

# 1. The Big Picture

## National Conference faces “tough” reality on the ground

This week was marked by an increase in diplomatic/political activity, with further clarity provided on the political roadmap ahead. In a briefing to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on the situation in Libya, UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) head Ghassan Salame announced that the National Conference (alMultaqa alWatani) will be held in the southwestern town of Ghadames between 14-16 Apr.

Some analysts suggest the surge in diplomatic and political activity lends credence to theories that a transitional executive government will be formed ahead of municipal and presidential elections. Rumours a new Government of National Accord (GNA) cabinet is being formed have already emerged. This theory is substantiated by France’s Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, who recently confirmed the creation of a new executive government to prepare for elections before year’s end.

However, while political sentiment is gradually improving, uncertainty over the rumoured agreement between the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA) commander, Khalifa Haftar, and GNA PM Sarraj, in addition to the prevailing mistrust among Libyan stakeholders, continue to raise concerns over the long-term implications behind the Libyan National Army’s (LNA) territorial expansion and a feared Tripoli offensive. These concerns are highlighted by Salame, who warned that a failure of the National Conference can only lead to “prolonged stalemate or conflict”.

Despite the centrality of the Conference – a prerequisite to hold elections – some analysts suggest it would be limited in its outcomes and only comes as a reaction to a new political reality in Libya where Haftar controls vast swathes of territory. There is mounting evidence to suggest Haftar’s recent campaign has prompted Salame to change strategies and

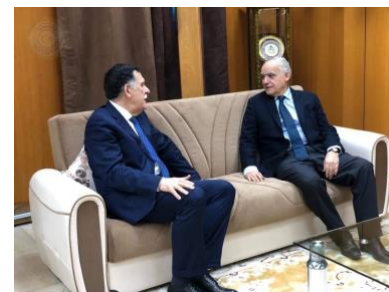
promote an alternative to the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). Some factions, including the High Council State (HCS), stand as unlikely to accept an agreement without the LPA as a reference point. Similarly, it remains unclear whether the House of Representatives (HoR) will accept any agreement.

Regardless, looking ahead, Haftar is unlikely to compromise and would favour any option enabling him to convert military gains into political credit. There are no guarantees that Haftar would refrain from pursuing a military offensive into the West, especially amid mounting opposition to the Conference from eastern-based voices. A delay in holding elections, and/or providing a satisfactory power sharing deal to the General, would increase the likelihood of large-scale military manoeuvres. Haftar understands that he is pressed for time as his hold over the South continues to wane, highlighted by emerging reports of new salary grievances at Sharara oil field, and a growing security vacuum in towns such as Ghadduwah. In the West, an uptick in criminal activity in towns will give pro-LNA voices greater legitimacy, raising the likelihood of tensions between pro/anti LNA groups.

Overall, it is with this sense of urgency that the National Conference will proceed. With so much uncertainty surrounding the agreement to form a transitional government, the Conference could be the proverbial “last straw that broke the camel’s back” amid a generally high risk of miscalculation.

**KEY POINTS**

- New executive gov. to be formed
- Salame promoting LPA alternative
- Opposition to Conf. forming in East



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## 2. National Security Map

LNA convoys reported near Harawa & Bani Walid; Fluid security environment in Gharyan

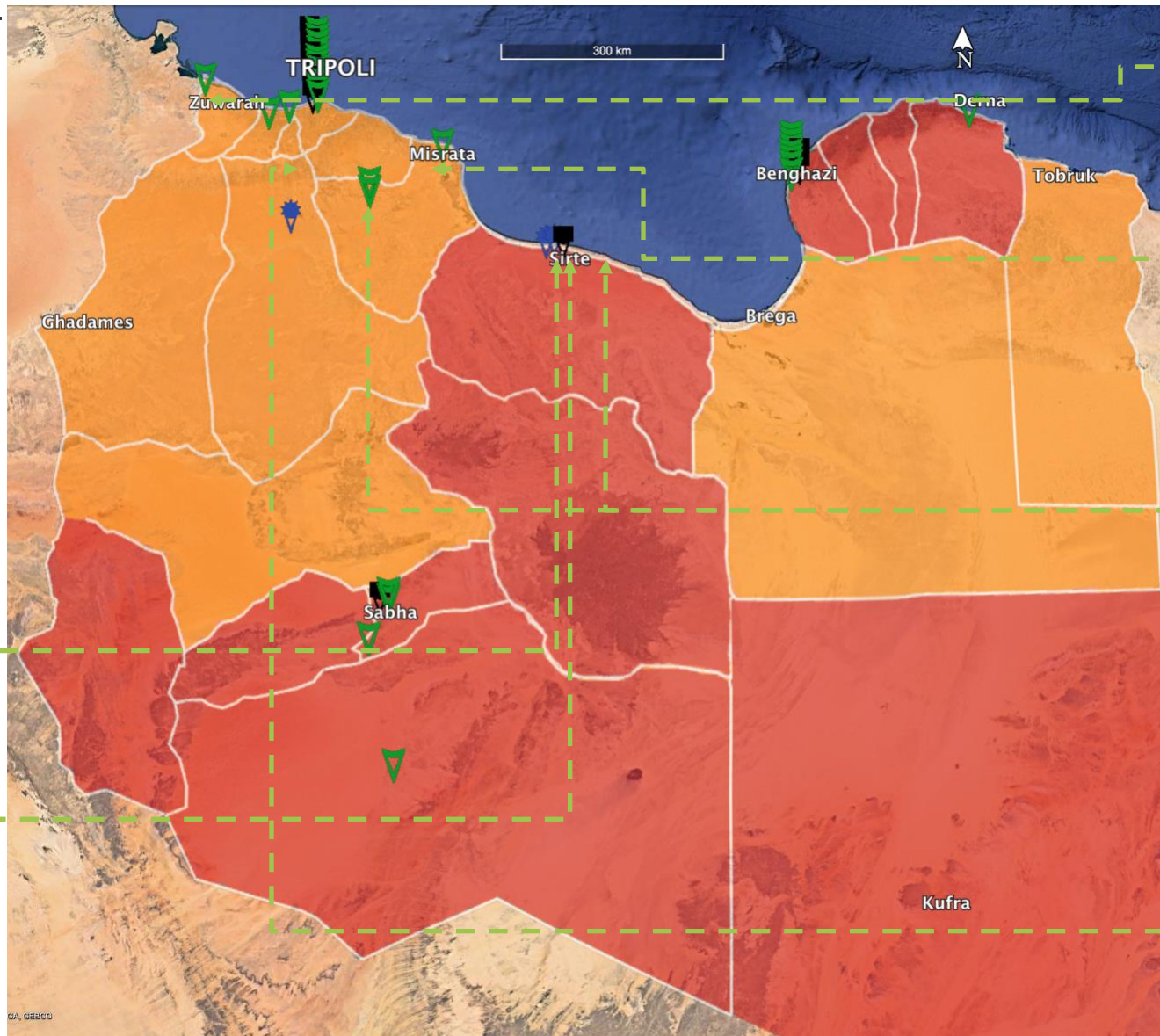
### Key

#### THREAT INDICATORS

- Severe Threat
- High Threat
- Moderate Threat

#### EVENT INDICATORS

- ★ IED | VBIED
- ▼ Violent Clash
- Isolated Gunfire
- ▽ Other



Reports suggest a passport system glitch on the Libyan border of the Ras Ajdir border crossing, resulted in long queues in the evening on 19 Mar. Additional reports suggest some travellers used the Dehiba Wazin Border Crossing to enter Tunisia. Operations resumed on 20 Mar.

Reports suggest a military convoy affiliated with Al-Bunian al-Marsous Battalion (BAM) was stationed at the southwestern suburbs of Misrata in the morning on 22

WB sources reported a Libyan National Army (LNA) convoy of approximately 8 tanks, 25 vehicles armed with anti-aircraft, and four howitzers in the Wadi Al-Ahmar area, near Harawa, travelling towards Sirte in the afternoon on 20 Mar. Meanwhile, in a separate incident, reports suggest an armed convoy of the LNA-affiliated Tariq Bin Ziyad Battalion was stationed near the Eastern border of Bani Walid, in coordination with LNA units in the area on 20 Mar.

Reports suggest a drive-by shooting resulted in the death of three young men in Gharyan's Tgessat area in the early hours of 24 Mar. Neither the identity of the assailant(s) nor the motive behind the incident are known. Meanwhile, in a separate incident, reports suggest unidentified assailants driving a gray Chevrolet carjacked a KIA Sportage and assaulted the driver on the Kazan bridge in Gharyan on 23 Mar.

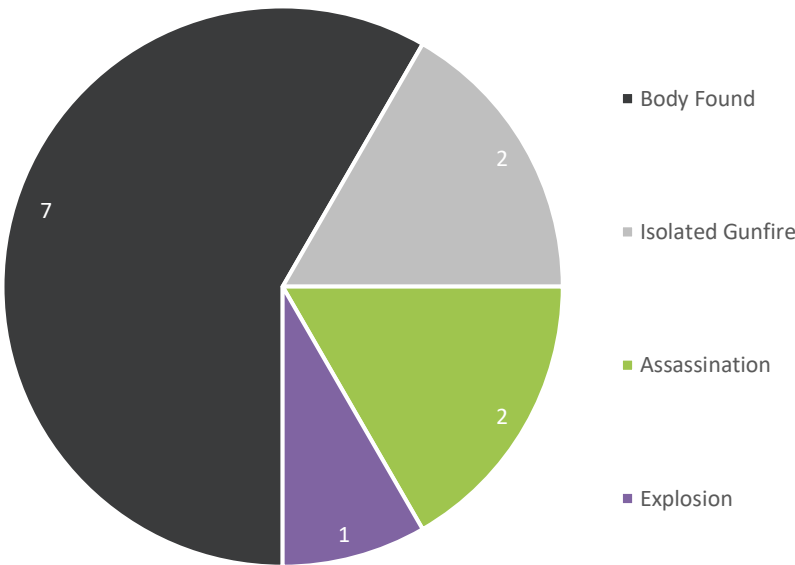
The Sirte Protection Force (SPF) discredited reports of a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) en route to, and possibly in, the city of Sirte on 18 Mar. The SPF noted it raised the state of alert upon receiving the reports, conducting patrols South and West of the city, though no VBIED was found.

Two unidentified gunmen reportedly opened fire on the residence of Sirte's Passports and Nationality Department head, Brigadier Abdelhadi Al-Werfali, resulting in the damage of his vehicle parked in front of his residence on 18 Mar. Local reports suggest there are disagreements between Al-Werfali who was appointed in Feb 2018 and an armed group guarding the department's building.

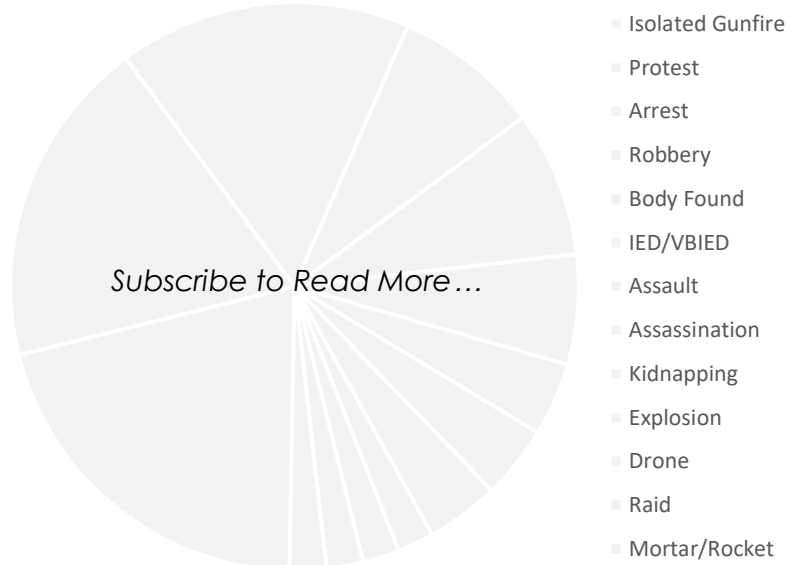
### 3. Nationwide Security Analysis

Increase in isolated gunfire incidents in Tripoli & sporadic incidents in Benghazi

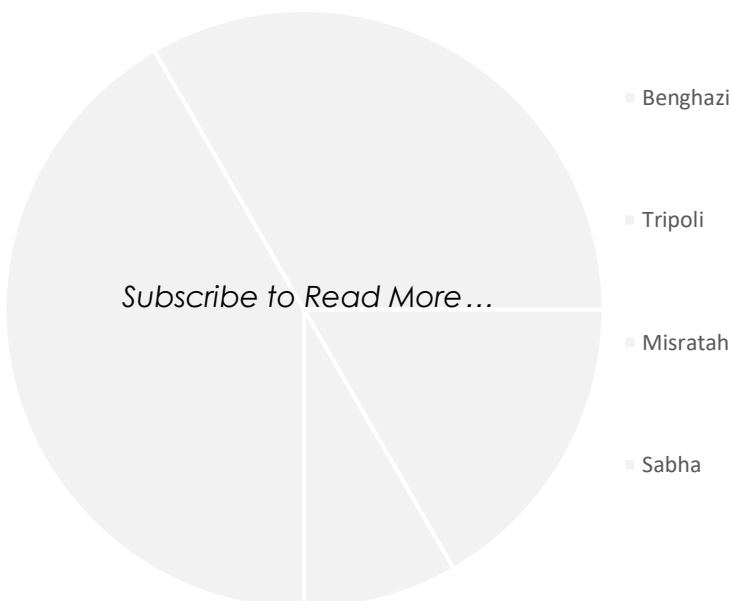
Nationwide fatalities by type of attack (Past week)



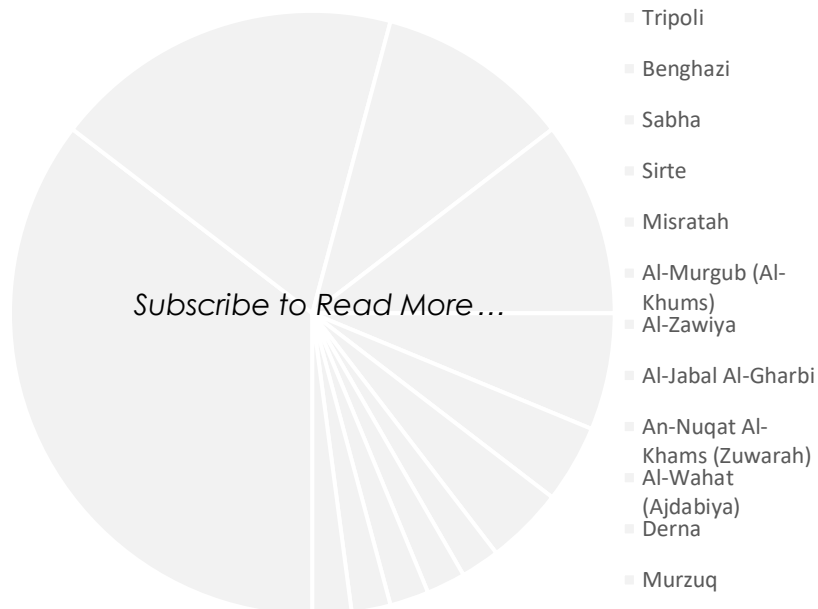
Nationwide incidents by type of attack (Past week)



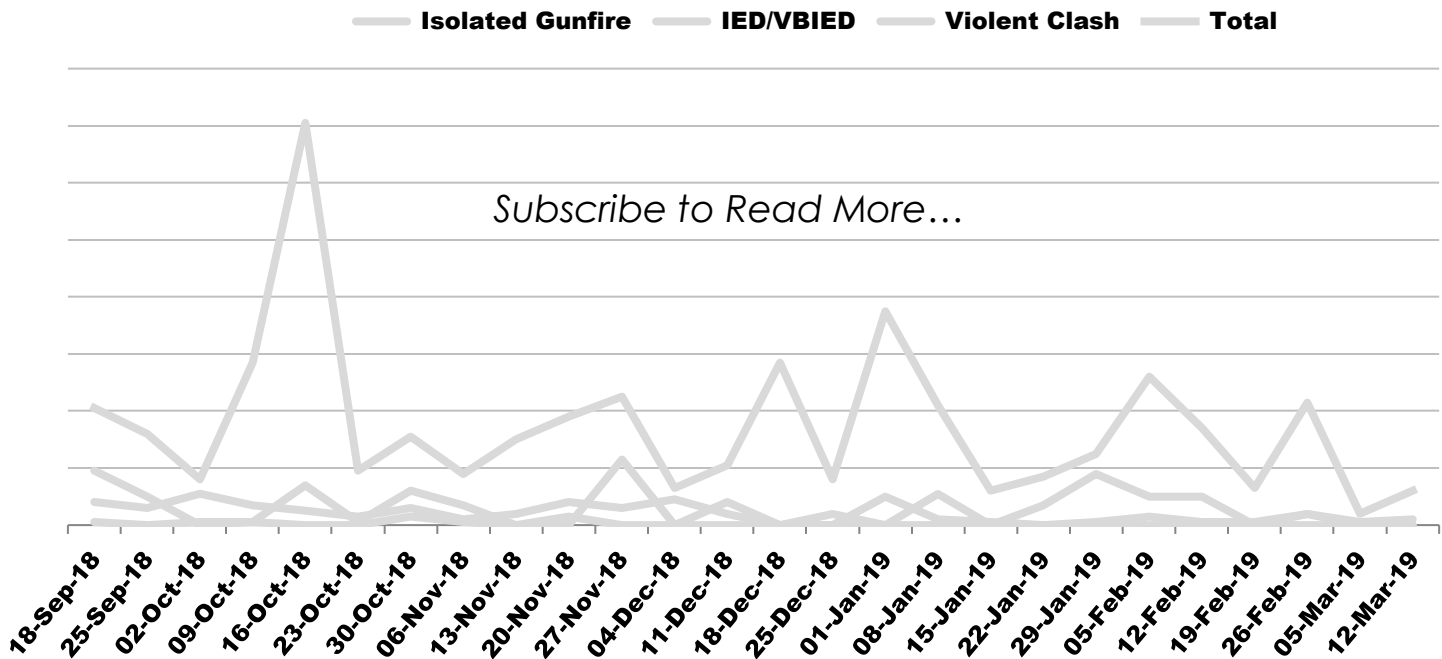
Nationwide fatalities by national district (Past week)



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 12 confirmed deaths in Libya, which compares to 04 deaths reported last week and 43 the week before. This week, WB recorded an increase in isolated gunfire incidents in the capital city and sporadic security incidents across Benghazi. Contrary to last week with no security incidents reported in the Southern region, this week WB recorded 6 events in the region, with the majority of incidents occurring in the Sabha district. Several security incidents were reported throughout the country including, 10 cases of isolated gunfire, 9 protests, 8 arrests, 4 robberies, 4 cases of bodies found, 3 IED/VBIED, 2 assassinations, 2 kidnappings, 1 explosion and 1 raid.

In Western Libya, WB recorded a total of 26 incidents, including 17 incidents in the capital city, Tripoli. In Tripoli, reports emerged over a white GMC vehicle exploding on the Beir Osta Meilad Road near Al-Riyada\_Clinic, South of Tripoli's Tajoura area, in the afternoon on 17 Mar. The motive behind the explosion remains unclear, with reports suggesting the driver was killed as a result. There were no reports of additional casualties. Meanwhile, unconfirmed reports suggest the driver was a Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC) member and the vehicle accidentally exploded while carrying ammunition. Meanwhile, in a separate incident, reports suggest unidentified gunmen carried out a drive-by shooting resulting in the death of a man in Tripoli's Edraiby area at approximately 2000hrs on 19 Mar. Initial reports suggest the man, originally from Al-Zawiya, was assassinated while driving a white Hyundai Elantra with up two of his friends onboard, resulting in one of their injuries. Unconfirmed reports allege the gunmen are affiliated with the Special Deterrence Force (SDF) and the targeted man was involved in harassment and armed robbery cases. Beyond, in the wider West, reports suggest unidentified gunmen established a fake checkpoint at Al-Harsha Traffic Light on the Coastal Road of Al-Zawiya's Al Harsha area in the morning on 19 Mar. The gunmen reportedly robbed the belongings of travellers heading to/from the Libyan-Tunisian Ra's Ajdir border crossing.

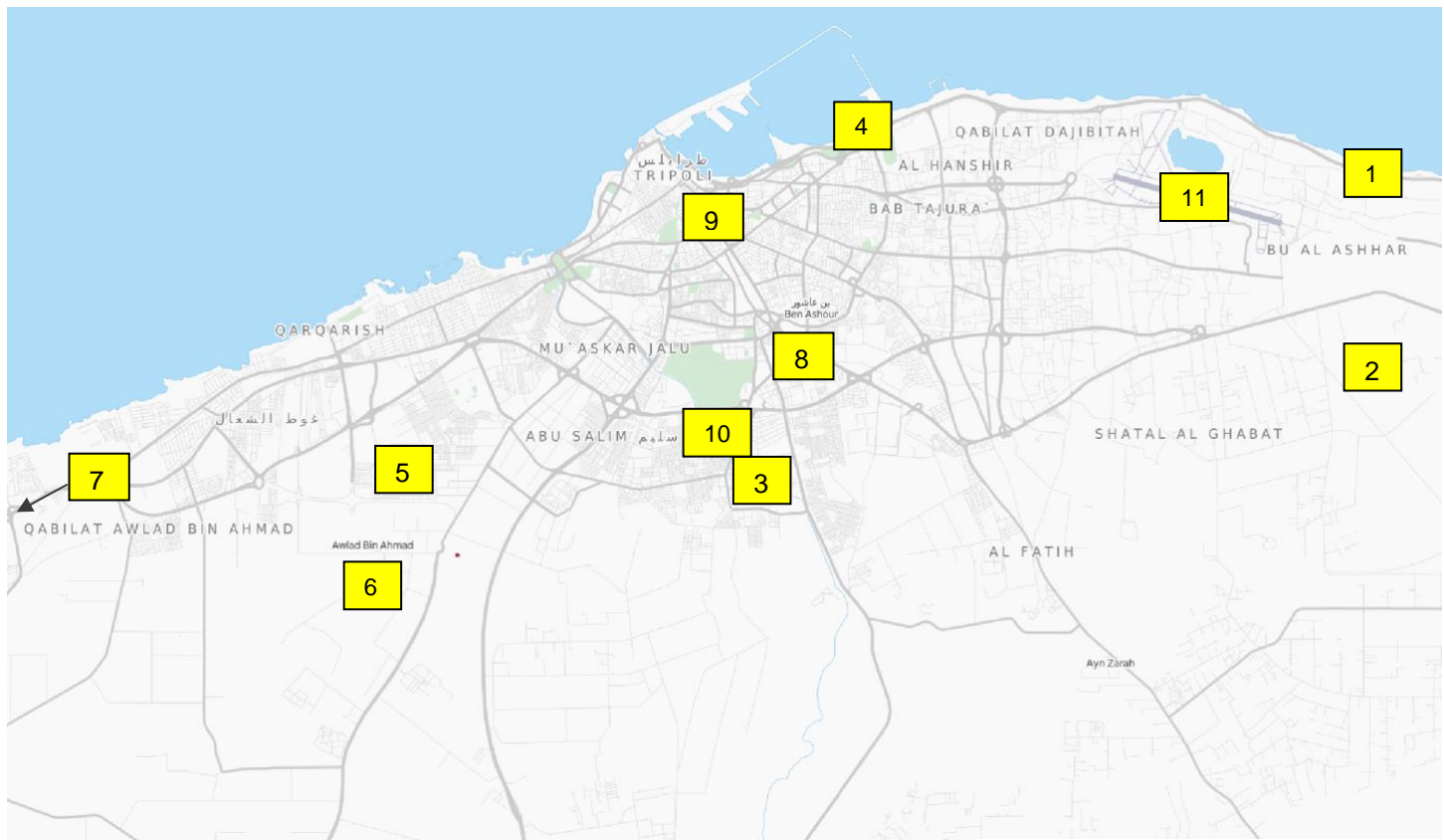
This week in Central Libya the Sirte Protection Force (SPF) discredited reports of a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) en route to, and possibly in, the city of Sirte on 18 Mar. The SPF noted it raised the state of alert upon receiving the reports, conducting patrols South and West of the city, though no VBIED was found. Meanwhile, in a separate incident, the SPF dismantled three shells connected to an explosive device near Sirte's Uqba Bin Nafie High School on 21 Mar.

Turning to Southern Libya, according to the Sabha-based newspaper "Fasania" head, Salima Bin Nozha, unidentified assailants vandalized and robbed the newspaper's HQ on 16 Mar, marking a third attack on the newspaper.

In Eastern Libya, reports suggest indiscriminate gunfire injured a 15-year-old boy in front of his residence in Benghazi's Al-Majouri area on 20 Mar, whilst a prominent Islamic scholar was kidnapped in Derna on 22 Mar.

## 4. Tripoli Neighborhood Report

### US Embassy in Libya warn of imminent attack on Central Post Office



#### KEY INCIDENTS

1. (16 Mar) Man found killed near Ispan roundabout; SDF involvement
2. (17 Mar) Vehicle explodes near Al-Riyada Clinic; driver killed
3. (18 Mar) Ghneiwa militia affiliates raid Central Post AlKhadra; staff dismissed
4. (19 Mar) AFRICOM commander meets GNA officials
5. (19 Mar) Drive-by shooting kills man in Edraiby; alleged SDF involvement
6. (19 Mar) Zintan militias assault College of Islamic Call staff member
7. (20 Mar) Land dispute between Fursan Janzour BN & Janzour locals
8. (20 Mar) Police establish CP with presence of explosive detector
9. (21 Mar) Tripoli University students protest; scholarship demands
10. (22 Mar) Warning of imminent attack on Central Post Office; possible IEDs
11. (22 Mar) Increased security presence at MJJ

#### Security alert; warning of imminent attack

On 22 Mar, the US Embassy in Libya issued a security alert warning of an imminent attack on the Central Post Office on Tripoli's Zawiyah Street following the discovery of possible improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Local reports suggest security forces cordoned off Tripoli's Zawiyah Street after discovering three IEDs at the Central Post Office HQ. WB sources reported Zawiyah Street and Al-Sayidi Street, where the Courts Complex is located, are closed due to the warning of a potential terror attack as of approximately 0900hrs on 23 Mar. In response, the Government of National Accord's (GNA) Ministry of Interior (MoI) issued a statement noting that security forces guarding the post office informed government forces on the presence of suspicious unidentified objects inside sealed packages, after which an inspection team examined the packages and denied the presence of IEDs and/or other explosive materials. The GNA stated that it had taken all necessary security measures to secure the post office's HQ and all vital facilities across Tripoli, whilst increasing the degree of readiness and security in its surroundings. Beyond, the GNA indicated that preliminary reports revealed no presence of IEDs inside the anonymous packages, whilst noting that the content of these packages are still being examined after which an official

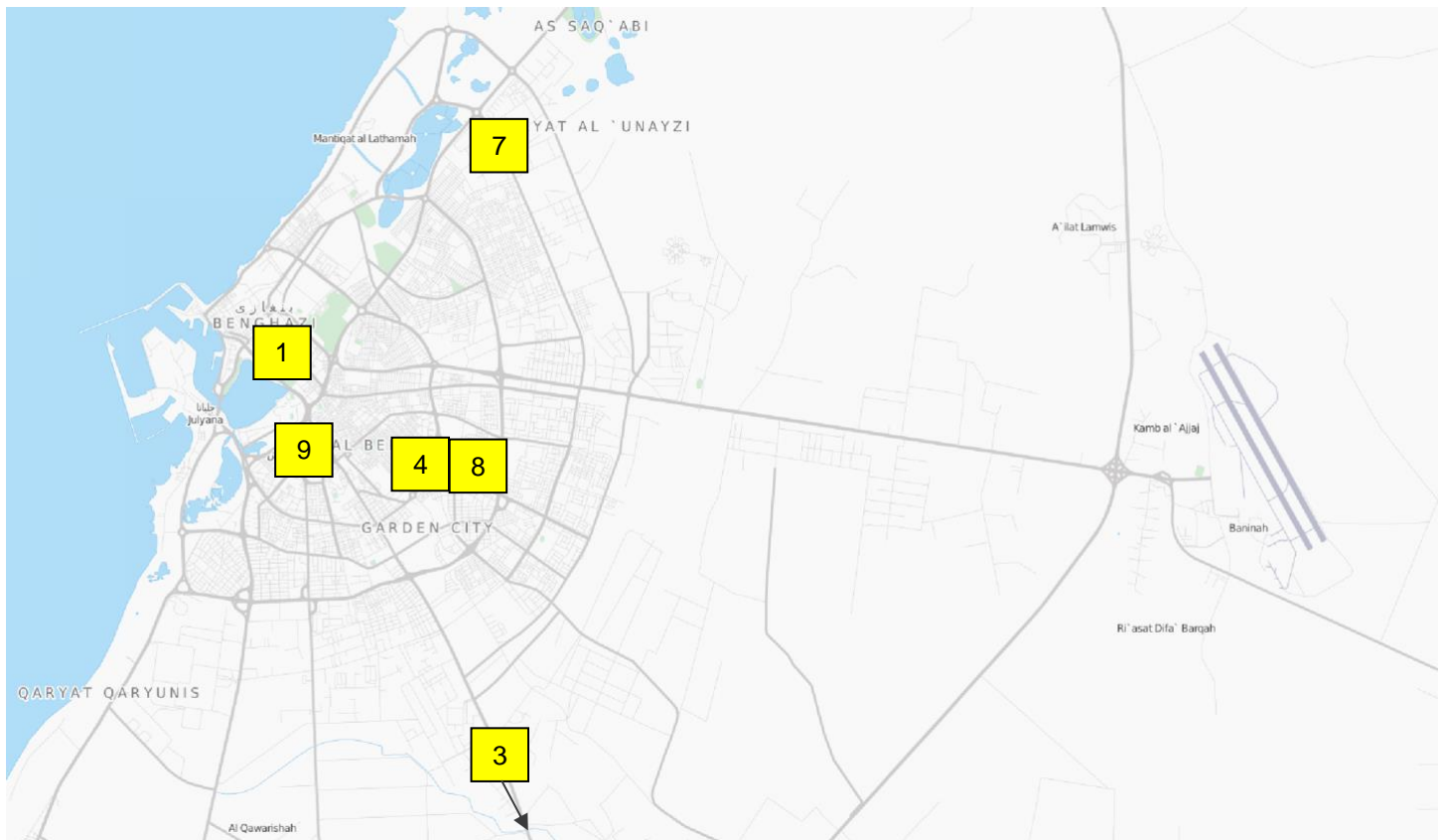
The MoI appealed to media outlets and foreign embassies not to rely on unofficial sources to evaluate security-related information and await an official statement by the competent and responsible authorities. Additionally, the MoI assured citizens and foreign residents on the government's seriousness with dealing with such incidents and taking all necessary security measures to ensure their safety and the protection of public and private facilities.

#### AFRICOM commander meets GNA officials

On 19 Mar, the commander of the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), and the US Ambassador to Libya, Peter Bodde, met with Fayez Al-Serraj, the Government of National Accord's (GNA) Minister of Interior, Fathi Bashagha, in addition to senior government officials in Tripoli's Abu Sittah Naval Base. The US pledged 500,000 US dollars in "rapid-response non-lethal assistance in support of the MoI's efforts to strengthen the capacity of the Tripoli Security Directorate". The statement noted that the newly-pledged amount is in addition to 30 million USD in ongoing security assistance in support of the GNA. The meeting coincided with sources reporting two US military aircraft landing in the Abu Sittah Naval Base. Pictures circulated of US helicopters hovering over the Abu Sittah Naval Base throughout the meeting. Al-Serraj's Media Office stated that the visit comes as part of US-Libyan discussions on topics of mutual interest, noting the US support of the upcoming National Conference.

## 5. Benghazi Neighborhood Report

### Assassination attempt on security head denied; UN Office opens



#### KEY INCIDENTS

1. (14 Mar) Unidentified assailants attack Sufi shrine in Ras Abaydah
2. (15 Mar) Two soldiers arrested for killing CID member
3. (16 Mar) Four unidentified bodies found Southeast of Suluq
4. (17 Mar) Man injured in armed robbery in Al-Majouri
5. (18 Mar) Members of Supreme Council of Tribes kidnapped
6. (19 Mar) Approx. 250 illegal migrants arrested
7. (19 Mar) CID arrests man involved in vehicle thefts in Hai Al-Salam
8. (20 Mar) Indiscriminate gunfire injures 15-year-old in Al-Majouri
9. (22 Mar) Pro-LNA & anti-MB & LIFG demonstration in Al-Kish Sq

#### Security head assassination denied

Benghazi's Security Directorate denied circulated reports across social media outlets of an assassination attempt on the Benghazi's security director, brigadier Adel Abdulaziz, in front of the directorate's headquarters in the morning on 16 Mar. The directorate's information office confirmed that the circulated news was fake and noted that Abdulaziz was not present at the HQ as he was on an official holiday. There is no further information available.

#### Soldiers arrested for killing CID member

An official from Benghazi's Criminal Investigation Department (CID) information office, Walid Al-Arifi, reported the arrest of two soldiers accused of killing a CID member and opening fire on a security patrol in the city. In a statement, Al-Arifi noted the arrest of two suspects riding a military vehicle that opened fire on a CID member resulting in his death at dawn on 15 Feb, whilst an additional suspect remains under investigation.

#### Conflicting kidnapping/arrest

Reports suggest a group of gunmen affiliated with the Internal Security under the Eastern-based Interim Government,

kidnapped two members of the Supreme Council of Tribes in Benghazi in the morning on 18 Mar. Initial reports indicate the incident to be an arrest and not a kidnapping, with reports suggesting the two members were taken from their residences. There is no further information available on the motive behind the kidnapping/arrest.

#### UN office opens

The United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) head, Ghassan Salame, announced the opening of a UN office in Benghazi after months of preparations in his latest briefing to the UN Security Council (UNSC) on the situation in Libya on 20 Mar. Salame noted that staff are currently being sent to Benghazi to assume their duties. The opening of a UN office in Benghazi would highlight an improved security situation across the city.

#### Demonstration rejecting National Conference

Local reports suggest Libyan National Army (LNA) supporters demonstrated in Benghazi's Al-Kish Square on 22 Mar, in which they rejected the Muslim Brotherhood and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and described the upcoming United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL)-endorsed National Conference as a "recycling of garbage". The demonstrators held banners in support of the LNA, whilst writing the names of the UNSMIL head, Ghassan Salame, along with the MB and LIFG factions, on garbage bags.

## 6. What's next

### Opposition to National Conference to grow; tensions in the West

#### POLITICAL FORECAST

In his briefing to the UNSC, Ghassan Salame confirmed that the UNSMIL endorsed two rounds of preparatory talks between advisors of the PM Fayez Al-Serraj and the Libyan National Army (LNA) head, Khalifa Haftar, in Tunis. The Tunis talks were followed by a meeting in Abu Dhabi in which Haftar and Al-Serraj agreed on the need to hold elections and unify parallel institutions. Beyond, Salame commented on the Libyan National Army's (LNA) military campaign in the South, mentioning reported hostilities against Murzuq by tribal forces under the LNA command. Meanwhile, on 18 Mar, the GNA and the Tripoli-based Central Bank of Libya (CBL) agreed on Libya's 2019 budget amounting to 46.8 billion Libyan dinars (LYD), marking an increase from 2018's budget of 42 billion LYD and comes after months of disagreements surrounding the state's annual budget. In a statement, the GNA noted that "financial arrangements" of 46.8 billion LYD was agreed upon following extensive meetings, with no further details provided. On the international front, France's Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, praised the Libyan National Army's (LNA) military campaign in the South, describing it as having made significant progress in combating terrorism and foreign criminal groups on 18 Mar. The French official's comments came against the backdrop of a meeting with the Government of National Accord (GNA) PM, Fayez Sarraj.

#### WHAT OTHER EXPERTS SAY

Writing for *AIMonitor*, Kirill Semenov, analyses the HCS head, Khaled Mishri's recent visit to Moscow. He argues "The visit by Mishri, as head of the Tripoli-based body charged with advising the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA), should be considered evidence of Russia maintaining a balanced policy on Libya. It was reported in *AI-Monitor* in October that Moscow was shifting away from a strategy of maintaining equal distance between itself and Tripoli and Tobruk and instead developing closer ties to Hifter, a Tobruk ally. This was symbolized by Hifter's visit to the Russian capital last November, during which he had discussions with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, in the run-up to the Palermo conference on Libya that same month. Since that time, there had been no significant meetings between Russian officials and Hifter's Tripoli-based opponents. Thus, Mishri trip to Moscow should serve to demonstrate that Moscow remains flexible in its approach to resolving the Libyan conflict. One should bear in mind that Mishri and Hifter are longstanding opponents. The Hifter-led HoR does not recognize the HCS's authority over it despite the council's mandate to that effect under the Libyan Political Agreement. Also, throughout most of Mishri's political career, he has been a member of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood Group and its affiliated Justice and Construction Party, while Hifter has opposed the Muslim Brotherhood and voiced his commitment to eradicating it in Libya. Mishri resigned from the Brotherhood in January, but has stated that he still respects the organization and defends its role in Libyan society. Of note, Russia has designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization within its borders."

#### SECURITY FORECAST

The weeks ahead of the National Conference will be challenging for both Tripoli and western towns in general. Incitement, spread of rumours, and criminal activity will likely see a significant increase. Protests across Tripoli are also likely. Separately, given the context of uncertainty, the Islamic State (IS) group remains capable of carrying out a complex attack in Tripoli and beyond. The Sirte Protection Force remains on high alert over suspicious and recent LNA movements South of the Sirte national district. SPF commander, Abdullah Al-Naas, confirmed the force received its 6-months salary payments from the GNA, though he called on the authorities to provide additional support, specifically in terms of weapons and equipment. In Zawiyah, tensions have the potential to escalate with little to no warning. Separately, in a statement, Zintani forces reaffirmed their control over the Al-Watiya Airbase, whilst calling on Zintanis to remain neutral. In Tarhunah, tensions are high and could escalate should factions in the town shift towards the LNA. In Gharyan, the security situation is fluid with at least three assassinations and multiple other criminal incidents recorded over the week. Southern Libya's security vacuum will continue to widen, raising doubts over the LNA's claims it controls the area. Pro-LNA demonstrations rejecting the scheduled National Conference are likely in Benghazi and other Libyan cities, especially given the fact that some Eastern factions deem the conference as unimportant.

#### LIBYANS AND THE ARAB STREET

Frederic Wehrey reflects on his recent visit to Libya's West and LNA sentiment. He writes on Sabratha, that "Another shadow now hangs over the town. Khalifa Haftar, the septuagenarian Libyan army general, was a dissident during the Qaddafi regime and onetime CIA asset. In May of 2014, he led a group of disaffected army units and local tribes in a military assault on Islamists and jihadists in the eastern city of Benghazi. After years of grinding combat, he won the east and turned his sights on the west. In recent weeks, his coalition of forces, the Libyan National Army, has blitzed across Libya's vast southern desert, seizing strategic oilfields and airbases. He is now encroaching on Tripoli, where the isolated, internationally backed Government of National Accord has failed in basic governance and is beholden to militia barons who have carved the capital into fiefdoms and plundered the state's coffers. The result of Haftar's offensive has been a major shift in the balance of power in Libya. "A reshuffling of the deck of cards," a United Nations official in Tripoli told me." Further, Wehrey writes "This is happening in Sabratha. Over a lunchtime gathering at a farm, seated with members of the town's strongest militia, I heard assent for the army to restore order. But multiple contradictions arise in this narrative. Haftar says he is building state institutions and fighting militias, but in practice he has relied heavily on local militias in his advance. He has recently stated his commitment to national elections, but in the past has argued that Libya is not ready for democracy and needs military rule."

# About Whispering Bell



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