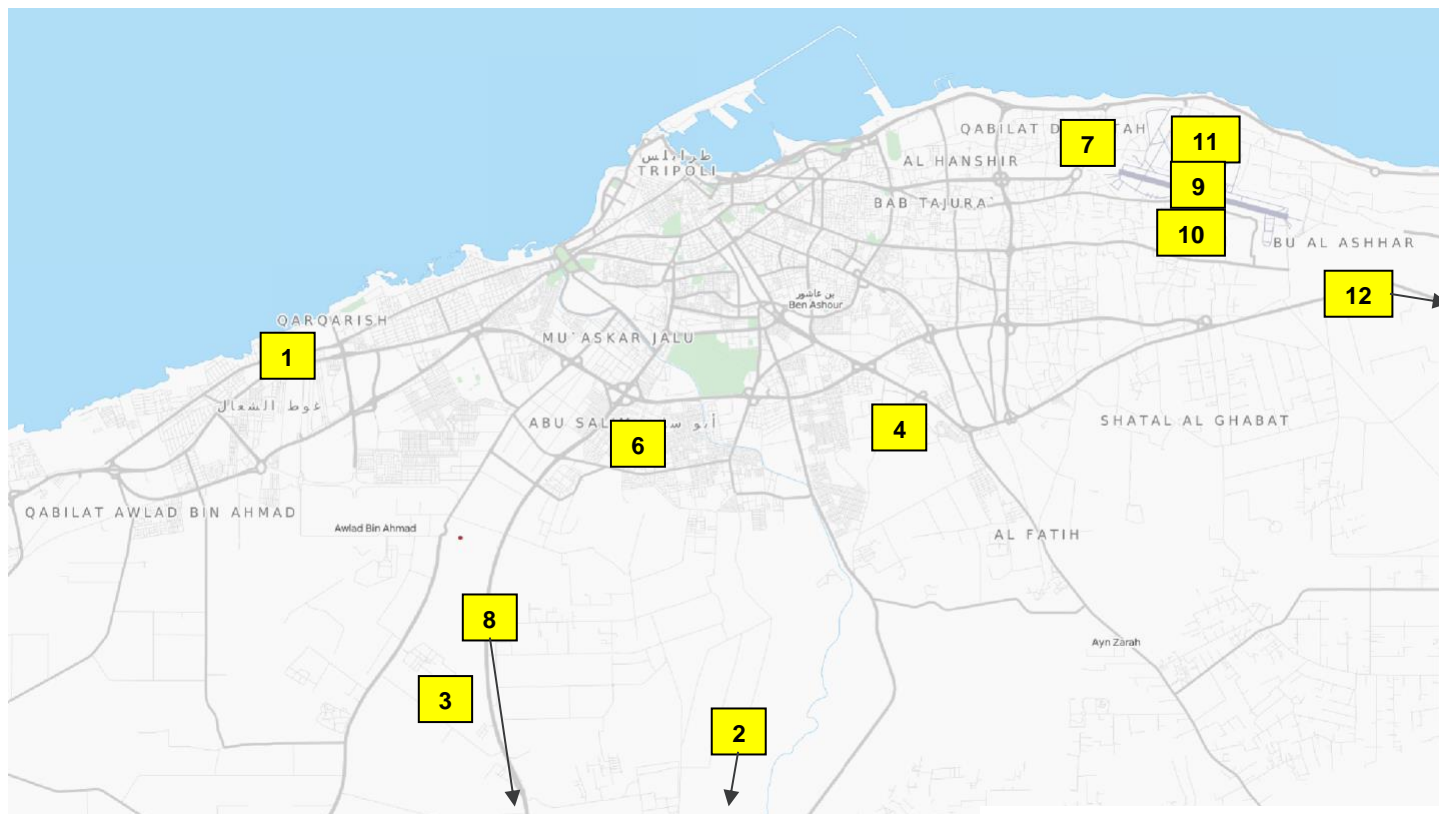
In the central region, the head of the Passports and Nationality Authority branch in Sirte, Abdelhadi Ghania, reported that his headquarters was subject to theft and tampering by an outlawed group in the evening on 17 Jan. According to Ghania, unidentified assailants broke the main gate of the HQ and stole mobile devices, computers, a fax machine, as well as other equipment. In addition, two arrests were conducted, and a drone was spotted in Sirte.

Turning to the south, WB recorded no security incidents across the region throughout the reporting period.

Meanwhile in the east, a suicide case was reported in Benghazi on 21 Jan. No further incidents were recorded across the city.

## 4. Tripoli Neighborhood Report

Intermittent disruptions to operations at MJJ; LNA reactivates NFZ



### KEY INCIDENTS

1. (18 Jan) Local dispute in front of cooking gas distribution point prompted by large crowds
2. (19 Jan) Indiscriminate shelling injures man & damages house in Qasr Bin Ghashir
3. (19 Jan) Ghneiwa militia allegedly raid several houses & force locals to evacuate
4. (20 Jan) Armed group raid Ministry of Health HQ in attempt to sign documents
5. (20 Jan) Criminal gang involved in kidnapping, extortion & theft arrested
6. (21 Jan) Abu Slim students protest against LNA offensive on Tripoli
7. (21 Jan) SDF allegedly arrest Sheikh for rejecting Syrian mercenary presence
8. (22 Jan) Four gunmen allegedly raid CID on Airport Rd in attempt to free detainee
9. (23 Jan) At least five mortar shells land on MJJ resulting in air traffic suspension
10. (23 Jan) LNA down GNA Turkish UAV after taking off from MJJ
11. (24 Jan) Shells target MJJ 24hrs after GNA announces resumption of air traffic
12. (25 Jan) LAAF airstrike targets Ghot Al-Romman, no fatalities/injuries reported
13. (24 Jan) Anti-LNA protest held in Tripoli

### Truce breached with attack on Mitiga

WB sources continued to report violations to the 12 Jan truce agreement marked by Libyan National Army (LNA) Air Force (LAAF) airstrikes, with an airstrike targeting Government of National Accord (GNA) positions in Tripoli's Ghot Al-Romman area and a mortar attack on Mitiga International Airport (MJJ). Separately, reports indicate additional families were forcefully displaced after evacuating their houses in Abu Slim's Rabish area due to ongoing clashes in Hadba Al-Mashro. In the afternoon of 23 Jan, reports indicate LNA units advanced in the Hadba Al-Mashro area. Meanwhile, the latest reports indicate indiscriminate shelling targeted Al-Hadba Alghasi resulting in the injury of two men near As-Safwa Hospital at approximately 2100hrs on 25 Jan. At approximately 2000hrs, an indiscriminate shell landed near Mieh Heloa Mosque in Arada resulting in the death of a Moroccan mechanic, whilst wounding two others.

### MJJ targeted after GNA resume air traffic

Reports indicate indiscriminate shelling targeted MJJ at approximately 0100hrs on 24 Jan. The mortar attack on MJJ came a day after the GNA announced the resumption of air traffic and tasked its Transport Ministry to take the necessary measures in this regard. On 23 Jan, approximately five indiscriminate shells landed on MJJ resulting in intermittent air traffic suspensions.

Following the attack, Libyan Wings and Afriqiyah Airways announced the diversion of all flights to Misrata International Airport (MRA). Of note, MJJ remains operational as of 26 Jan despite renewed attacks on the airport.

Meanwhile, LNA spokesman Ahmed Al-Mesmari declared military activity has been recorded at MJJ, renewing warnings that any military or civilian aircraft will be targeted if found to be in violation of the LNA-imposed no-fly zone (NFZ). Al-Mesmari added that despite the LNA agreeing to a ceasefire without any demands, it is within its legitimate rights to respond to any threat or violation of the ceasefire, singling out MJJ as a key port for delivering terrorists, weapons/equipment, as well as harbouring Turkish troops.

### GNA Turkish UAV downed ivo Mitiga

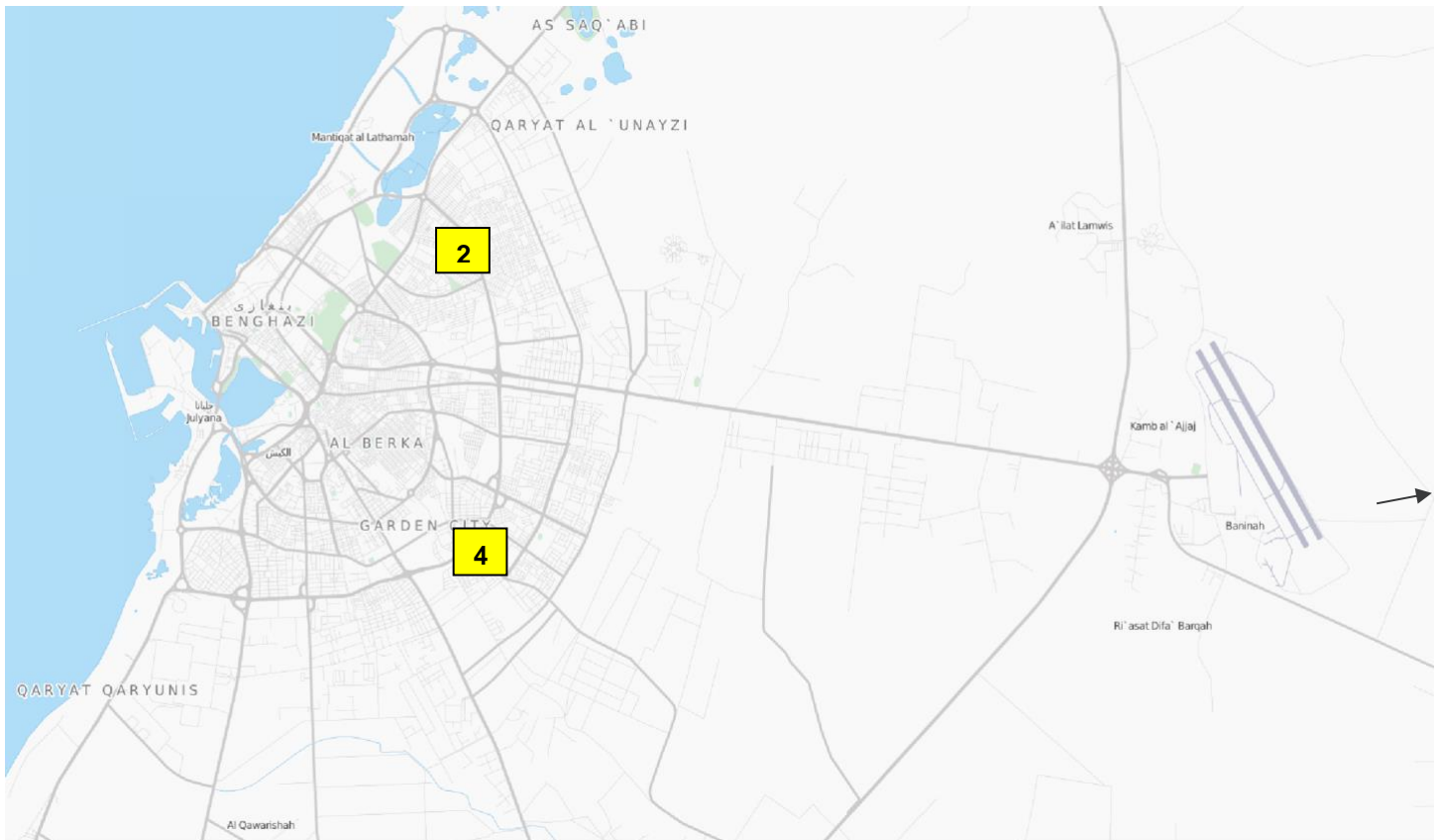
On 23 Jan, the LNA downed a GNA-affiliated Turkish Bayraktar TB2 unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) after it took off from MJJ. Pictures circulated purportedly showing the downed UAV with a Libyan flag on it. The UAV reportedly crashed on a house in Shurfat Al Malāha area, behind MJJ. No fatalities or injuries were recorded.

### Vehicle thefts & robbery

An armed group raided the main building of the GNA's Ministry of Health HQ on Al-Shok Road in a failed attempt to force employees to sign unidentified documents in the afternoon on 20 Jan. A force affiliated with the GNA's Ministry of Interior Central Support Force intervened and arrested the perpetrators. No fatalities or injuries were reported. Unconfirmed reports suggest Misrata forces were behind the raid and was prompted by the GNA prioritising alleged Syrian mercenaries for overseas medical treatment instead of Libyan fighters.

## 5. Benghazi Neighborhood Report

### Second convict in 2012 terror attack on US facilities sentenced to 19 ½ years



#### KEY INCIDENTS

1. (19 Jan) Two drug dealers trading between Benghazi & Ajdabiya arrested
2. (21 Jan) Man commits suicide after receiving news on brother's death
3. (23 Jan) Libyan militant sentenced to 19 ½ years for participation in 11 Sep 2012 attack on US facilities
4. (25 Jan) Drug trafficking hideout raided in Buhdima area

#### Drug trafficking hideout raided

The Benghazi Security Directorate raided a drug trafficking hideout in Benghazi's Buhdima area and subsequently seized large quantities of alcohol, drugs, and hallucinogens on 25 Jan. The Directorate stated it is currently pursuing the identified suspects that fled during the raid.

#### Suicide case

A man reportedly shot himself dead on Benghazi's Syria Street on 21 Jan. Reports suggest he committed suicide after receiving news of the death of his younger ill brother.

#### Two drug dealers arrested

Ajdabiya's Anti-Narcotics agency arrested two drug dealers trading cannabis resin (hash) between Benghazi and Ajdabiya on 19 Jan. According to the agency, the two suspects were ambushed upon entering Ajdabiya, and were seized in possession of approximately half a kilogram of hash. The investigations revealed that the suspects were of Libyan nationality. Arrest campaigns targeting drug-related crime remain particularly prevalent in the eastern region.

#### 2nd convict in 2012 terror attack sentenced

On 23 Jan, the US Department of State announced that Libyan militant, Mustafa Al-Imam, was sentenced to over 19 years for his participation in the 11 Sep 2012 terror attack

targeting US facilities in Benghazi killing four Americans, including the US Ambassador Chris Stevens. Al-Imam stands as the second militant convicted in the attacks that led to the ambassador's killing after Ahmed Abu Khattala was convicted in 2017 on terrorism-related charges and sentenced to 22 years in prison. The US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, stated that Al-Imam's conviction "sends a strong message to those who would attempt to commit such a heinous crime."

## 6. What's next

### Fighting intensifies as negotiations in Geneva escalate local tensions

#### POLITICAL FORECAST

The main question ahead is whether efforts to uphold the ceasefire and Berlin Conference's outcomes will bear fruit. The odds are stacked against the 5+5 military commission talks and political consultations with Libyan representatives in Geneva. Internationally, it is highly unlikely for France, Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus, to accept any resolution of the Libyan conflict that preserves Ankara's deals with the GNA. Likewise, the GNA risks losing key support from Islamist factions if it is perceived to make too many concessions. Even if the GNA makes concessions and proves willing to negotiate in Geneva, the pro-LNA backers will likely delay any resolution to buy time in an effort to isolate Turkey. This was evident in comments by Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, stating the EU will not agree to a political solution to end Libya's conflict unless Turkey and the GNA abandon the maritime deal delineating maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean. More intra-GNA divisions are expected in the short term. Of note, this week saw rifts between Misrata's Abdulrahman Sewehli, former head of the High Council of State (HCS) and the Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party (JCP). Sewehli accused the HCS's current head, Khalid Mishri, of influencing GNA decisions. Mishri reportedly intervened to block Sewehli from attending meetings in Geneva as part of the political track, by freezing the latter's HCS membership. For its part, Algeria continues to revive its diplomatic role by positioning itself as a mediator in the Libyan conflict. During a two-day visit to Algiers, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that Haftar could not be expected to respect the truce brokered by Turkey and Russia on 12 Jan.

#### SECURITY FORECAST

In Tripoli, sources reported a sense of fear and anger among Libyans, including civilians nominally supporting the GNA, due to the presence of Turkish-backed Syrian mercenaries, spotted near engagement areas such as Abu Salim and Alhadba Alkhadra. Meanwhile, Mitiga International Airport (MJI) will likely continue to be targeted sporadically, if it resumes operations. The deepening divisions within the GNA were highlighted by reports of arbitrary arrests sanctioned by the Ghneiwa militia and targeting suspected LNA supporters in Abu Slim and Hadba areas. Meanwhile, there has been a relative uptick in criminal activity and sporadic security incidents across the capital in the past three weeks. Depending on the outcome of the 5+5 military commission in Geneva, there is a risk of infighting and skirmishes across GNA-controlled territory, especially Tripoli and other towns such as Zawiya. Given strong opposition to negotiations from pro-GNA Islamist factions and hardliners, there is a risk of attacks and kidnappings targeting GNA officials and other political figures. Meanwhile, tensions continue in areas around LNA controlled Al-Ajailat town, as LNA-affiliated western CID raided a pro-GNA warehouse. Tensions could escalate further into direct GNA-LNA confrontation in areas in the vicinity of Al-Ajailat and Al-Zawiya, and possibly Zuwara. In Zliten, tensions could escalate between rival armed groups after the nomination of Mustafa Bin Taher, a new commander to lead the Zliten Liberation Room. The LNA would naturally seek to consolidate its posture in Zliten to encircle and isolate Misrata from Tripoli. Last but not least, the Sirte and Misrata districts will continue to take centre stage in combat between LNA and GNA forces. The truce will likely continue to be violated and could even be ignored altogether as fighting intensifies.

#### WHAT OTHER EXPERTS SAY

Libya expert Frederic Wehrey provides a compelling account of the Turkish-backed Syrian elements currently fighting in support of the GNA in Tripoli. Wehrey's article, published on the *New York Review of Books*, provides a perspective from the ground after Turkey's recent Libya pivot. There is mounting evidence to corroborate the presence of Syrian combatants in Tripoli, now seen as a way for Erdogan's government to hedge against the potential risks of sending troops of his own. Wehrey describes the process of arrival of Syrians in Tripoli: "The Syrian fighters in Libya said that they'd arrived there via Tripoli's only functioning airport on a Turkish military plane from Istanbul. They reported to an operations room at that airport, which includes a cadre of Turkish officers working closely with Syrian and Libyan militia commanders. One of these Libyan commanders was my host on the front, a former engineer named Muhammad al-Darrat, who's led fighters in multiple battles since 2011." Further, Wehrey explores how these Syrian fighters attempt to justify their presence on the ground, with some arguing they have simply accepted an invitation to oppose dictatorship. But this narrative may not bode well for the Syrian combatants, both locally and at home where it is viewed as a distraction and betrayal of Idlib. Wehrey writes "But not all Libyans are happy with the Syrian presence. To some, their arrival at the front is an affront to Libyan national pride and fighting prowess, and a source of embarrassment for the GNA government as Haftar's camp turns that resentment into a propaganda point." In an interesting account, the Syrian fighters describe Russia as an enemy and view the fight in Libya against Russia's Wagner private military contractors (PMC) as a payback for Moscow's aerial bombing campaign in Syria.

#### LIBYANS AND THE ARAB STREET

Gregory Aftandilian for *The Arab Weekly* explores Washington's policy position vis-à-vis the Libyan conflict. Aftandilian argues US foreign policy relatively shifted with the departure of John Bolton, former national security advisor to the Trump administration. Bolton may have steered US foreign policy towards support for Haftar whose victory was seen as contributing to stability and eradicating the Islamist threat. Aftandilian writes that Bolton's departure enabled the State Department to cogently articulate and give more nuances to its policy. The involvement from the State Department introduced more clarity after mixed signals from Washington. Aftandilian reports US officials from the White House, State Department, and military, met with Haftar in November 2019 in Jordan. The officials are reported to have expressed concerns over Haftar's offensive and highlighted the potential ramifications of Russia's growing involvement in-country. However, the author points to the fact that Washington is unlikely to lead Libyan stabilization efforts. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's participation at the Berlin Conference signaled intent to work towards a solution, though Washington is unlikely to take leadership of the peace process, according to Aftandilian. Aftandilian concludes "Hence, while the United States is likely to remain engaged in the Libyan situation with its European partners, it seems more comfortable "leading from behind" rather than being out in front."

# About Whispering Bell



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