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In-Depth Analysis of Breaking Events & Under-Reported Regional Security Trends

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an effort to oust Qaddafi, independent militias of varying strength have been formed inside Libya and are threatening regional security inside the country. Of these the Zintan militia is one of the foremost examples of a brigade with strong organizational skills, effective tactics and entrenched authority in their base city of Zintan. On December 10th, the Zintan brigade was involved in a firefight with the convoy of the ex-commander-in-chief of the National Army, Major General Khalifa Haftar. The Zintan Brigade acted without orders from the National Army, which they accused of not notifying them of the convoy's approach to the Tripoli airport. It is becoming a major challenge for the Libyan Transitional Council to integrate these militiamen in the new security structure of Libya. The Zintan Brigade and other militias will continue to be key actors in Libya affecting the domestic security situation until they become fully integrated into the new Libyan National Army.

The Zintan Militia and the Fragmented Libyan State

One of the major challenges for the future of Libya concerns the presence on its soil of a variety of autonomous militias of various sizes, geographical origin, ideology and organizational aims. The consequent fragmentation of the security environment is a major obstacle for Libyan efforts to achieve an effective and functional statehood.

Efforts to integrate the militias into a new national army and police force have been stymied in part due to the unpopularity of Major General Khalifah Haftar, chief-of-staff of the Libyan National Army until he was replaced earlier this month. General Haftar appeared to have lost the confidence of the government, with Transitional National Council (TNC) chairman Mustafa Abd-al-Jalil reportedly describing the American-backed Haftar as "suspicious and arrogant" at an official meeting between al-Jalil and a number of militia commanders (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, December 12, 2011). On January 3, Haftar was replaced as chief-of-staff by Colonel Yusuf Mangush, who was promoted to general. Mangush, a Misrata native and retired officer from the Libyan military, joined the rebel forces after fighting began last spring, only to be captured by loyalist forces during the struggle for Brega in April. Though Mangush has the support of Abd al-Jalil and Prime Minister Abd al-Rahim al-Kib, the powerful Benghazi rebel faction have



Osama al-Juwali,
Zintan militia member
and Minister of Defense

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denounced his appointment as “undemocratic” while promoting their own candidate, General Salah Salem al-Ubaydah (AFP, January 3; *Jeune Afrique*, January 13). General al-Mangush is determined to establish a supreme defense council and speed up the integration of militia fighters into the national army and police, but he may need a greater level of support than he has now to be successful (*Jeune Afrique*, January 13).

Libya’s Difficult Transition

In political science, especially following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the term “transition” is mostly used to define those political processes leading to a – more or less – effective (liberal) democracy. In Libya, at present, it is impossible to use transition in this meaning, as the first step to start a transition to democracy is to have a government capable of imposing its rule on the people and groups in its national territory. The 42 years of the *Jamahiriyah* (State of the Masses) – a very personal Qaddafi creation lacking institutions typical of modern states – makes this an enormous challenge, even in the event of a scenario (at present completely detached from the reality on the ground) in which everyone in Libya acted to meet the need to create a functioning state without seeking to advance narrow and factional interests at the same time.

The success of this transition is strongly connected to how Libyans will be able to manage the thorny issue of militias and the risk of starting a political shift to warlordism rather than democracy. The continuous clashes between different militias – the latest occurring in near Gharyan (50 miles south of Tripoli), involving a militia from Gharyan pitted against another militia from neighboring Assabia – are a powerful reminder of the menace they pose to Libya’s increasingly volatile and fragmented security environment (Reuters, January 14; AFP, January 16). One of the most important and well organized groups in present-day Libya is the Zintan militia, which controls the Tripoli airport and other institutions in the capital. The group has been the protagonist in several political and security incidents over the past few weeks.

Moving on from the Jamahiriyah State

Libya as a unitary state has always been characterized by several internal fault lines, with ethnic, tribal, cultural and political cleavages characterizing its political and social environment. These fault lines were exploited by Qaddafi during his rule. For example, in the very early

stages of his rule after the 1969 coup, Qaddafi tried to downgrade the importance of the tribes, but, after a few years he understood that it was impossible to maintain a strong grip on the country without the support of at least some of the major tribes. The resulting “divide and rule” policy was a major feature of the Qaddafi *jamahiriyah* (state of the masses). In the long run, stressing these divisions proved to be unsustainable and was a key factor in explaining the eruption of the revolts in February 2011.

It is no coincidence that the core of the revolt was the eastern city of Benghazi, the stronghold of the pre-Qaddafi Sanussi monarchy and the area most penalized under Qaddafi. The Libyan east-west divide is a long standing feature of the Libyan political and social landscape and is essential to understanding Libya’s fragmentation. The increasing weight of local, regional and tribal interests – which emerged clearly in the protests against the appointment of the new transitional government – is connected to this domestic cleavage. Though very important, this dynamic is only one of many working against the establishment of a unitary state in Libya.

The killing of Qaddafi was not only the symbolic end of an era but visible proof that his rule cannot return to Libya. The psychological relief this provided had another side to take into account; the death of the common enemy opened the underlying structural fissures within the heterogeneous bloc of rebels who carried out the revolution. In this context, the presence of autonomous armed militias on the ground represents a major obstacle to the normalization of the Libyan security environment.

Recent Clashes in Tripoli

At the end of November, fighters of the Zintan militia stopped Abdulhakim Belhadj at the Tripoli airport, accusing Belhadj of travelling to Istanbul on a fake passport. Only after a direct intervention from Libyan interim leader Mustafa Abdul Jalil was he able to catch his flight (Tripoli Post, November 26, 2011). Belhadj, head of the Tripoli Military Council, a former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and one of the most important figures in the anti-Qaddafi revolt, is considered to be one of the main enemies of the Zintan group. His military council presents a direct challenge to the Zintan Brigade in the struggle to control the security of Tripoli. Like other militias active in the Libyan capital, establishing control over the city is considered

to be a strategic necessity for these groups to enable them to advance their interests and agendas in the new political balance. In this context, control of the airport is considered fundamental.

The Zintan Brigade was the protagonist in another incident at the Tripoli airport on December 10, 2011, when the militia was involved in a firefight with a convoy carrying Major General Khalifa Haftar. Two members of the militia were killed and several injured (see Terrorism Monitor Brief, December 16, 2011). Khalid al-Zintani, a spokesman for the Zintan militia, said that members of his group did not try to kill Haftar and that clashes occurred simply because no one notified the Zintan revolutionaries of Haftar's intention to travel to the airport (AP, December 11). Al-Zintani and Mukhtar al-Akhdar, the commander of Zintani fighters at the airport, criticized the nascent National Army, of which Haftar is now the ex-commander-in-chief, saying that the presence and influence of this army on the ground is almost nonexistent and adding that the Zintan Brigade will step down only once the new government authorities are able to fully guarantee security in Tripoli. Only a few days later, the members of the Zintan militia were involved in another clash with members of the neighboring Mashashiya, arresting 20 members of the tribe, which was considered loyal to Qaddafi's regime (AFP, December 12, 2011).

The Zintan Militia Benefits from Strong Organization

The Zintan militia is named for Zintan, a city of roughly 50,000 people in the Nafusa Mountains of western Libya. The relationship of this city with Qaddafi's regime was always unsettled. Though located in that half of the country that benefited by the shift in the political balances following the overthrow of the monarchy, Zintanis remained rather critical of Qaddafi and his *Jamahiriyah* state. Some Zintanis participated in the failed 1993 coup against Qaddafi that was organized by some members of the Warfalla, Libya's largest and most powerful Libyan tribe and usually regarded as a power base for the Qaddafi regime (though this support was far from unanimous). Zintani fighters joined the 2011 revolution during its very early stages and were responsible for arresting the fugitive Saif al-Islam Qaddafi in southern Libya (*Jeune Afrique*, November 30, 2011). The charismatic founder of the Zintan militia, Muhammad Ali Madani, was killed by loyalist forces on May 1, 2011 (al-Arabiya, September 7, 2011).

The Zintan Brigade has an inflexible approach in its recruitment procedures - only those who can fully demonstrate that they were not attached to the previous regime can join the group. As shown by the dispute with the Mashashiya, the Zintan Brigade has a more general, non-negotiable approach of rejecting any possibility of collaboration with people attached to the previous regime.

Another characteristic of the Zintan militia is their strong and efficient organization, which allows them to implement an effective control of the areas under their informal rule. Unlike other Libyan militias that are composed mostly of civilian volunteers, the Zintan Brigade has a balanced but strictly hierarchical mix of civilian volunteers from Zintan and former members of the Libyan national army who defected in the early stages of the revolution and are now in command positions within the Brigade.

It is not surprising that a member of the Zintan militia, Osama al-Juwali, was appointed Minister of Defense in the new transitional cabinet (al-Jazeera, November 22, 2011). Unlike other members of the Libyan leadership, al-Juwali has opted for a milder approach towards the militias, aimed at integrating and co-opting these groups. Al-Juwali says that time is needed to settle this situation, without setting any deadlines. In mid-December al-Juwali suggested that six weeks was the minimum time needed in which to expect some results concerning the normalization of the militias' presence (Reuters, December 19, 2011). This stance is part of a wider pragmatic approach pursued by al-Juwali, who wants to integrate militiamen in the new military and security services of the country. He stressed the fact that these men represent those marginalized during Qaddafi's era and will bring new blood into the Libyan security forces (al-Jazeera, December 26, 2011). In his efforts, al-Juwali can count on his growing reputation within the revolutionary forces as a member of one of the most powerful Libyan militias with the support of a wide network of personal relations within it.

Conclusion

Apart from a powerful shared aim to get rid of Qaddafi, the various loose-knit groups of the rebel camp had little in common, leaving a general feeling of mistrust and suspicion as the main denominators of their relationship. Every militia has its own self-narrative and myth concerning its role and weight in destroying Qaddafi's *Jamahiriyah*. As shown by the recent clashes

in and around Tripoli, the ability to obtain a consensus among the militias seems slight and the possibility that these groups will voluntarily give up their arms and get out of Libyan streets appears to be remote. The Zintan militia is a rather powerful example of how much militias matter in the current Libyan environment; well organized, tough, irreducibly anti-Qaddafi and even in a way reliable, they patrol several areas of Tripoli and, although at odds with some residents and local groups, have been able to perform a more or less effective job of controlling their districts. Their role during the revolution bought them some credibility amongst ordinary Libyans and other revolutionaries. With some other factions, however, relations remain tense, especially with groups vying for control of Tripoli such as the Tripoli Military Council, the Misrata militia and the National Army.

Any state pretending to be effective and functioning cannot allow the presence of armed groups on its territory that act independently. The efforts of al-Juwali, a member of the Zintan group, will be aimed at integrating, rather than marginalizing, these militiamen in the new security structure of Libya. The presence of a militia member in the position of Minister of Defense is a vivid demonstration of how much the militias matter. That the Minister is a member of the Zintan militia displays the importance of this group and suggests that the next political moves by the Transitional Government will not be hostile to Zintani interests.

The presence of an enormous number of “liberated” weapons on the streets of Tripoli and the strong possibility that not all the militias will be satisfied by the new political balance make the outcome of the process started by al-Juwali very uncertain. Optimism regarding a settlement of the militia issue in Libya in the short term appears to be unrealistic.

Dario Cristiani is a PhD Candidate in Middle East and Mediterranean Studies at King's College London. Previously, he has been a teaching fellow in Political Science and Comparative Politics at the University of Naples “L'Orientale” and a political analyst with the Power and Interest News Report (PINR).