

December 24, 2019

## 1. The Big Picture

### Turkey-GNA ties prompt actors to back LNA as tensions mount

Fighting continues to intensify between Libyan National Army (LNA) and Government of National Accord (GNA) forces. Escalation is now clearly in sight across all frontlines after the LNA's decisive battle announcement and ultimatum demanding Misrata's withdrawal from Tripoli and Sirte, extended after mediation to 25 Dec (0000hrs). Despite the GNA's response with a state of emergency across the West, pro-GNA forces are yet to engage in offensive combat operations; an attack on Tarhunah was repelled by pro-LNA forces.

By contrast, the LNA consolidated ground and launched a significant air campaign targeting Misrata and other positions across the West. The air campaign was unprecedented in terms of scale with more than 20 airstrikes within less than 72 hours to compel Misrata forces to retreat. Separately, the LNA gained the upper hand on the communications front with the establishment of a radio channel called "Sawt Libya", broadcasted over 89.8 FM in Tripoli. The development is significant given the LNA is now able to directly reach out to Tripoli residents to reinforce its narrative.

Meanwhile, the week was rife with developments on the diplomatic front as alliances begin to form amid growing Turkey-GNA ties. With the signing and ratification of both the maritime and security cooperation memoranda of understanding (MoU) with Ankara, the GNA is now pitted against a larger coalition of regional actors in the East Mediterranean. The Tripoli government is feeling more pressure as actors that traditionally viewed it as the legitimate government are now having to align with the LNA to secure their interests in the East Med. Italy is a case in point of this gradual shift eastward.

Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio met GNA PM Fayez Sarraj in Tripoli on 17 Dec. During the brief official Libya visit, Di Maio also held talks with LNA commander Khalifa Haftar in Benghazi, and speaker of the House of Representatives (HoR) Aguila Saleh. In his post-visit speech, Di Maio revealed that Rome will invite Khalifa Haftar in the coming weeks to work a solution to the current crisis. During the visit, Di Maio is reported to have pressured the GNA to cut ties with Ankara and stop military cooperation. The visit was interpreted by many analysts as evidence of Rome's closer ties to Haftar and the East.

Rome is considering changes to its approach on the Libyan file. Italy's position continues to be shrouded in uncertainty. Rome has maintained an ambivalent policy towards Libya in recent months. Italy's traditional support for the GNA became less

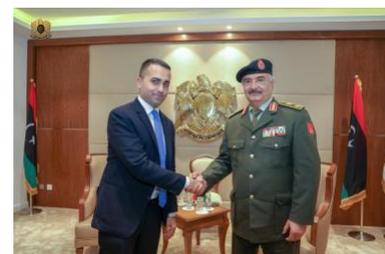
pronounced as Rome carefully considered its position after the LNA's gains and growing Russian involvement in support of Haftar. Many observers suggested Italy was careful not to publicly declare its support for the LNA to protect its interests in the Mellitah Oil and Gas Complex (MOG) and maintain healthy relations with Zuwara's Amazigh who are nominally pro-GNA.

Rome's traditional support for the GNA may be replaced by more facilitation and coordination between all parties in Libya to ensure a smooth transition. Regardless of Italy's position, Russia and Turkey are now the de facto powerbrokers and arbiters of Libya's conflict; a deal between Ankara and Moscow is now seen as the most viable option to help deter further escalation. Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on 19 Dec that he aims to end the conflict and begin talks between the GNA and LNA. Meanwhile, there are signs of disagreements between the two. A Russian foreign ministry source expressed concerns over the potential deployment of Turkish troops to Libya. In response, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated Turkey will not remain silent in the face of Russian-backed mercenaries operating in Libya in support of Haftar. Despite these apparent tensions, many observers argue that Turkey's growing involvement will help balance the equation on the ground, prompting Haftar and other forces to come to the negotiating table. Seen from this angle, Turkey and Russia's involvement come as a direct result of the power vacuum left behind by the European Union and United States.

In brief, the assessment Ankara is unlikely to send troops to Libya continues to hold, despite mounting rhetoric and threats of intervention. Turkish military support is unlikely to come in the form of a full-scale deployment of troops. Turkish Envoy to Libya Emrullah Isler told Bloomberg that Ankara does not foresee a deployment of troops in the short term. According to the diplomat, Turkey could send personnel for training and other requirements, but deploying troops would require Erdogan to send a separate motion to parliament, and only after an official GNA request. There are a number of conditions that are yet to be met before Turkey resorts to deploying troops to Libya. The GNA is also more likely to favour deliveries of weapons and/or covert military support from Ankara as it is facing significant pressure from the international community.

#### KEY POINTS

- Italian FM puts pressure on GNA, visits Haftar
- LNA's Misrata ultimatum extended to 25 Dec
- Turkey-Russia seen as critical powerbrokers



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# 2. National Security Map

Over 20 LNA airstrikes targeting Misrata and West; LNA releases intercepted Turkish-manned vessel

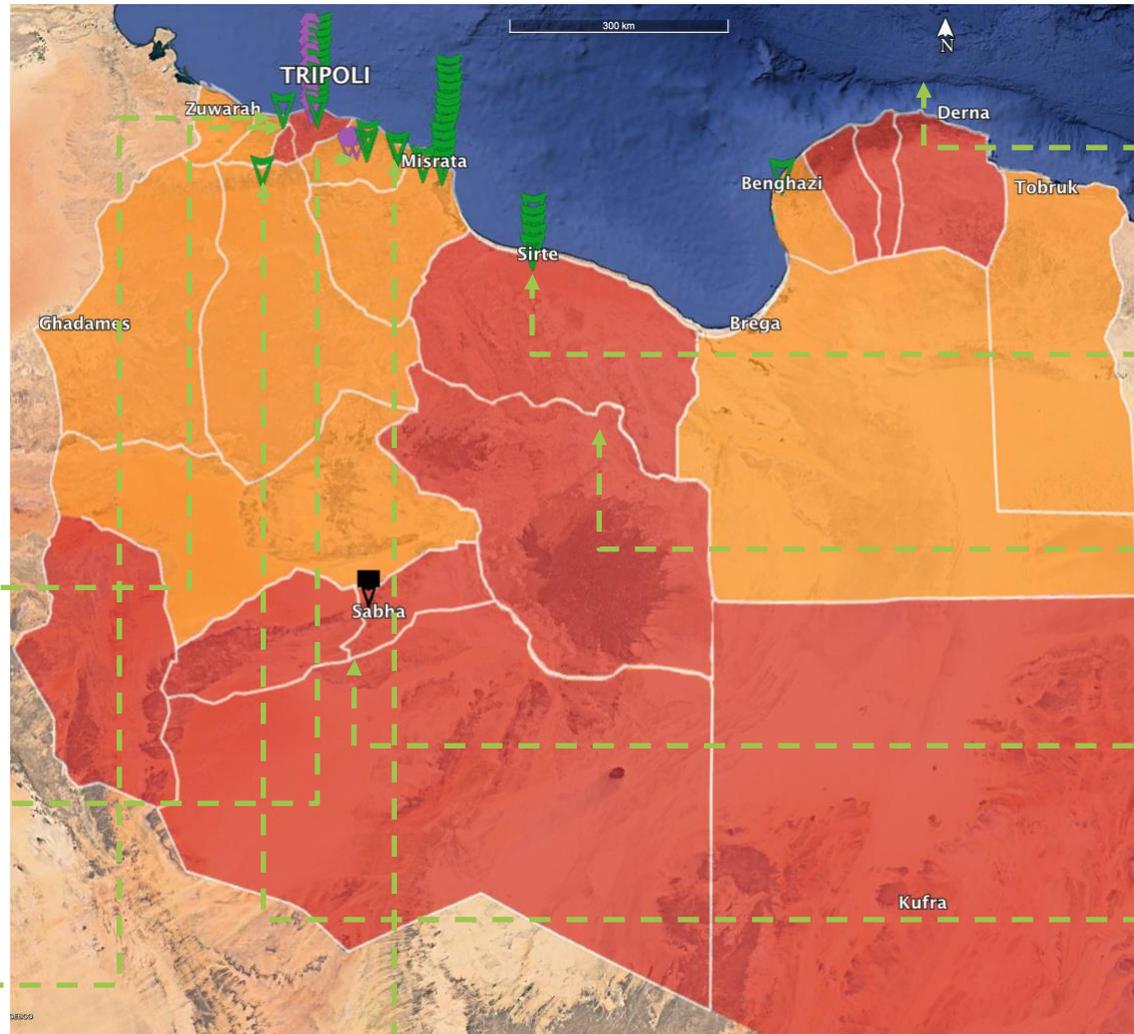
## Key

### THREAT INDICATORS

- Severe Threat
- High Threat
- Moderate Threat

### EVENT INDICATORS

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



Al-Zawiya militias deployed forces south of the city towards Abu Eissa and Al-Sabriya areas in the evening on 18 Dec, allegedly in preparation for an offensive on LNA positions in Surman and Sabratah. In response, LNA forces reportedly gathered near Surman. WB is closely monitoring local developments for further information.

Following the GNA's offensive on pro-LNA forces in Tarhunah, the LNA carried out airstrikes at approximately 2000hrs and 2300hrs targeting forces that retreated towards Msallatah. On 21 Dec, fighting renewed southeast of Msallatah in the Barkat area between pro-LNA Tarhunah forces and the retreating GNA forces. The pro-LNA forces later declared the area was under their control.

Sources reported angry locals temporarily blocked Sabratah's Coastal Road and erected dirt barricades demanding the release of prisoners and relatives held in Al-Zawiya at approximately 1420hrs on 17 Dec. A similar protest was reported on 11 Dec in front of the Passport Office in Surman. The prisoners are believed to have taken part in the initial offensive launched by the LNA from Surman and Sabratah.

The LNA's Navy intercepted a Grenada-flagged cargo vessel and detained its Turkish crew members off Libya's eastern coast on 21 Dec. The interception was carried out off Derna's coast by the LNA's Susah combat vessel. The intercepted vessel was escorted to Ras Al-Hilal port for further inspection and investigation. Emerging reports on 23 Dec indicate the vessel was released after no evidence of military assets was found.

The pro-GNA Sirte Protection Force (SPF) reported an LNA unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) strike killed a man and injured three others in the morning on 17 Dec. The SPF claims the UAV strike targeted the force at CP 30 (30 km East of Sirte). In a related development, pro-LNA accounts reported the arrival of LNA forces in Sirte's CP 40 "Gate 40" on 17 Dec.

The National Oil Corporation (NOC) reported production resumed at the Ghani field with a capacity of 5k barrels per day (bpd), and later 8k bpd. The field, jointly operated by Harouge Oil Operations (HOO) and Canada's Suncor, was closed due to an Islamic State (IS) attack in 2015.

Reports an armed convoy affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) was spotted travelling from Ghadduwah towards Murzuq on 22 Dec. It is unclear if the alleged IS militants' movement is part of a planned attack on Murzuq.

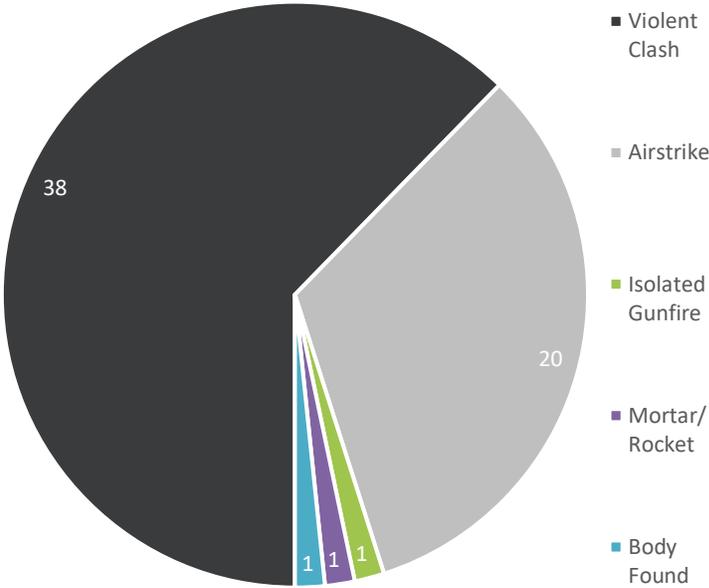
Reports suggest a German expatriate was kidnapped in Al Qalaa village on 11 Dec and his vehicle was found burning. The man reportedly worked as a teacher in the Western Mountains area, between Yefren and Al Qalaa.

The LNA conducted airstrikes in Zliten targeting multiple positions at approximately 0200hrs on 17 Dec. The LNA targeted a camp believed to harbour pro-GNA armed factions in Majer, south of the city.

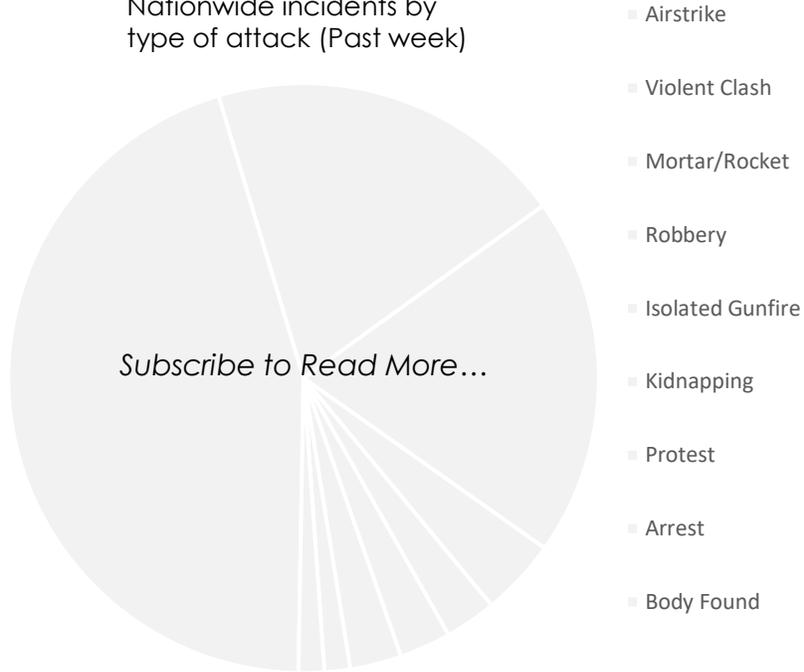
### 3. Nationwide Security Analysis

#### Fatalities increase due in part to intensified LNA air campaign

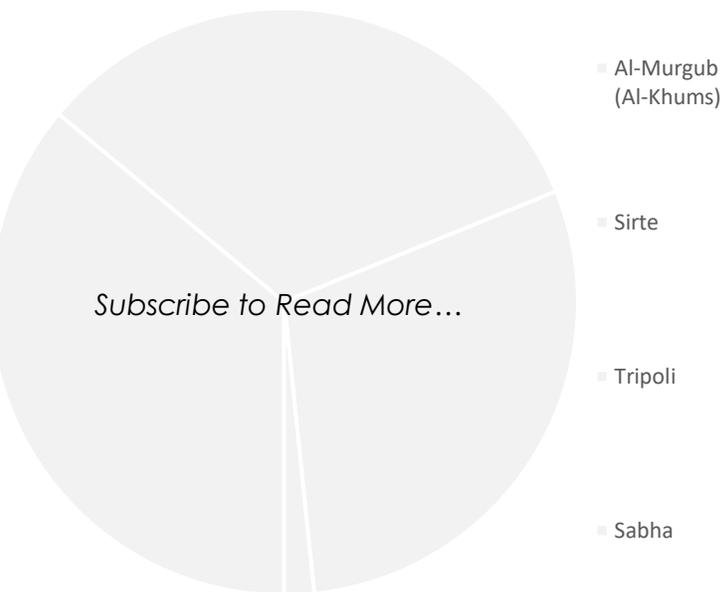
Nationwide fatalities by type of attack (Past week)



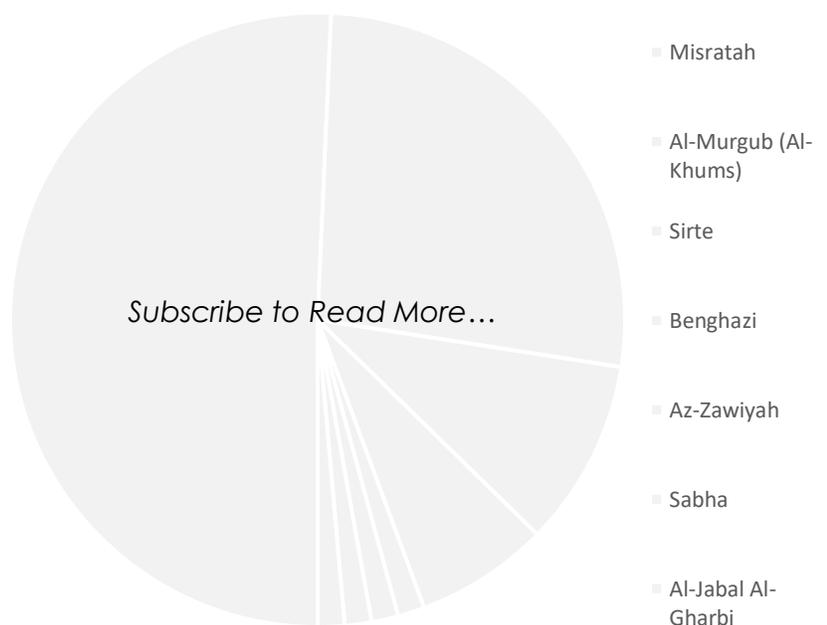
Nationwide incidents by type of attack (Past week)



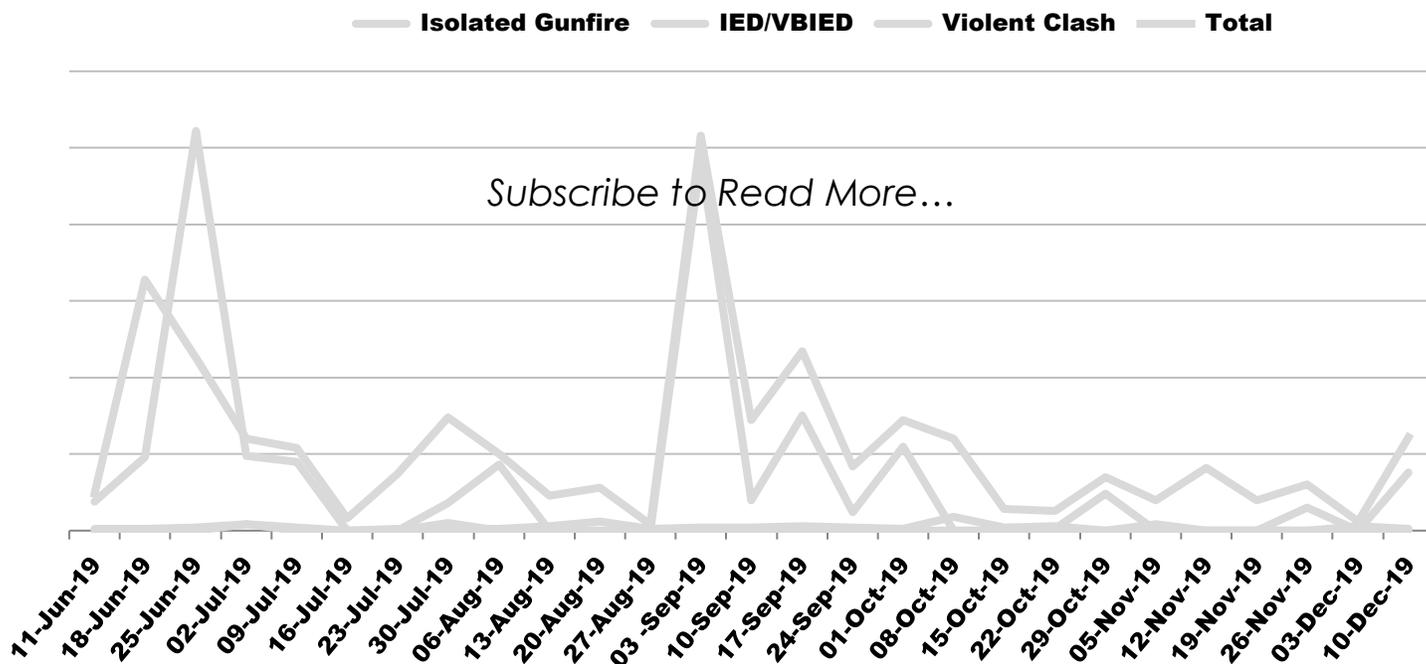
Nationwide fatalities by national district (Past week)



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 61 confirmed deaths in Libya, which compares to 6 deaths reported last week and 30 the week before. While official figures remain unknown, this week was marked by some confirmed reports of fatalities from combat in Tripoli's South. These figures help explain the increase in the number of fatalities recorded this week. However, figures published by both LNA and GNA accounts across social media generally remain biased and are unlikely to reflect the real number of fatalities from combat. Only in certain high-profile cases can the fatality be confirmed. For example, this week's death of a senior Nawaasi commander was widely reported across social media and his funeral documented by both pro-LNA and pro-GNA accounts.

Tripoli continues to account for the highest number of incidents, though this week, Al-Murgub (Khoms) national district saw the highest number of fatalities due to the failed GNA offensive on LNA forces in the area. Overall, isolated gunfire cases are on a downward trend. Several incidents were recorded throughout the country including 32 airstrikes and at least 14 bouts of violence across the Western region and 14 other mortar/rocket reports from combat in Tripoli.

In Western Libya, WB recorded a total of 64 incidents, including 36 in Tripoli, where the week was marked by a relative increase in vehicle thefts and carjacking incidents. Sources reported two separate vehicle thefts on 20 Dec. A Kia Sportage vehicle was stolen while parked in a residential area of Janzur. A Kia Cerato vehicle was stolen while parked in Al-Noflyeen area. Separately, on 22 Dec, unidentified assailants riding a Toyota vehicle carjacked a Kia Bongo truck in Tripoli's Janzour area on 22 Dec. More importantly, pro-GNA Misrata forces launched an offensive East of Tarhunah, in the Dawoon area, on 20 Dec. Fighting erupted between GNA forces and pro-LNA Tarhunah formations between Tarhunah and Msallatah at approximately 1800hrs on 20 Dec. The pro-GNA forces attempted to release pressure from Tripoli frontlines, but later retreated after engaging pro-LNA Tarhunah 9th Brigade. Pro-LNA accounts claim at least 22 pro-GNA forces were killed, while 21 others were detained, after the failed GNA offensive and ensuing violent clashes between Tarhunah and Msallatah.

Separately, multiple localities across the Western region followed suit and declared a state of emergency after the Misrata declaration. Al-Jmail military council, Zintan's civilian and military councils, Al-Ruhaibat military council, Zawiya, Msallatah municipality, Kabaw military council, Janzur municipality, and Khoms, are among those that declared a state of emergency and expressed readiness to mobilise all means to support GNA forces.

LNA airstrikes dominated the central region's security environment as tensions continue to mount. The LNA spox. declared airstrikes in Sirte's Abu Hadi area resulted in 19 fatalities within GNA ranks, including 11 terrorist elements of Syrian nationality. At least five fatalities were claimed by the pro-GNA Sirte and Protection Force (SPF). Pro-LNA accounts reported the arrival of LNA forces in Sirte's CP 40 "Gate 40" on 17 Dec. LNA positioning East of Sirte may escalate tensions and result in engagement in the Sirte national district.

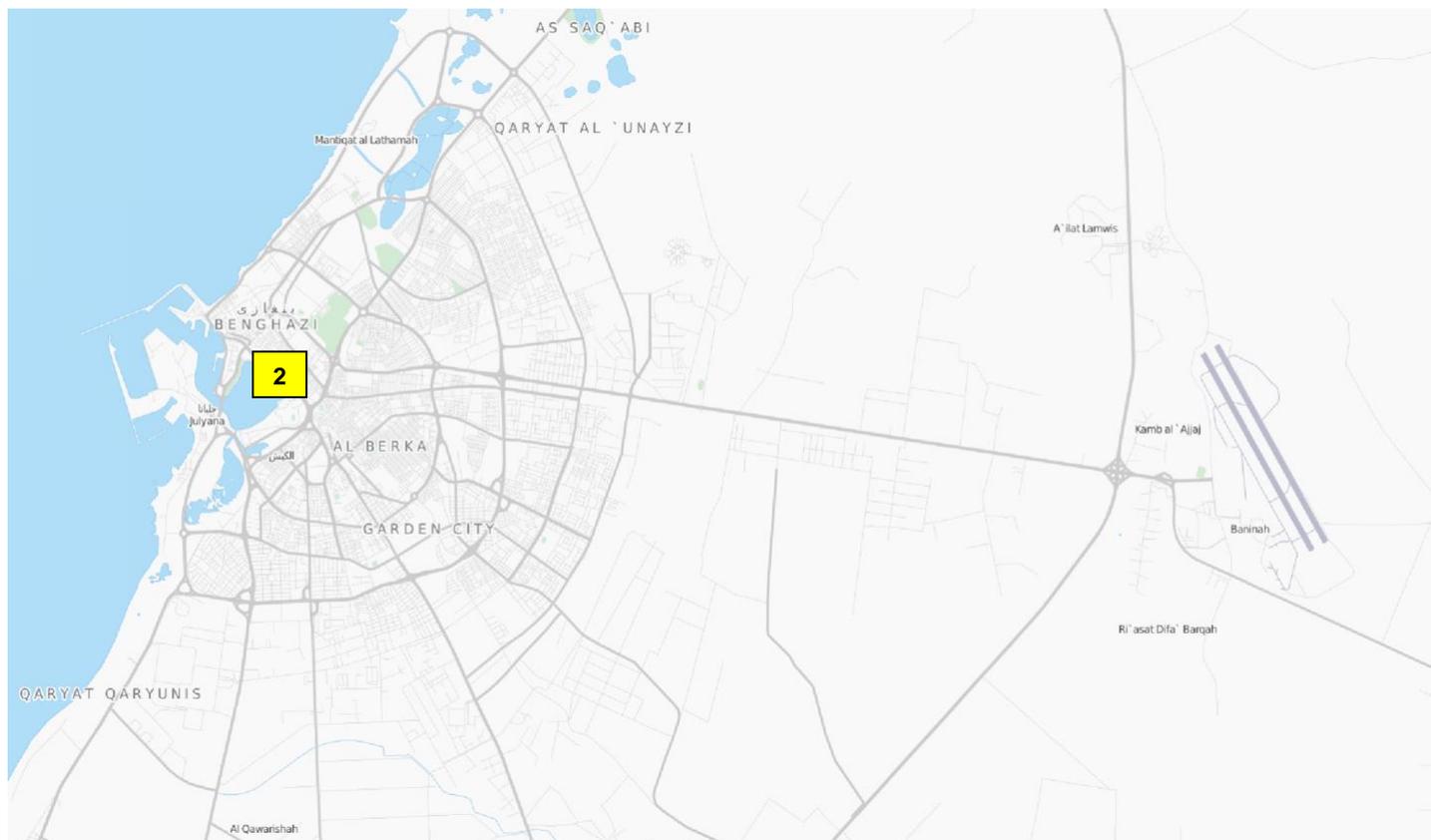
In the south, reports indicate a teacher was shot and killed by unidentified assailants in front of a school in Al-Menshia area in Sebha on the morning of 18 Dec. Local reports allege the killer was a student. The overall security environment has been stable relatively compared with past tensions between Tebus and locals, especially in Murzuq. However, the security vacuum prevails, and tensions/clashes remain possible in the short term.

The East continues to be relatively stable when compared with the current security environment across western regions. Multiple reports corroborated the movement of LNA formations from eastern towns to Tripoli frontlines. Meanwhile, Benghazi continues to see sporadic criminal activity and security incidents.



## 5. Benghazi Neighborhood Report

### CID arrest man firing at random in downtown



#### KEY INCIDENTS

1. (18 Dec) CID arrest criminal gang specialized in vehicle smuggling
2. (21 Dec) Male suspect fires at random using AK-47 rifle
3. (22 Dec) PM supervises Security Directorate HQ opening
4. (22 Dec) Greek FM meets Haftar, Thinni and Al-Hweij

#### Vehicle smuggling criminal network arrested

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of Benghazi's Security Directorate arrested a criminal network in Benghazi accused of smuggling vehicles to Sudan on 18 Dec. The CID's investigation revealed the male suspects bought Korean-manufactured vehicles in Benghazi markets and drove them to Kufra, where they were sold for double the price to smugglers allegedly from Sudan.

#### CID arrest man firing at random in downtown

Benghazi Security Directorate CID arrested a young man suspected of firing at random using an AK-47 rifle from his vehicle on Jamal Abdel Nasser street, Benghazi's downtown area, at approximately 0200hrs on 21 Dec. The suspect was reportedly under the influence of narcotics and alcohol and was later referred to public prosecution.

#### Greek FM visits Haftar in Rajmah

Greece's Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikos Dendias met with Khalifa Haftar, the Interim government PM Abdullah Thinni, and Interim government foreign minister Abdulhadi Al-Hweij in Benghazi/Rajmah. Turkey's maritime and security cooperation deals with the GNA were at the centre of discussions. In further evidence of the expanding Greece-Egypt-LNA alliance, Dendias travelled to Cairo and met with his

Egyptian counterpart, Sameh Shoukry, after visiting Benghazi. Dendias is also scheduled to visit Cyprus and meet with foreign minister Nikos Christodoulides. The Greek FM's visit was condemned by the GNA, claiming it is the only legitimate government of Libya. Recent developments have strengthened the alliance between Greece, Cyprus, and the eastern-based interim government. This alliance further undermines the posture and legitimacy of the GNA, which is now faced with the challenge of fighting a growing international coalition.

#### PM supervises HQ opening

Interim government PM Abdullah Thinni supervised the opening ceremony of the recently-refurbished Central Security Directorate HQ on 22 Dec. Thinni was accompanied by interior minister Ibrahim Boushnaf, who has been leading efforts to reform and unify security institutions across the city. The Central Security Directorate showcased its anti-riot and counterterrorism capabilities during the ceremony, according to an interim government statement.

## 6. What's next

### Escalation in Misrata/Sirte as Russia-Ankara begin negotiations

#### POLITICAL FORECAST

The GNA's legitimacy and survival continue to face significant challenges. The eastern-based government continues to work to strip the GNA from international recognition. The East is now expanding its alliances with Greece and Cyprus, highlighted by Greek foreign minister Nikos Dendias' visit to Benghazi. In response, the GNA is doing what is within its reach to maintain its posture. GNA PM Fayed Al-Sarraj sent letters urging leaders of the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), Italy, Algeria, and Turkey, to activate pending security cooperation agreements. Meanwhile, Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha held a closed-door meeting with representatives of the Gaddafi tribe in Tripoli on 18 Dec. The meeting corroborates recent reports that the GNA is attempting to regain the support of the Gaddafi. Unconfirmed reports suggest the GNA attempted to establish contact with Saif Al-Islam Gaddafi over the past two weeks. The GNA's efforts have been described as a last-ditch effort after the LNA strengthened its alliance with the Gaddafi, which continue to play a critical role in Libya with the capability to tilt the balance of power in the country. Separately, US publication Politico reported Gotham Government Relations and Communications, the US public relations firm recently contracted by the GNA to lobby on its behalf, has sent a letter to US President Donald Trump to stop Haftar's Tripoli offensive. Overall, the recent escalation has resulted in a flurry of developments in the diplomatic track and meetings between international stakeholders to reach a Libyan settlement. Russian President Vladimir Putin held a second phone conversation this week with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to discuss developments in Libya and Syria. Turkey's intent to send troops to Libya was likely at the centre of the discussions. In addition, the Kremlin confirmed on 17 Dec that Putin will visit Erdogan in Jan 2020 to discuss Turkey's potential military support for the GNA.

#### WHAT OTHER EXPERTS SAY

Writing for the *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Ben Fishman and Soner Cagaptay contextualise Turkey's growing involvement in Libya and its regional/domestic implications. The authors argue that Ankara gradually saw Libya as a critical arena to compete with actors such as Egypt and Greece in the region. This prompted Turkey to double down on its support for the GNA in an effort to counter the East Med bloc. For its part, the authors write that the GNA was compelled to strengthen its relationship with Ankara because it had no other alternative to fend off Haftar's forces. Domestically, Ankara's pivot to Libya has significant repercussions. According to the authors, "With Haftar showing no interest in the political compromise and the international community doing little to pressure his foreign backers, the new Turkish-Libyan defense memorandum could help deter further escalation—particularly since Egypt does not want a military confrontation with Turkey. Further escalation in Libya could open the door to Ankara and Russia supplanting the West and the UN in the battle to determine Libya's future. Although Erdogan and Vladimir Putin currently back opposing sides in the civil war, their operational track record in Syria speaks volumes about their potential for reaching an understanding in Libya. The two leaders spoke about the Libya situation by phone on December 17, and Putin is scheduled to visit Turkey in January for a meeting focused specifically on that issue." Fishman and Cagaptay conclude that US indecision has allowed Moscow to strengthen its foothold in Libya, adding that "Washington now has a narrow window to prevent further violence in Libya and limit Moscow's influence there. To do so, it must fully back the German-led effort to convince all relevant outside parties—including Turkey and its regional rivals—to commit to a ceasefire and halt arms transfers. U.S. officials should also threaten to use existing sanctions authorities against violators of a ceasefire once it is signed."

#### SECURITY FORECAST

In Tripoli, the LNA continues to rely on the air cover provided by attack helicopters to target GNA positions across Tripoli's southern frontlines. Video footage of the helicopter flying low over Tripoli was published across social media. LNA appears intent on reaching Salah Al-Dein traffic lights, a vital position that could lead to the control of additional areas south of the capital. In terms of tactics, the LNA is set to make significant gains on the narratives front as it begins to broadcast via 89.8 FM to Tripoli residents. Separately, infighting and tensions are apparent in the GNA camp and will likely be exacerbated by LNA gains in the short term. There is a risk of infighting and splintering within the TRB after recent allegations of tensions over leadership. In a similar development, the SDF continues to distance itself from other armed factions across the capital as highlighted by the alleged audio recording of Abdullaouf Kara, who called for negotiations and restraint. In the central region, LNA positioning East of Sirte may escalate tensions and result in engagement in the Sirte national district. Although difficult to ascertain, there is a possibility the LNA will conduct ground offensive operations in Sirte or Misrata to draw in Misrata forces and release pressure from Tripoli. The LNA realizes the criticality of Tarhuna for its Tripoli operations, and if GNA forces renew their offensive on Tarhunah via Msallatah, LNA could lose leverage. As a consequence, the LNA would opt for attacking first to avoid a potential loss of Tarhunah. In Zawiyah, tensions remain high and local armed groups deployed forces south of the city towards Abu Eissa and Al-Sabriya areas in the evening on 18 Dec, allegedly in preparation for an offensive on LNA positions in Surman and Sabratah. In response, LNA forces reportedly gathered near Surman. The developments will add to existing tensions between the pro-LNA town and pro-GNA elements in neighboring Al-Zawiyah. Travellers are advised to factor these tensions into travel plans.

#### LIBYANS AND THE ARAB STREET

Kamel Abdallah for Egyptian publication *Ahram Online* (English) presents the latest developments on the political front and preparations for the Berlin Conference on Libya after a meeting concluded on 10 Dec between UN Security Council members, Germany, Italy, Turkey, UAE, and Egypt. According to *Al-Ahram Weekly's* uncited diplomatic sources, UNSMIL head Ghassan Salame presented during this meeting a proposal for a new negotiation process in Libya. The proposal reportedly includes a political, economic, and military track. According to *Ahram Online*, the tracks will be implemented simultaneously though the military one might take precedence. The author writes "Among the proposals for the political track is a plan that aims to revive previous efforts to amend the agreement on Libya earlier signed in Skhirat in Morocco, to reduce the members of the country's presidential council from nine to three (a president and two deputies), and to choose a prime minister and two deputies to form a cabinet separate from the council. This process will take place within the framework of a meeting on the Libyan political dialogue to be held outside Libya with the participation of 40 negotiators chosen from the 13 electoral districts in the country after consulting local leaders. This step will replace the previous negotiators from Libya's two parliaments by figures who most likely will not be members of either. The new cabinet will be presented to the parliament in Tobruk for approval in two stages, and it will be approved in a third stage if it obstructs it." Meanwhile, the economic track will reportedly include the establishment of a Libyan Fund for Construction and Development (LFCD) and a committee of financial experts to reinforce the country's institutions, such as the Central Bank of Libya (CBL), National Oil Corporation (NOC), and Libyan Investment Authority (LIA), which are all due to undergo an audit. Finally, the military track will build on Cairo's military unification initiative and seek to reach a truce and later a ceasefire, before demobilizing/disarming armed groups.

# About Whispering Bell



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