

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## INDONESIA: FAMILY TIES IN TERRORISM INCREASINGLY EVIDENT AHEAD OF ELECTIONS

*Brian M. Perkins*

The threat of terrorism continues to loom large in Indonesia as the country gears up for elections on April 17. The country will not only vote for its next president, but also on the 560 members of the People's Representative Council, which will undoubtedly weigh heavily on the country's counter-terrorism efforts. Many constituents have noted a significant lack of debate between the two main candidates—incumbent President Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto—regarding counter-terrorism strategies. Meanwhile, both candidates have made significant efforts to appeal to conservative Muslim groups across the country. Widodo has selected a prominent religious leader as his vice president, and Subianto has attempted to make himself appear to be a more pious Muslim than his reputation indicates ([Jakarta Post](#), August 9). Less conservative voices within the country, as well as international observers, fear religious intolerance and Islamic conservatism will continue to rise, creating an even more fertile ground

for the various jihadist groups operating throughout the country.

Regardless of who wins the election, the president will almost certainly be faced with the challenge of intra-party bargaining within the People's Representative Council to address the persistent threat of terrorism. The terrorist threat in Indonesia was brought to the fore in 2017 and again in 2018 after bombings in Jakarta and Surabaya, respectively, and although the threat has mostly receded from mainstream media, militant groups continue to operate and recruit throughout the country.

Indonesian security forces have managed to disrupt a large percentage of terrorist plots and the country has extremely strict anti-terrorism laws. However, Indonesia and the next government is facing a new challenge as there has been a notable trend in which entire families, including women and children, are conspiring to conduct attacks. Most recently, on March 12, a police standoff ended when a woman detonated a suicide bomb outside of her home in Sibolga, North Sumatra Province, killing herself and her two children. The woman was reportedly the wife of Abu Hamzah—a suspected member of the Islamic State-linked group Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD)—who was arrested a day

prior to the bombing ([Straits Times](#), March 13). Indonesian authorities later arrested seven other suspected members, including two women, that are allegedly linked to the bomber. Previous attacks have also highlighted familial links among militants in Indonesia, including the bombing of the Surabaya Center Pentecostal Church.

The involvement of entire families in terrorist groups presents several challenges, not only from a preventative perspective, but also from a post-attack perspective. Indonesian authorities will likely be forced to broaden the scope of their investigations and surveillance efforts to account for the increased involvement of women and children and will likely closely monitor the family members of arrested suspects to prevent would be revenge attacks by children or women, like Abu Hamzah's wife, who have allegedly been trained as suicide bombers. Another significant challenge is the question of what to do with the women and children left behind when the adult male member of the family is arrested or dies during an attack. Given Indonesia's strict anti-terrorism laws and legislation that allows authorities to arrest anyone with suspected links to a banned terrorist organization, such as JAD, it is likely that many family members, regardless of actual involvement, will end up in the country's prison system, which is already overburdened and becoming a hotbed for radicalization. The country's countering violent extremism strategies will need to be adjusted to account for this growing trend, focusing not only on military-age males or those currently in prison, but instead starting earlier, with a focus on entire family units as well as family members left behind. The results of the upcoming election will undoubtedly have an effect on anti-terrorism legislation as well as the overall political and religious climate.

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## **MOZAMBIQUE: ANSAR AL-SUNNA ATTACK ON FOREIGN WORKERS RAISES CONCERNS OF GROWING INSURGENCY**

*Brian M. Perkins*

The little-known but ongoing insurgency in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province shows no signs of abating after intensifying nearly 17 months ago. The group responsible, Ansar al-Sunna, has conducted countless attacks on civilian villagers and security forces throughout Cabo Delgado in the past year ([Terrorism Monitor](#), June 14, 2018). The province, despite being one of the poorest in the country, is quickly becoming one of the most important regions for the Mozambican economy due to the discovery of significant oil reserves. Projects to tap those reserves are set to increase significantly in the coming months.

Ansar al-Sunna has perplexed international analysts as well as the Mozambican government and security forces due to its extreme violence and the lack of public claims for its operations. Local authorities have made contradictory statements regarding the nature of the group, with some officials referring to the attackers as mere criminals and others referring to them as jihadists ([Club of Mozambique](#), April 25, 2018). Despite the lack of adequate reporting in the region and the lack of public claims or propaganda, it is likely that the group is an amalgamation of local smugglers and individuals radicalized both locally and through networks in Tanzania.

The majority of the group's attacks have included nighttime raids of villages—where the group has razed homes and beheaded villagers—and unsophisticated ambushes on unsuspecting security forces. The death toll over the past year is estimated to have reached well into the hundreds and recent attacks might indicate the beginning of a worrisome new trend. Ansar al-Sunna conducted two rare daylight attacks and its first on foreign workers in February. The first attack targeted a convoy of workers from U.S.-based Anadarko Petroleum just miles from the company's facility on the Afungi Peninsula, and six workers were injured. The second attack targeted the Portuguese construction firm, Gabriel Couto, resulting in the beheading of one employee ([Club of Mozambique](#), February 23).

The group's ascendance has directly coincided with increasing oil exploration. The shift of targets from

Mozambican villagers and security forces to foreign workers, meanwhile, took place shortly after foreign firms began establishing a more significant presence in the region, and just ahead of Anadarko's timeline to make its final decision on its investment on a project to build an onshore LNG processing facility in Cabo Delgado. The Mozambican government has promised to boost security in the region to ensure oil projects remain on schedule, but security forces have already been accused of serious human rights abuses against villagers. An overly heavy-handed approach toward civilians may risk further resistance against the government.

As Mozambique seeks to ramp up foreign investment and oil projects in the region, there is a risk that if not contained quickly, the Ansar al-Sunna insurgency could quickly grow to resemble that of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta. This armed militant group wreaked havoc on the government and oil industry in Nigeria. While the insurgency is young, the Mozambican government should take stock of local grievances against the state and work to obtain buy-in from locals through increased involvement in oil projects and much-needed development projects.

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## Peace Talks with Afghan Taliban and its Implications for Pakistan

*Farhan Zahid*

Negotiations leading toward a peaceful solution for a longstanding politically violent conflict is generally the desire of neighboring nations. In the recent past, several terrorist campaigns have ended after rounds of talks resulting in peaceful solutions in countries such as Algeria, Ireland, Colombia, Peru and others. However, peace talks resulting in lasting negotiated settlements are particularly elusive with Islamist terrorist groups. Islamist terrorist groups are typically absolutist and Manichean in their approach and mostly reluctant to hold peace talks with the states through mediators and at times only do that under conditions suitable to their ideological causes or when facing imminent military defeat.

In the case of the Afghan Taliban, the situation is much more complex. There have been rounds of peace talks with the group over the last 15 years, yielding more or less no results. Long campaigns of political violence detrimentally affect countries in close proximity and such is the case for Afghanistan's eastern neighbor, Pakistan. Whether peace is attained in Afghanistan or not, the results will likely have serious implications for Pakistan.

### Current State of Affairs

Peace talks appear to be faltering and there is no military solution in sight. There are 14,000 U.S. troops (down from 100,000 in 2014) plus an additional 8,000 NATO troops still in Afghanistan. U.S. fatalities stand at around 2,500 with 20,000 injuries during the last 17 years of war, and the cost of war in Afghanistan is estimated to be \$1 trillion ([Al-Jazeera, February 14](#)). Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) still appear to be unprepared, ill-trained, and unlikely to defeat the Islamist insurgents in the near future. In 2018, Afghanistan experienced the highest number of casualties in a single year since 2009 ([UNAMA, February 24](#)).

The current state of affairs in Afghanistan does not present a rosy picture. The growing Taliban violence has resulted in massive ANSF casualties and the Taliban controls more territory than at any time since 2001, despite

Afghan Taliban-U.S. peace talks recently held in Doha, Qatar. President Donald Trump's December 2018 announcement of his desire to withdraw troops indicates a major upcoming change in U.S. foreign policy. For some time, it seemed that peace talks were becoming more viable as enthusiastic efforts were made by Zalmay Khalilzad, a seasoned American diplomat and expert negotiator of Afghan descent. But as of March, no concrete conclusion could be drawn.

### **Implications for Pakistan**

Several possible scenarios could be analyzed amid recent peace talks in Afghanistan. Each has significant implications for Pakistan, some positive and some negative.

Despite significant challenges ahead, there is a possibility that peace could be achieved after successful rounds of talks with the Afghan Taliban, resulting in the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan in 2020.

A strong possibility connected to this scenario is the relieving of pressure U.S. forces (through drone strikes and Special Operations) have placed on anti-Pakistan terrorist groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State-Khorasan—who are hiding in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan. A number of TTP commanders such as Mullah Fazalullah and others have been killed by U.S. strikes and other operations and, similarly, IS-K's first four Emirs were killed by U.S. forces based in Afghanistan ([Dawn](#), June 23, 2018; [NATO](#), April 15, 2018).

The withdrawal could easily result in the Afghan Taliban, or significant factions of it, breaching the agreement and launching a campaign against the new Afghan regime—potentially causing another collapse of the government. Such a scenario would likely lead to the outbreak of civil war, and chaos reminiscent of what happened in 1990 after the withdrawal of Soviet troops following the Geneva accord signed in 1989. For Pakistan, despite its alleged ties to the Afghan Taliban, this would be a worst-case scenario as it would likely spark an increase of violence in neighboring provinces of Pakistan, the exodus of refugees into Pakistan, massacres, human and women rights violations, all while bolstering al-Qaeda and other foreign Islamist terrorists. It is not unreasonable to consider a scenario in which Afghanistan returns to being a base of operations for international terrorism,

including anti-Pakistan groups, as it was before the U.S. invasion in October 2001.

In a less likely scenario, Khalilzad succeeds and there is a peaceful settlement in Afghanistan, the reintegration of the Afghan Taliban into wider society, elections, and a new government, resulting in a cessation of violence and the end of safe havens for foreign terrorist groups in Afghanistan. This is a situation that policymakers in Pakistan would love to capitalize on in order to strengthen its own dilapidated economy and rebuild peace.

The chances of the conflict status quo continuing in Afghanistan are likely and that does not suit neighboring Pakistan's new ambitions. If fighting continues and Afghan Taliban numbers keep rising (currently estimated to be around 50-60,000), the rural areas would eventually fall to Taliban control, leaving behind only urban centers in the Afghan government's hands. This situation would further weaken the Afghan government and facilitate the rise of militias in every corner of Afghanistan, a situation highly unfavorable for Pakistan.

Another issue apart from these scenarios is that the success or perceived success of the Afghan Taliban would create a sense of victory among Pakistani Islamist groups, which would be a morale-boost for Islamist terrorist groups operating in Pakistan. Most of the Pakistani Islamist terrorist groups consider the Afghan Taliban to be a role model regime and would likely adopt similar tactics in the event of the Taliban's success.

### **Conclusion**

The Afghan Taliban are Islamist by virtue of their adherence to the ultra-orthodox Deobandi sect of Islam and are known for their stubborn and inflexible attitudes. They also remain close to al-Qaeda and have never condemned its violence. Hence, it would be much harder for mediators to adjust to their hardline approaches and somehow manage to drive them towards a fulsome, peaceful solution.

In its current state of economic turmoil, Pakistan would benefit from the foreign investments that peace in Afghanistan would encourage. An unstable Afghanistan would further damage Pakistan's reputation. This is perhaps one reason Pakistani policymakers are surprisingly keen to play their part in bringing the Afghan Taliban to peace talks and finding a possible solution for ending this long war. Pakistan needs to play its role for its own sake and efforts must continue for a negotiated settle-

ment in Afghanistan, though that is not in sight at the moment.

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## Continued Fighting Between Islamic State and AQAP Complicates Security in al-Bayda

*Brian M. Perkins*

The United States has declared the fall of the Islamic State's (IS) physical caliphate in Syria, but the group has found fertile ground outside of Syria and Iraq. The group has fared particularly well in some locations and struggled to expand in others, but even in some of the locations that have proved difficult for expansion, the group has managed to persist. This has notably been the case in Yemen, where the group initially burst onto the jihadist scene, before eventually fizzling out to a core group based in Yemen's al-Bayda governorate.

While the IS branch in Yemen (IS-Y) has faced significant challenges in maintaining expansive operations across the country, it has proved rather resilient in al-Bayda and continues to pose a threat to the country's internal security. IS' persistence creates a complicated and challenging dynamic in Yemen. First, and most obviously, its mere existence presents another jihadist group for local and international actors to confront. Second, its operations have already, and will likely continue to, have a multifaceted effect on al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

The war in Yemen initially proved to be a boon for AQAP as the group's ranks swelled and its territorial control expanded, but the past two years have seen significant territorial reversals. One of the most active AQAP groups is currently based in al-Bayda, the same area as the most active group of IS-Y ([Terrorism Monitor](#), September 21, 2018). It is no coincidence that the two have found freedom of movement in al-Bayda, as the governorate has historically been a base of operations for AQAP. The area is currently one of the less active fronts between the Houthis and anti-Houthi forces and is not as closely controlled by UAE-backed security forces.

Over the past year, IS-Y and AQAP's operations have mostly consisted of tit-for-tat attacks against one another in the Qayfa region of al-Bayda. The focus of the two group's propaganda output has similarly followed this trend, with each group claiming successful attacks

against the other and trying to seize the moral high ground in the eyes of locals. Meanwhile, attacks on Houthi forces and civilian targets have waned as the two have become embroiled in their own fight.

On the surface, it is easy for analysts to view a scenario in which two jihadist groups are focused primarily on defeating one another as a positive, but the situation on the ground and the long-term implications are becoming far more nuanced as the fight continues. At present, it appears unlikely that either group will defeat the other any time soon, but what is clear is that the skirmishes between the two have disrupted local lives and are forcing some to choose between the two. Both groups have ramped up recruitment efforts and propaganda over the past year. Most notably, IS-Y released a nearly 30-minute video on April 1 calling for Muslims to join the group and “disturb the lives of disbelievers” ([Jihadology](#), April 1). Meanwhile, local groups aligned with the tribes in Qayfa have allegedly aligned with AQAP to hunt down and confront IS-Y fighters and leaders after the group destroyed a local well and other agricultural resources ([Jihadology](#), March 28).

The attack on tribal resources is a significant development as IS-Y’s lack of sensitivity to local contexts, including its often-brutal tactics, are partially to blame for its relative dissolution in other areas of Yemen. If the group continues such attacks, it might quickly find itself more at odds with locals and an AQAP increasingly bolstered by local partners. This scenario would not necessarily result in the defeat of the group in al-Bayda, but instead could push the group to other corners of Yemen, once again allowing AQAP to be the preeminent group there and facilitating its return to typical targeting patterns and activities. Meanwhile, IS-Y would continue to pose a threat to Yemen’s internal security.

While it is positive that the two sides are not striking government or civilian targets as frequently as in the past, neither side is likely to defeat one another in the near to medium term. In fact, the two groups have seemingly not been significantly degraded in this area and could both see short- or longer-term gains as they compete for local support or acquiescence. Conversely, the decline of one group would likely mean the strengthening of the other. It is unclear if IS-Y’s call for recruits to travel to Yemen will be successful, but it does indicate it is actively seeking to not only draw in locals but is also attempting to appeal more broadly to those outside of Yemen, a tactic less commonly employed by

AQAP. IS-Y’s targeting of vital tribal resources has already led some groups closer to AQAP. While many tribes will only align with the terrorist group against a common enemy, time spent fighting for a common goal often results in some individuals more formally joining AQAP or the formation of a deeper understanding between formal AQAP members and locals.

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# The Shifting Strategic Context in Libya and the 'Haftar Dilemma'

*Dario Cristiani*

## Introduction

On January 13, the Libyan National Army (LNA), led by General Khalifa Haftar, made its way through southern Libya, entering Sabha and consolidating its position in the Fezzan region. As a result, Haftar also seized control of Libya's biggest oil field, Sharara. Now controlling the fields and terminals of the entire Sirte Basin, the so-called Libyan oil crescent, Haftar's grip on Sharara has further boosted his power. In late February, the Head of the Presidential Council of the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), Fayez al-Sarraj, met with Haftar in the UAE—under the auspices of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and Head of Mission of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Ghassan Salamé—both agreeing on the necessity to end the transition through general elections, safeguarding stability, and unifying the country's institutions ([Jeune Afrique](#), February 28). In mid-March, Salamé announced the UN-backed National Conference would take place in the city of Ghadames on April 14-16 ([The Libya Observer](#), April 2). This conference will take place in a shifting political environment, as these developments have changed the strategic context in Libya. Haftar's position has visibly strengthened, and the launch of a military offensive in western Libya on the night of April 3 is a result of this shift. On April 4, LNA spokesperson General Ahmed al-Mesmari announced that LNA forces entered the city of Gharyan and were "happily welcomed by the people" ([Twitter.com/lnaspox](#), April 4). A few hours before, Masmari announced that the LNA was ready to start a military offensive to "cleanse the west" eliminating "terrorists and mercenaries" ([Jeune Afrique](#), April 4). Local sources denied some of these accounts, stating that LNA forces were a few kilometers away but then, speaking to Reuters, the commander in charge of the LNA operation, Abdelsalam al-Hassi, said that LNA troops seized "control of Gharyan" as he was allegedly speaking driving through the town ([Reuters](#), April 4; [Al Ra'ed Media Network](#), April 4). This military operation is a further bid from Haftar to have his greater political

centrality and his dominance over Libya formally recognized.

However, this dynamic will not be smooth and will trigger resistance from several actors across Libya, deepening further conflict and volatility. Astonishingly, this military escalation started as the Secretary General of the UN, António Guterres, is in Libya. Guterres has expressed his concern by the military movement taking place in Libya, highlighting the increasing risks of confrontation while reiterating the UN position that "there is no military solution" to the Libyan conflict ([Twitter.com/antonioGuterres](#), April 4). In the wake of these developments, Al-Sarraj's remarks at the Arab League Summit held in Tunis are telling. On March 31, 2019, the Head of the Presidential Council said that his government will always work for a peaceful settlement in Libya and "won't allow the return of a totalitarian or military rule in the country" ([The Libya Observer](#), March 31).

## Haftar's Southern Bid

Haftar's consolidation in the south has changed the Libyan strategic environment and will bear a number of consequences for the entire political landscape and the balance of power in the Tripolitania region. Haftar's bid to strengthen his position in the south is not new. Already in 2017, it was clear that Haftar perceived the consolidation of his presence in the south as an essential condition to reach Tripoli. The Brak al-Shatti massacre of May 2017 halted this dynamic, representing a severe setback and forcing the LNA troops to withdraw to the east. This goal was not abandoned, but merely postponed. Over the past two years, the security situation in the south did not improve, and the GNA did very little to strengthen its position there. The return of Haftar in the south was much more successful this time as the military strategy was supported by the local population. The LNA provided various services and goods to the local population, who, feeling abandoned by the GNA, decided to side with Haftar.

The apparent military weakness and lack of action by the GNA was not the only variable in making Haftar's moves possible. The significant external support he continues to enjoy was also a major factor. In the Libyan battlefield, a remarkable rhetorical contradiction exists between the narratives and the actions of the plethora of sub-state actors involved in the conflict(s) across the country. While everyone rejects foreign influence on paper, routinely accusing enemies of representing outside

interests, in reality, access to external financial and military support remains a crucial element for all the Libyan actors. In several cases, external support remains an intervening factor in determining a shift in political and military balances.

Haftar's recent gains in the south are no exception, as they were the consequence of robust support from some of his historical supporters—the UAE, France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Russia. For instance, Haftar's advance was facilitated by French military operations targeting Tebu forces and Chadian rebels located in southern Libya ([Alwihda Info](#), February 3; [Orient XXI](#), March 13). To add to this picture, external countries such as Italy and Algeria were wary of, or at least, at odds with Haftar having moderated their positions. Steady military support and a more favorable diplomatic contest strengthened the general's confidence, facilitating his takeover in the south.

### **The Haftar Dilemma and the (Almost) Inevitable Outcome: More Conflict**

The southern consolidation, consistent support from his traditional allies, and increasing acceptance of his centrality by some of his former external foes should be translated into a political formula that would recognize these gains. However—and this is one of the many paradoxes of the Libyan strategic context of the past years—Haftar's benefits have not always translated into greater political recognition and tangible influence. In some cases, his ambitions have been frustrated. Not even the complete control over the so-called oil crescent—the crucial Sirte basin—gave him the capacity to dominate the system. To do so, Haftar needs to strengthen his presence in Tripoli and the surrounding areas, which will prove to be particularly difficult. In the current Libyan balance of power, any attempt to formally recognize Haftar's greater centrality would trigger resistance from a widespread and diversified coalition of actors, mostly based in the west of the country. Their interests might not necessarily converge—they are often strategically divergent—but all of them are, for one reason or another, wary of Haftar potentially dominating the system. This recognition would inevitably lead to an exacerbation of the conflict.

However, it is likely that the same outcome would occur if Haftar's centrality is not recognized through a formal political agreement. In this case, it would be Haftar

pushing a full-fledged military solution in order to have this centrality finally recognized in Tripoli. Against this backdrop, it is important to highlight a crucial element—a military operation led by Haftar in western Libya neither means that his LNA would enter Tripoli smoothly and quickly, nor does it imply that the LNA has the resources and capacity to actually carry out such an operation to the scale needed to achieve quick success. There are several diplomatic, logistic, and military impediments to an army takeover of western Libya. The events of the past few years have shown that the capabilities of the LNA's military force must always be put in context. Also, in those areas where the LNA enjoyed an unmatched dominance, it still needed years to eradicate local enemies, for instance in Benghazi and Derna. LNA military capacities remain significantly dependent on external support, as demonstrated on several occasions, for example when the LNA temporarily lost control of oil terminals in the Sirte Basin.

In western Libya, where LNA troops have an even weaker territorial knowledge, control of supply lines, and local proxies, a military offensive without massive external support would be challenging. Yet, this future military support would be politically unfeasible. In the east and the south, Haftar could claim that he was going after Islamists, terrorists, and mercenaries. In the West, despite LNA sources using the same rhetoric to justify their actions in Gharyan, a military operation would inevitably be perceived as being a direct action against the GNA and al-Sarraj. Despite his apparent weakness, al-Sarraj also remains formally supported by those same external actors who are backing Haftar. As such, external military support for Haftar, while it is unlikely to cease in general, cannot be particularly significant or too visible in this specific context, unless the al-Sarraj government collapses on its own and groups perceived as a more extensive regional threat—for instance, the Islamic State (IS) or al-Qaeda elements—boost their presence in western Libya. That being said, Haftar's strengthening position also gives him greater leverage with his external partners, and this might reduce their capacity of influencing his choices.

For Haftar, moving into western Libya would inevitably mean loosening its grasp on the east and the south as the LNA might not have the human and logistical resources to guarantee the same levels of control. This would be a typical case of overstretching and will likely push some of the forces defeated or marginalized in the



east and the south to reorganize, particularly if the situation in the west deteriorates. They could result in attacks on LNA troops in the south and the east, opening new fronts, thus helping anti-Haftar groups in the west, who could later claim territorial control, material benefits, and political recognition if their role proved to be essential in undermining Haftar's ambitions.

### **The Haftar Temptation and the Shifting Alliances in the West**

The military threat remains a negotiating card for Haftar, and the Gharyan attack must be seen in this context. Observing his rise since 2014, he has often been able to go beyond what many observers and Libyans believed he could achieve. From this perspective, while objective conditions make a full military operation in western Libya complicated, this cannot be entirely excluded and the events in Gharyan suggest that this process is already well in the making. Haftar wants to show that, despite the obvious impediments, he still has the capacity of launching a military operation. The timing, from this point of view, is very relevant. He does so as the National Conference is approaching. This should intimidate internal enemies and external powers and make all these actors more willing to recognize Haftar's dominance formally.

Haftar's strengthening position in the south and the looming threat of a military operation in the west could trigger a further development—a potential shift in alliances in Tripoli and in the broader Tripolitania region. Against this backdrop, Haftar can represent a tempting option for a number of groups, either for those willing to challenge the current order in Tripoli and surrounding areas or those who want to consolidate power and control, and preserve their material and financial interests, perceiving an alignment with Haftar as the best way to do so. As for the latter, this might be the case for groups such as the Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade (TRB) of Haitem al-Tajouri (See [MLM](#), December 10, 2018). In December 2018, the major militias operating in Tripoli—the TRB, the Nawasi Brigade (Qaddur family), the Rada-Special Deterrence Forces (led by Abdel Rauf Kara) and the Abu Salim Central Security (led by Abdul-Ghani 'Ghneiwa' Al-Kikli) merged into a unitary structure denominated by Tripoli Protection Forces (TPF) ([Libya Herald](#), December 18, 2018). However, this merger does not imply that these four groups have also amalgamated their views. More than an alliance, the Tripoli militia bloc

is a coalition of mostly material interests linked to actual territorial control, and their political and ideological views remain different. For instance, unlike the Nawasi and Rada militias, al-Tajouri is not fiercely anti-Haftar. In the past, rumors surfaced of him getting closer to Haftar. Al-Tajouri is also the least ideological, most pragmatic, and business-focused among the Tripoli militia leaders. He has demonstrated his willingness to shift alliances if it serves the consolidation of his interests, as he did when he started supporting al-Sarraj after weeks of hesitation ([Il Foglio {Rome}](#), February 10, 2017). Additionally, he seems to be the closest of Tripoli's militia leaders to the UAE, Haftar's most crucial external sponsor ([Akhbar Libya 24 {Benghazi}](#), October 20, 2018).

The recent rumors concerning talks between Haftar and the Seventh Brigade from Tarhouna points at another possible development ([Middle East Eye](#), March 31). Also known as the Kanyat or the Kani Brigade, led by the al-Kani family, the eldest of the four brothers, Mohammed al-Kani, is the Seventh Brigade's formal leader (see [MLM](#), October 4, 2018). Despite being formally associated with the GNA since 2017, the Seventh Brigade was one of the militias marginalized following the consolidation of Tripoli by four militias over the past two years. Kanyat clashes with TRB and Nawasi forces, justifying its action as being driven by the ambition of freeing Tripoli and its people from gangs looting public money ([Al-Arabiya](#), September 3, 2018).

Against this backdrop, Misratan forces will also play a crucial role. While Misrata, as a town, was a more or less coherent force during the initial outbreak of the Libyan revolution in 2011, over the past years its groups have significantly diversified. Crucial elements of the GNA, such as the Interior Minister Fathi Bashaga and the al-Sarraj's deputy, Ahmed Maitig, are from Misrata. Other Misratan forces, such as those linked to Salah Badi and Khalifa Ghwell, never made a mystery of their aversion for Sarraj, the GNA and the Tripoli militias that lodged them out of the capital but also remain sternly anti-Haftar. As such, an eventual consolidation of Haftar in the west—either through diplomatic means or, less likely, through a direct military engagement—might even trigger unexpected, tactical alliances between a number of very different actors who all fear Haftar's rise for one reason or another.

Against this backdrop, it is important to underline how, in Libya, there is a psychological factor that informs the

views of all the actors involved in the conflict—the fear of structural marginalization. Under the 42-year-long rule of Muammar Qadhafi, many of the groups currently active in Libya were openly marginalized in a system that excluded a significant number of social, political and tribal actors from power and the redistribution of wealth. This factor is fundamental in understanding how the Libyan transition collapsed following the initial optimism triggered by the elections of July 2012. Since Haftar is clearly bidding to be recognized as the ultimate king-maker of Libya—some say “strongman,” some others more bluntly say “dictator”—rival groups fear that an eventual victory by the LNA might translate into further decades of marginalization. From this point of view, this factor can push even bitter enemies to work together since they perceive Haftar’s potential final victory as the ultimate threat.

## Conclusion

Haftar’s consolidation of territory and resources in the south has created the conditions for a shift in the Libyan strategic context. While this consolidation has not translated, at least yet, into a formal recognition of his centrality, it has inevitably given Haftar a greater ability to influence events. This development has reduced the amount of options for a peaceful settlement. Formal, diplomatic recognition of Haftar’s role would trigger the reaction of a broad coalition of actors—from Tripoli’s militias to Misratan groups—that perceive Haftar as an existential threat. Meanwhile, a lack of formal recognition might instead reignite Haftar’s ambitions to conquer Tripoli by force. While the conditions for a military operation in western Libya are objectively complex, the simple threat of force might tempt revisionist actors or groups looking to consolidate their interests to align with Haftar. In either case, the likely outcome is the intensification of the conflict.

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