



Whispering Bell

Libya Weekly Political & Security Update

February 25, 2020



1. The Big Picture

Last-ditch effort at negotiations as Bashagha goes after Nawasi in Tripoli

Both the Libyan National Army (LNA) and Government of National Accord (GNA) are becoming increasingly vocal about their intent to resume fighting if negotiations fail. But while the LNA gained greater negotiating leverage by rallying some 4000 tribesmen gathered in Tarhunah this week to voice their support, the Tripoli government had to contend with divisions between its Interior Ministry (MoI) and the Nawasi militia.

Meanwhile, Turkey's in-country presence suffered setbacks this week after President Recep Erdogan publicly admitted the presence of Syrian fighters in Tripoli and the fact Turkish military personnel have been killed by the LNA. Speaking to his supporters, Erdogan sought to reassure that Ankara's presence in Libya is justified.

For its part, the LNA, led by Khalifa Haftar, clearly articulated its conditions to pursue negotiations. Progress at the negotiating table and LNA acceptance of a ceasefire hinges on the retreat of Turkish military officers and Syrian fighters, and the dissolution of militias. The LNA is now favouring a wait-and-see approach by carefully monitoring GNA divisions and alternating between political statements and targeted combat operations to weaken the Tripoli government. The strategy was highlighted this week when Haftar's forces shelled Tripoli Port (LY TIP) on 18 Feb. The LNA justified the barrage of shells on the basis a Turkish vessel docked at the port was supplying GNA forces with military hardware.

The incident signalled a new escalation after a period of uncertainty as political negotiations unfolded in the aftermath of the Berlin Conference. The shelling of central Tripoli raises concerns combat could expand northward. LNA shelling would corroborate the recently-documented presence of a Turkish-manned surface to air defence system in Tripoli. Analysts are of the view the system is deterring the LNA from utilising aerial assets such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and combat jets. The recent uptick in shelling, however, does raise the prospect of civilian collateral damage.

In response to the Tripoli Port incident, the GNA temporarily suspended its participation in the 5+5 military talks in Geneva, only to later reverse the decision and resume negotiations, allegedly as a result of pressure by a foreign government.

In GNA ranks, the week was marked by stark divisions between Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha and the Nawasi militia led by Mustafa Ghadour. During a press conference on 23 Feb, Bashagha described militias as illegitimate entities acting with no oversight from Public Prosecution and the MoI and exploiting positions of power to engage in criminal activity and extortion. Further, Bashagha accused militias of infiltrating state institutions such as the Libyan Intelligence Services (LIS), in a tacit reference to the Nawasi militia. By contrast, Bashagha defined the

Support Force and brigades ("Katibas"), such as Misrata's Bunyan Al-Marsous (BAM), as legitimate forces fighting to defend the capital. Bashagha added that the Support Force and brigades are entitled to be integrated into a regular army and police force, unlike militias.

In response, multiple pro-Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) figures and Nawasi militia members accused the Minister of having a pro-LNA agenda and working to facilitate an LNA entry in the capital. The GNA hardliners attributed Bashagha's defiant stance to the presence of Syrian fighters protecting him.

Bashagha's statement comes against the backdrop of long-standing tensions between the MoI and the Nawasi militia. More recently, tensions escalated over Nawasi's detention of MoI-affiliated figures on allegations of sympathising with the LNA. For its part, the LNA exploited the context of divisions to its advantage. LNA spox Ahmed Al-Mesmari accused Bashagha of eliminating some Tripoli-based armed factions to reassure the international community and protect his position. The LNA spox stated Bashagha has requested the support of Syrian fighters and a foreign public relations firm to carry out an internal purge in Tripoli.

Overall, it remains too early to ascertain the precise ramifications of Bashagha's latest moves. It remains unclear if Bashagha's bold move to distance himself from militias marks an attempt at demobilising armed groups in the capital. Some would argue the development is no news given the Interior Minister has always been a reformist and vocal about his opposition to militias. Bashagha's exclusive focus on the Nawasi militia suggests this is likely a personal dispute and the result of long-standing tensions that have only recently been exacerbated by confessions from Shurki Al-Labib, the alleged leader of a pro-LNA sleeper cell recently captured in Tripoli.

Seen from this angle, Bashagha's actions would be purely motivated by revenge against the Nawasi militia. However, analysts are of the view Bashagha is also driven by self-interest to preserve his position, especially after recent pressure exerted by Washington on the Tripoli government to disarm militias. Of note, in another locally controversial statement, Bashagha told Bloomberg US military presence in Libya would be welcomed by the GNA to counter Russian influence.

In any case, Bashagha's bold move will be perceived locally as a peace overture to Haftar. Looking ahead, divisions are set to widen between GNA hardliners that continue to demand a full LNA withdrawal to April 2019 positions and moderates willing to concede, despite emerging reports of some progress achieved during Geneva military talks.

KEY POINTS

- LNA shells Tripoli Port; Turkish soldiers killed
- Tensions between GNA Interior Minister & Nawasi
- Some progress reported in 5+5 military talks



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2. National Security Map

Zuwara raises state of alert in fear of LNA attack; GNA forces gather in Zawiya on rumours of LNA attack

Key

THREAT INDICATORS

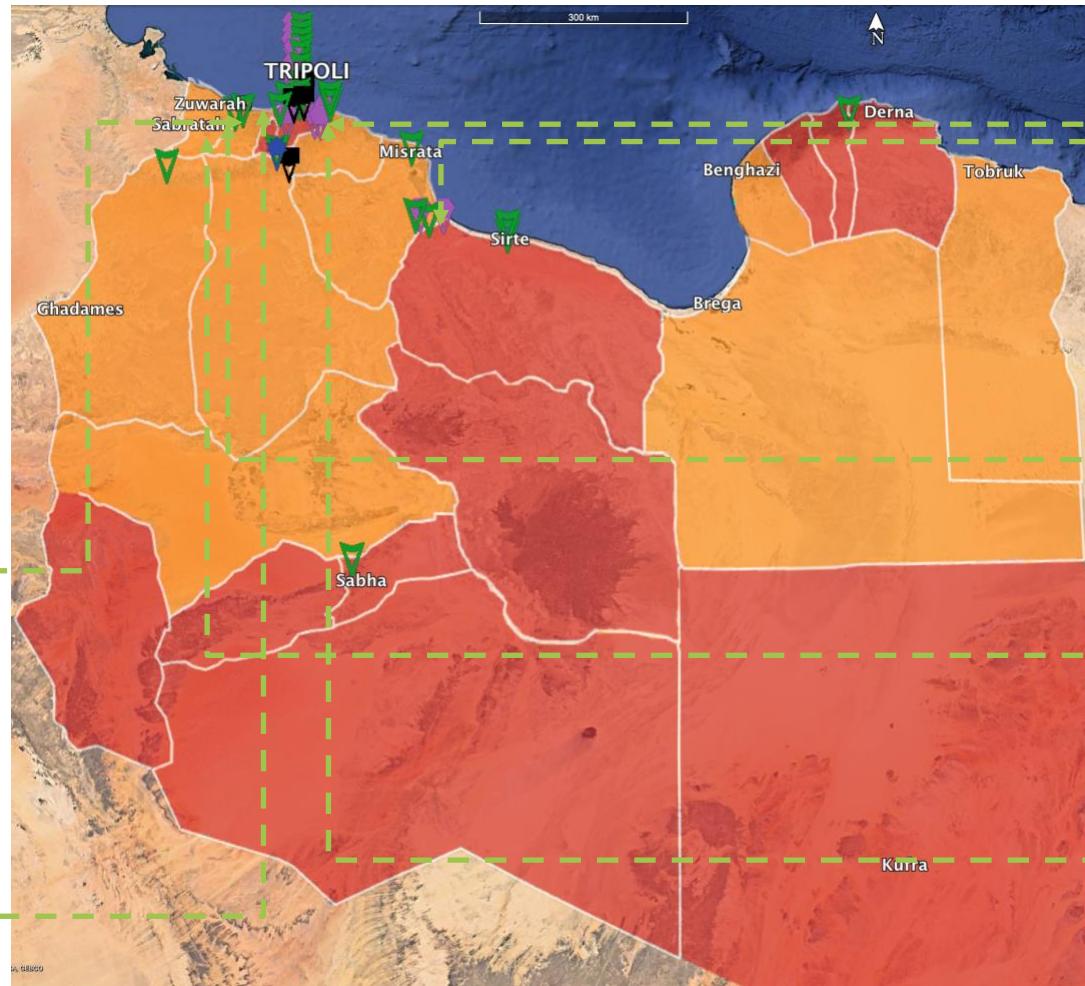
- Severe Threat
- High Threat
- Moderate Threat

EVENT INDICATORS

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

Zuwara's Joint Security Ops Room raised the state of alert to critical and declared general mobilisation on fears of an LNA-sanctioned attack. The Joint Security Ops Room reported monitoring suspicious movements and intercepting phone conversations hinting at an imminent LNA offensive within Zuwarah's administrative boundaries. Zuwarah's Mayor, Farhat Boshwashi, confirmed LNA movements have been reported in Surman, the pro-LNA town East of Zuwarah, and Wattiyah airbase. Of note, Zuwarah is within close distance to the Mellitah Oil and Gas (MOG) complex, jointly operated by Italy's Eni and the National Oil Corporation (NOC).

On 18 Feb, reports across pro-LNA accounts suggest LNA units are preparing to launch an attack on Al-Zawiya on 18 Feb. On 21 Feb, reports indicate a GNA military gathering in Al-Zawiya in preparation against any potential attack after recent reports suggesting LNA units are preparing an offensive on the city.



Reports indicate the LNA-aligned Al-Kaniat raided Garabelli Police Station with no resistance and stole a police vehicle before fleeing at approximately 0500hrs on 21 Feb.

Reports indicate LNA airstrikes targeted GNA forces in Wadi Zamzam at dawn on 21 Feb. The airstrikes were corroborated by the LNA's Military Information Division (MID) claiming that a GNA Turkish-affiliated armed convoy was targeted. Separately, pro-GNA accounts claimed its forces advanced on Al-Weshka frontline following heavy clashes with LNA units in the area in the morning on 19 Feb.

On 14 Feb, the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADDH) condemned the kidnapping of an Algerian national in Al-Ajaylat by a pro-LNA Salafist armed group identified as Sheikh Bouajila led by Abdulsalam Bahim on 25 Jan. In a statement, the LADDH urged Algerian authorities to intervene immediately and cooperate with Libyan factions to facilitate his release. The LADDH noted that it had addressed Algeria's Foreign Ministry, security forces and the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). The motive behind the kidnapping is unknown.

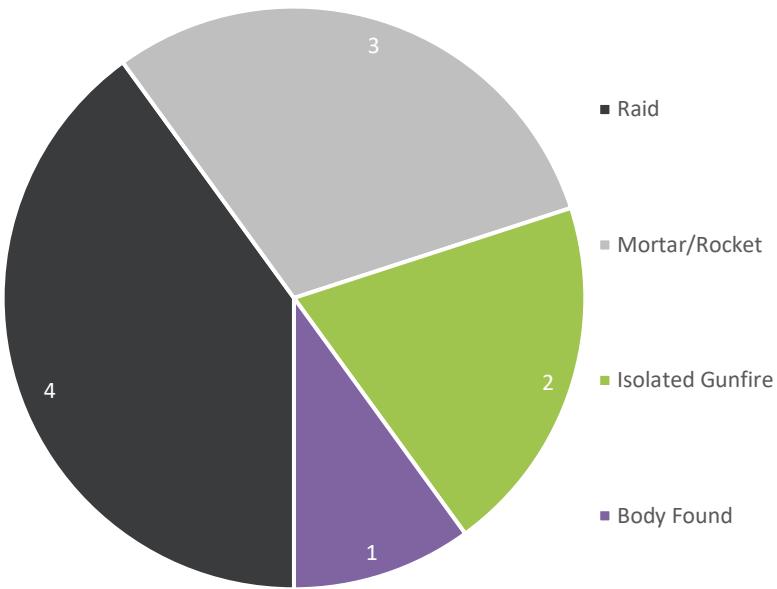
Reports indicate LNA military reinforcements arrived in Al-Assah and Al-Wattiyah Airbase on 21 Feb.

WB sources reported GNA-aligned Misrata factions established two checkpoints on Garabelli's Coastal Road and inspected travellers' IDs at approximately 2100hrs on 19 Feb. In a related development, Misrata's Special Emergency Room denounced the assassinations and kidnappings based on identity by "gangs of treachery in Tarhuna" in reference to the LNA-affiliated Al-Kaniat militia, in the Garabelli and Msallata areas. In a statement, the Room referred to the kidnapping and murder of three civilians from Misrata whose bodies were dumped on the side road in Garabelli's Al-Shridat area on 14 Feb.

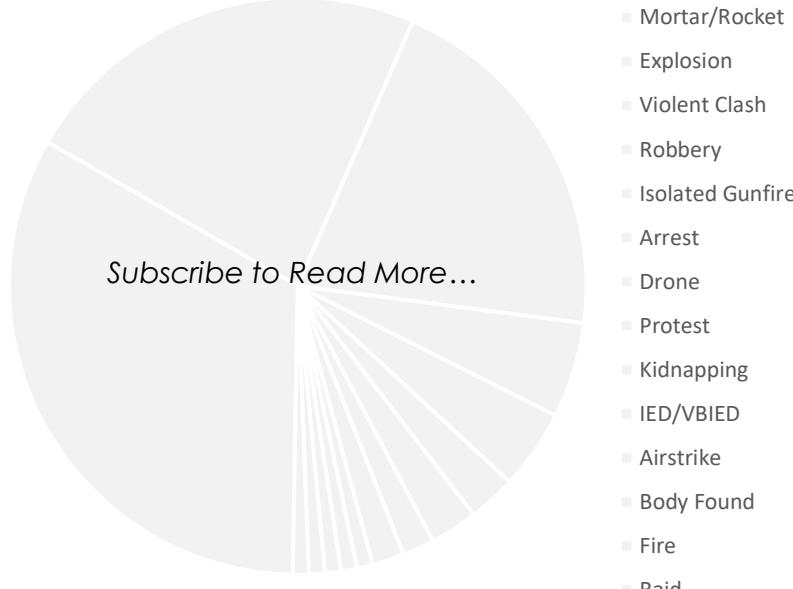
3. Nationwide Security Analysis

Evident decrease in airstrikes in west; shelling on upward trend in Tripoli

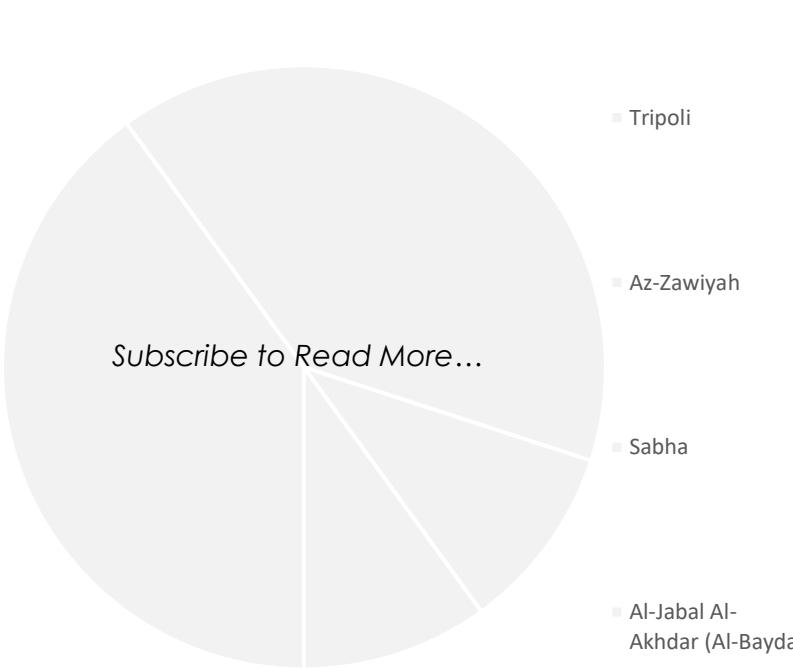
Nationwide fatalities by type of attack (Past week)



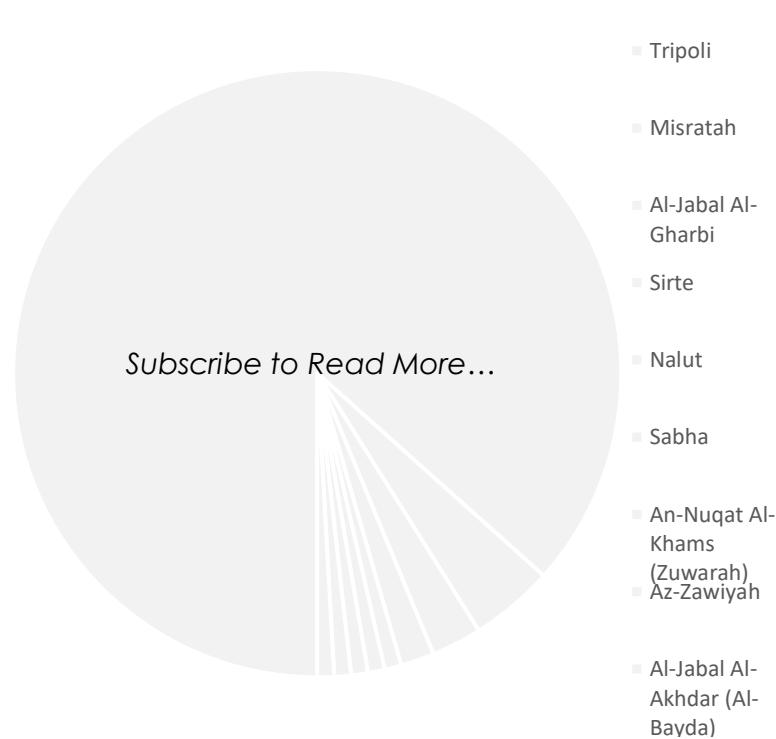
Nationwide incidents by type of attack (Past week)



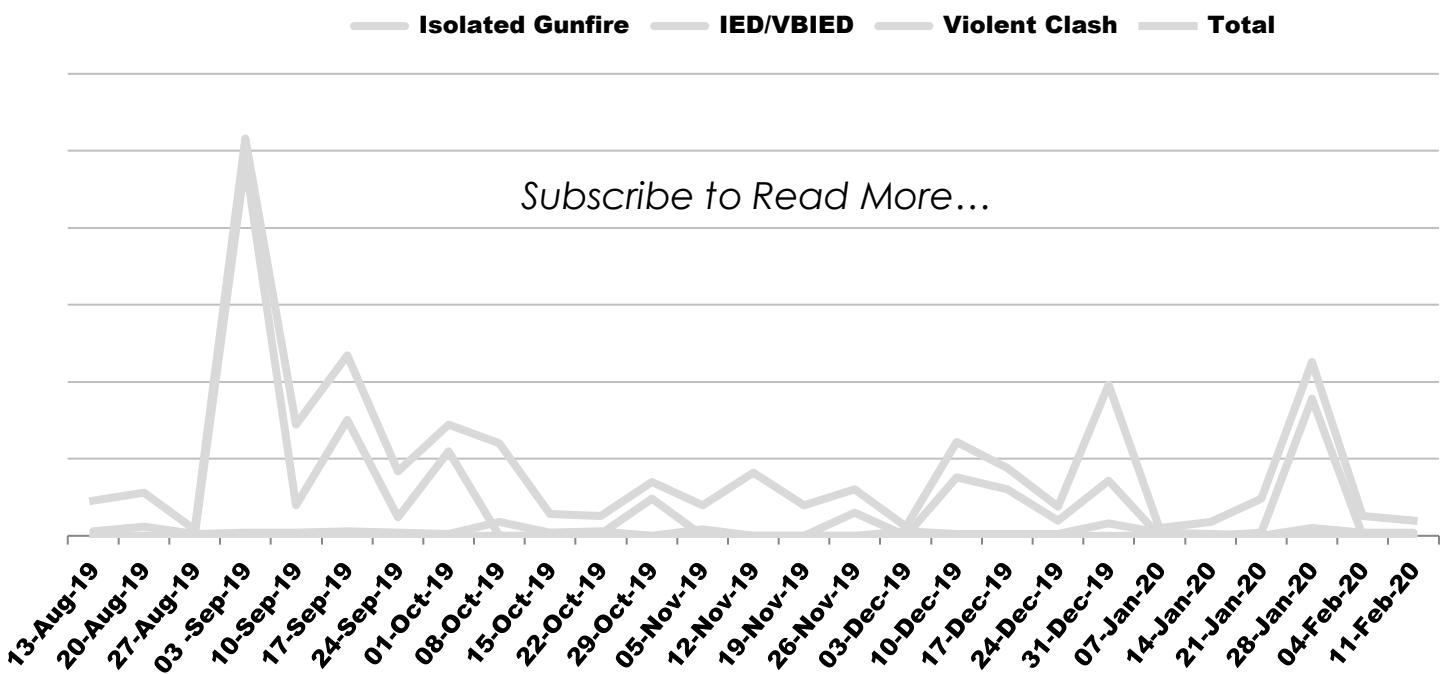
Nationwide fatalities by national district (Past week)



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 10 confirmed deaths in Libya, which compares to 13 deaths reported last week and 113 the week before, marking a relatively similar number of fatalities recorded in the previous week as military activity has yet to return to the intensity of its pre-12 Jan truce levels. Whilst WB recorded no civilian fatalities as a result of an expanded shelling campaign across the capital, three fatalities were recorded as a result of the Libyan National Army (LNA) targeting a weapons depot of Turkish delivered military supplies at Tripoli Port on 18 Feb. There are conflicting reports surrounding the identity of those killed, with the Government of National Accord (GNA) claiming they were civilians, whilst the LNA claimed three Turkish soldiers, including a Syrian translator, were killed in the attack. Beyond the attack on Tripoli Port, four fatalities were recorded as a result of a pro-LNA brigade raiding the house of a family affiliated with another pro-LNA brigade in Sabratah. Meanwhile, two fatalities came as a result of isolated gunfire cases, including a local dispute in Tripoli's Ghut Shaal vicinity and a gunfire incident targeting a police checkpoint killing one security member in Sabha. Further, a body was found in the eastern city of Al-Bayda. In relation to military activity, mortar/rocket shelling incidents remained on an upward spiral marked by the targeting of Tripoli Port, which increased fears of shelling expanding to central Tripoli beyond current engagement areas. Meanwhile, explosions were audible across the capital city as a result of heavy artillery fire. In terms of airstrikes, this week saw one LNA airstrike targeting GNA-aligned positions in Wadi Zamzam. Beyond military activity, this week saw a drop in the number of robberies, though all six robbery incidents were recorded in Tripoli. Isolated gunfire cases saw a relative decrease in contrast to last week. An additional raid in Sabratah, and two kidnappings in Tripoli and Al-Ajaylat indicate an uptick in criminal activity in the western region parallel to the pattern witnessed over recent weeks. Meanwhile in the central region, one arrest was reported in Sirte and a drone was heard was flying over the Qasr Abu Hadi area this week. In the south, no security incidents were recorded beyond the city of Sabha where a police checkpoint was targeted with gunfire. In the east, beyond the body found in Al-Bayda, this week saw no security incidents in the region's main city of Benghazi. Several incidents were recorded throughout the country including 37 mortar/rocket shelling incidents, 23 violent clashes, 6 robberies, 5 isolated gunfire cases, 2 protests, 2 kidnappings, 1 airstrike, 1 bpdy found and 1 raid.

In western Libya, WB recorded a total of 108 incidents, including 97 in Tripoli, marking a decrease in security incidents recorded in the region and across Tripoli. In Tripoli and beyond military activity, WB sources reported two thieves robbed a mobile phone shop on Burj Street in Tripoli's Hai Alandalus area at approximately 0500hrs on 20 Feb. Separately, reports indicate sporadic gunfire and explosions in Tripoli's Ghut Shaal area in celebration of a man returning 24hrs after he was kidnapped by the LNA-aligned Al-Kaniat militia in Garabulli. Beyond this, reports indicate a parked grey Hyundai Sonata was stolen in front of a house in Tripoli's Al-Kremiya area in the morning on 19 Feb. Similarly, reports indicate a grey KIA Cerato was stolen in front of a house in Tripoli's Gorje area on 19 Feb. Beyond acts of theft, there were reports of sporadic gunfire in Tripoli's Ghut Shaal area at approximately 1900hrs on 21 Feb. Initial reports indicate skirmishes erupted between residents of the area following a verbal altercation resulting in an exchange of gunfire and the subsequent death of a man. The motive behind the skirmishes remains unknown. Following the incident, nine police vehicles entered the area and settled the dispute.

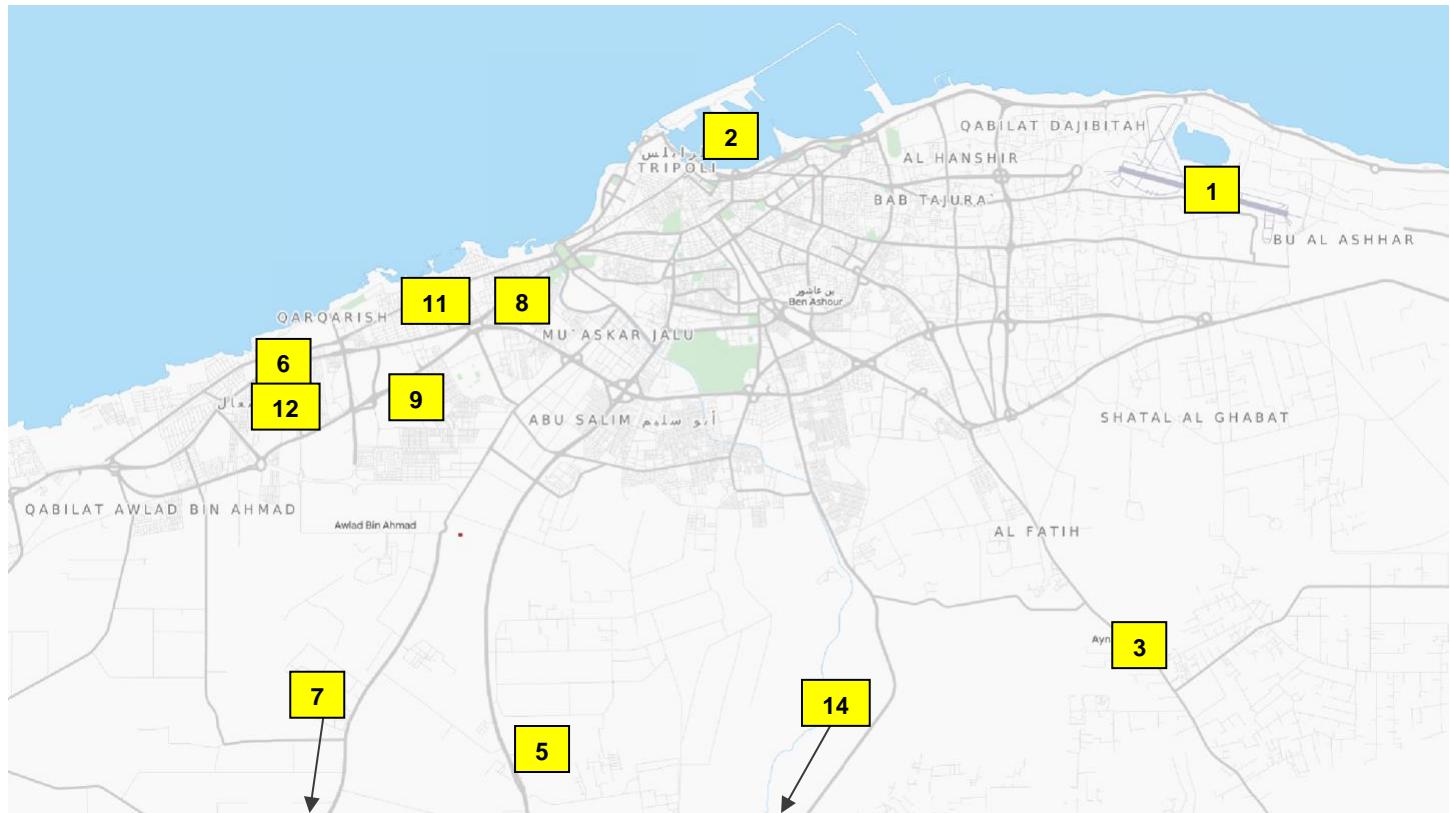
In the wider western region, reports indicate an exchange of artillery shelling between LNA and GNA forces on the Abu Grein frontline, south of Misrata, at approximately 2200hrs on 16 Feb. No fatalities or injuries were recorded. Separately, there were reports of heavy explosions in Gharyan's city centre in the morning on 17 Feb. Initial reports indicate the explosions came as a result of the detonation of explosive remnants of war (ERW) in the GNA's Eighth Camp in the Kamoon area. In addition, Policemen arrested three men driving a grey KIA Sportage at a checkpoint in Gharyan's Bu Gheilan area in the morning on 18 Feb. The suspects were driving a stolen vehicle from Tripoli. Turning to the central region, On 18 Feb, pro-LNA security forces in Sirte arrested an unknown number of locals a day after they raised imagery and the flag of the former Gaddafi regime during 17 Feb Revolution celebrations across the city.

In the south, Reports indicate two unidentified assailants conducted a drive-by shooting targeting a checkpoint manned by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), resulting in the death of a security member in Sabhā on 21 Feb. The latest reports indicate the assailants were arrested on 22 Feb.

Furthermore in the eastern region, reports indicate an unidentified body was found with signs of a headshot in a farm in Al-Bayda in the morning on 15 Feb.

4. Tripoli Neighborhood Report

LNA shelling of Tripoli Port increases fear of combat expanding northward



KEY INCIDENTS

1. (17 Feb) Shells target aircraft during take off at MJL, air traffic temporarily suspended
2. (18 Feb) Barrage of shells fired by LNA units target Tripoli Port, three killed
3. (18 Feb) LNA claim GNA-affiliated Turkish UAV downed in Ain Zara
4. (18 Feb) Pro-LNA sleeper cell arrested in unidentified area
5. (19 Feb) NOC confirm BPMC LPG tanker targeted by munition at storage facility
6. (19 Feb) Celebratory gunfire in Ghut Shaal after Al-Kaniat militia release man abducted for 24hrs in Garabolli
7. (19 Feb) Vehicle theft in Al-Kreymiya
8. (19 Feb) Vehicle theft in Gorje
9. (19 Feb) Vehicle theft in Qaryat Salah
10. (19 Feb) BPMC resume fuel deliveries
11. (20 Feb) Mobile shop robbed in Hai Al-Andalus at approx. 0500hrs
12. (21 Feb) Shots fired during verbal altercation killing one in Ghut Shaal
13. (21 Feb) Locals hold anti-LNA protest
14. (22 Feb) GNA claims skirmishes between LNA-affiliated groups in Qasr Bin Ghashir

LNA targets Tripoli Port with barrage of shells

At approximately 1315hrs on 18 Feb, the LNA's Media Centre claimed responsibility for firing a barrage of shells targeting a weapons depot at Tripoli Port after a Turkish vessel carrying weapons and ammunition destined for GNA forces reportedly docked at the port. The LNA claimed the strike against the weapons depot was aimed at weakening the capabilities of Syrian mercenaries fighting alongside armed groups aligned with Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda (AQ) and came in response to repeated truce violations by the GNA. Sources confirmed storage facilities and an unidentified vessel were directly targeted at the port's landing dock. The GNA's Ministry of Health claimed the attack on the port resulted in three civilian fatalities and wounded five others, whilst the LNA claimed that three high-ranking Turkish officers were killed along with a Syrian translator. At approximately 1700hrs, reports indicate at least one mortar shell targeted Tripoli Port. Initial reports indicate storage facilities at the landing dock were targeted in the second wave of the attack. There is mounting evidence to indicate the targeted vessel was Albanian-flagged "ANA". Open source vessel tracking software confirms the vessel sailed from Turkish port of Mersin on 09 Feb and had Gabes port (Tunisia) as its destination. It would have docked midway at Tripoli port on 15 Feb. Allegations that it contained ammunition and weapons remain difficult to ascertain. Satellite imagery confirms cargo was directly targeted near the vessel. The incident would signal a new escalation after a period of uncertainty in the aftermath of political negotiations. The shelling of central Tripoli has raised fears combat will expand northward. LNA shelling indicates the recently documented

Turkish surface to air defence system in place in central Tripoli is indeed deterring the LNA from utilising its aerial assets, including UAVs and combat jets.

LNA claims UAV downed in Ain Zara

On 18 Feb, the LNA spokesperson, Ahmed Al-Mesmari, claimed a GNA-affiliated Turkish unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) was downed over Ain Zara after taking off from the Mitiga International Airport (MJL) military base to target LNA positions in retaliation for the LNA's targeting Tripoli Port at approximately 2100hrs. Pro-GNA accounts denied the claims.

Shells target MJL temporarily suspending air traffic

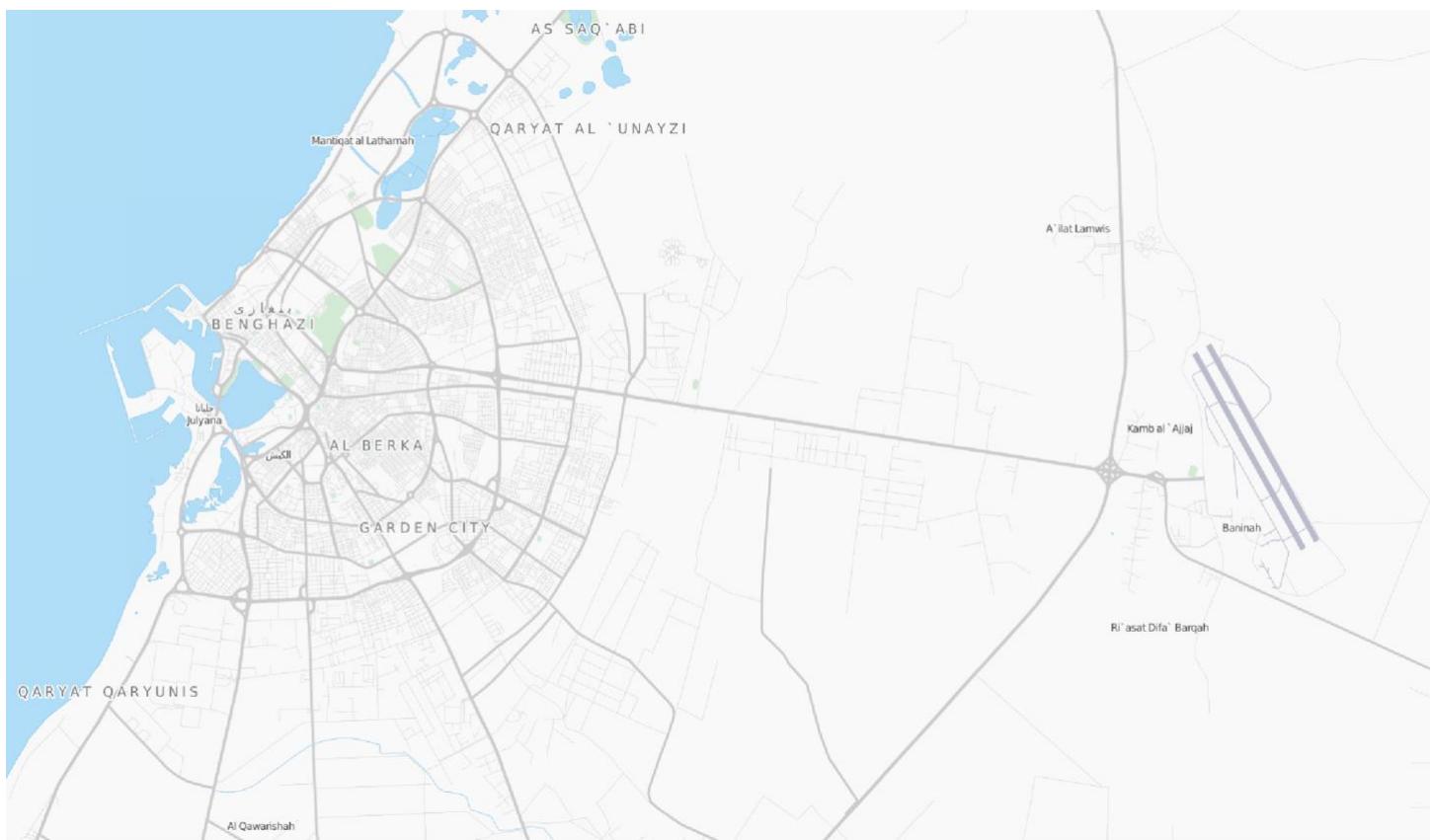
MJL reported a Libyan Airlines-operated aircraft was targeted with shells during take-off at approximately 1800hrs on 17 Feb. Subsequently, air traffic was temporarily suspended. Flight operations resumed at approximately 1930hrs. The GNA attributed the attack to the LNA.

Pro-LNA sleeper cell & two CID members arrested

A former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and current hardline opponent of Khalifa Haftar, Noman Benothman, appeared in a video claiming a pro-LNA sleeper cell was arrested in an unidentified location in Tripoli on 18 Feb. Reports suggest the sleeper cell consisted of approximately 20 men led by a pro-LNA military figure identified as Shukry Al-Labib. Of note, Al-Labib reportedly formed the LNA's Tripoli Dignity Operations Room as per the orders of Haftar and allegedly has ties to the Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade (TRB) head, Haithem Al-Tajouri. In a related incident, the head of the Mol's Criminal Investigations Department (CID) and the head of the Office for Displaced Affairs were reportedly arrested by the Nawasi Brigade on charges of LNA support. Reports indicate the CID members were arrested after Al-Labib mentioned their names during interrogations.

5. Benghazi Neighborhood Report

Prominent drug dealer arrested amid crackdown on drug-related crime across city



KEY INCIDENTS

1. (22 Feb) Prominent drug dealer arrested after police foil escape attempt

Prominent drug dealer arrested

On 22 Feb, Benghazi's Security Directorate reported the arrest of a prominent drug dealer as part of a widespread security campaign to crackdown on drug-related crime by Benghazi's Rescue Police Department. According to the Directorate, the suspect was arrested after an escape attempt was foiled by the Rescue Police Department.

6. What's next

Tensions in Zawiya as fighting continues across the West

POLITICAL FORECAST

SECURITY FORECAST

On the Berlin Process's political track, prospects of the Geneva forum scheduled for 26 Feb continue to be shrouded in uncertainty. The High Council of State (HCS) and other eastern-based figures refused invitations to attend the negotiations. At the time of writing, emerging reports indicate the HoR withdrew its participation. Meanwhile, the sheikh of the Magharba tribe, Salah Al-Atyoush, reportedly refused an invitation to attend. Al-Atyoush's refusal is reportedly due to his belief that a solution to the Libyan crisis should come as a result of dialogue between Libyans in Libya. But against all odds, it appears military track negotiations have achieved some progress. UNSMIL reported some progress after the second round of the 5+5 Libyan Joint Military Commission (JMC) talks ended in Geneva, Switzerland on 23 Feb. The Mission confirmed that the two sides prepared a ceasefire agreement to facilitate the return of civilians to their areas with the implementation of a joint monitoring mechanism under the auspices of the UNSMIL and JMC. Of note the issue of civilian returnees was the main point of contention in the initial negotiation round. The statement added that the two sides agreed to present the draft agreement to their respective leaderships for further consultations and to convene again in March to resume military talks and complete the preparation of the Terms of Reference of the sub-committees tasked with implementing the agreement. Regardless of the progress reported so far, the LNA is unlikely to concede on its demands for a Turkish withdrawal while GNA hardliners are equally unlikely to accept the LNA's current positions. The situation is therefore unlikely to be solved in the medium term. On the international front, the African Union (AU) continues to grow more involved in Libya, with the establishment of an Inter-Departmental Task Force on Libya. Meanwhile, the AU's Peace Support Operations Division (PSOD) is tasked with beginning preparations for the deployment of a "multidimensional mission" once a ceasefire agreement is reached between the warring sides.

WHAT OTHER EXPERTS SAY

Libya expert Tarek Megerisi for the *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)* argues the new EU naval mission off Libya's coast is unlikely to yield significant results in enforcing the UN arms embargo given it is by design targeted at Turkey's support for Tripoli. Megerisi argues the mission, which was recently agreed by the EU after Operation Sophia was discontinued, is merely a message by the EU to ascertain its role in the Libyan conflict. The author calls on the EU to be more realistic, "The EU has stipulated an operation that "comprises aerial, satellite and maritime assets". But the aerial aspect of enforcing the arms embargo will likely be the costliest and trickiest to implement, and could mean the mission devolves into a simple naval blockade. This would force the whole undertaking into the Sophia trap: some policymakers in Brussels and national capitals would be content to believe that Europe is active on this file when, in reality, the impact would be minimal. A meaningful approach would instead incorporate a sustained aerial mission, one that involves flying sorties into Libyan air space rather than merely patrolling European waters. This will entail having to enforce a credible deterrence capability, potentially intercepting cargo planes or even striking aerial or ground transports. But European countries (and the United States) are unwilling even to name and shame those countries supplying Haftar. So prospects for such an aerial component to the mission are non-existent."

In Tripoli, there is a risk tensions between Nawasi and the GNA MoI will continue to unfold with tit-for-tat actions and statements, and in an extreme scenario, an assassination attempt targeting the Interior Minister. Of note, there have been at least two reported assassination attempts against Bashagha recorded recently. Separately, while the LNA's growing reliance on shelling indicates Turkish-manned air defence systems are being put to use in Tripoli, the LNA's claims a GNA UAV was downed over Ain Zara would indicate the LNA possesses jamming capabilities too. Further, critical infrastructure such as ports and airports will continue to be targeted across the West on suspicions of harbouring Turkish military personnel and receiving military shipments. Meanwhile, the closure of oil terminals and fields is expected to continue given the outcomes of the Tarhunah tribal meeting, where it was agreed to maintain the status quo until the GNA is dissolved. The closure will continue to squeeze GNA budgets and will subsequently increase local grievances; a situation that the LNA will look to exploit in the medium term to exacerbate divisions and oust the Tripoli government. In Zuwara and Zawiya, tensions are high amid fears of an LNA-sanctioned offensive. Analysts are of the view Zuwara's security forces are relatively small and ill-equipped to protect against a large-scale LNA offensive. It is generally believed Zuwara will favour negotiations with the LNA in the long term if a victory is within reach. UAV activity reported in the Western mountains area, including Tiji and Nalut, could be the prelude to offensive LNA military operations to seize additional ground. Tensions in the vicinity of Gharabelli are set to continue. The recorded increase in Misrata's security presence in the area comes against the backdrop of multiple infiltration attempts by the LNA-affiliated 9th Brigade Tarhunah ("Al-Kaniyat") in the form of raids, kidnappings, and other sporadic incidents. The uptick in activity by the LNA's 9th Brigade is inscribed in attempts to isolate Misrata from Tripoli by continuing to push northward to secure the Coastal Road.

LIBYANS AND THE ARAB STREET

In an article published by *The National Interest* Karim Mezran and Dario Cristiani explore the Berlin Conference's outcomes and whether it has realistically brought Libya closer to a political solution. The authors argue that a "logic of mediation" and European bureaucracy meant that stabilisation efforts focused on organizing the conference as opposed to achieving tangible results. They write "Observers need a lot of imagination to consider Berlin a real step forward, at least if the aim is to achieve a stabilization that is not short-sighted and structurally weak. A truce is always good since whatever can be done to avoid further chaos and destruction in today's Libya should be welcomed. Yet, as shown by the immediate resumption of hostilities in the aftermath of the conference, any truce without clear and consistent mechanisms to punish free-riders and spoilers is destined to fail. The events of the past few days—with the flights of Emirati planes to Libya, the attacks by Haftar's forces, and the Turkish responses—show how this sad reality did not take too long to materialize again. Berlin can only be considered a step forward if one looks at it from the point of view of Haftar and his supporters: Berlin was the final step in his journey toward full international recognition. Moreover, the idea of appointing a "new, representative and unified government" as envisaged by the conclusions of the conference will give Haftar a de facto veto on any political solution. Haftar will reject any arrangement that includes current members of the GNA. As such, any new government of national unity that emanates from these negotiations will be even less representative than today's GNA."

About Whispering Bell



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