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ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

## Position Paper

# Security in Libya: Legitimacy of the State and the Rise of Weapons



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There is more to what happened in Libya than disagreement between the regime and political opposition in the areas that experienced political crises and subsequently developed into armed conflict. The peculiarity of the Libyan case is not limited to imbalance between the regime and the opposition, which was mostly formed after the outbreak of the armed conflict. It stems, rather, from the regime's utilisation of social contradictions (tribal and regional) to the extent that its repercussions are undermining the gains achieved by the revolution.

The crisis and the subsequent armed conflict that broke out in most cities and regions of the country are manifested in the form of an eruption of political and security problems. It is important to point out that since the era of tyranny, factors of conflict have regularly changed form and shifted from one place to another as problems had been smouldering beneath the surface and suddenly erupted as soon as restrictions were lifted and freedoms dominated. Ethnic and regional conflicts usually feed on deprivation and suppression, while the collapse of totalitarian rule leaves behind a political and security vacuum. This state of affairs often leads to the emergence of parties that try to fill some of the vacuum and get involved in abuses and consequential clashes. The elements contributing to the current conflict can be summarised as follows:

1. The emergence of tribal and regional prejudices
2. Ideological conflicts
3. The emergence of religious extremism
4. Remnants of the former regime
5. Formation of battalions on regional and tribal bases

### **Differences amidst Political Weakness**

The delay in filling the political vacuum and the failure to setup strong security and political institutions vis-à-vis the intensive proliferation of weapons and the expansion of forming security and military contingents have contributed to the emergence and escalation of differences. There is no indication of how to actually tackle these differences through applicable strategies and plans, which is considered the major failure of the executive office and the transitional government thereafter.

Preliminary information confirms that the elements belonging to security battalions greatly outnumber the elements of both national security and preventive security combined. In fact, the role of the battalions – which is unrecognised by the Department of Interior in the Executive Office – surpasses the activity of official agencies in maintaining security, combating crime and pursuing elements of the previous regime, or what is commonly known as "fifth column", given that the transitional government knows very little about the activities, number and weapons of these battalions. The confusion in the security system erupted when President of the Transitional Council, Mustafa Abdul Jalil, was besieged and attacked at his headquarters where the role of security protection was non-existent. Some officials justified it by claiming it was out of fear that the situation might explode and expected clashes might occur. One of the most serious consequences of failure to integrate armed groups into the new system – whether in new security military institutions or civil institutions (as a prelude to disarmament) – is the possibility that many of them will gather in favour of regional, tribal or ideological slogans with conflicting interests and orientations.

1. Regional and tribal prejudices have emerged clearly since the announcement of liberation. This was apparent in the voluble voices speaking on behalf of their regions and tribes, and the competition of the roles of each region or tribe in the revolution. The situation then evolved into armed conflict and confrontation between the many areas regarding their respective positions (pro or anti) on the regime. It is worth noting that the differences – that evolved into confrontations –

occurred for reasons related to the circumstances of the era after 17th February 2011, but historical differences have been employed to agitate the conflict. It is noted that armed activities increased even after Gaddafi's demise due to tension and rivalry among regions and tribes in a way that may hamper the transition from revolution to state.

Tension concerning this file takes various forms. In the west, armed clashes continued to break out intermittently; and the latest were the violent clashes in Bani Walid, which claimed the lives of six people and left about thirty wounded. A few days before this incident, there had been clashes in Gharyan and Al Asabi'ah, southwest of Tripoli, in which medium- and heavy-impact weapons were used. That was also true for areas like Zuwara, Al Jumayl, Regdalin, Zawiya, Warshefana, Zintan and Mashashiya, where tension is high and mediation efforts hardly contributed to the cessation of hostilities. So far, there are no projects and programs that address the root causes of the conflicts, which implies that the outbreak of conflict is possible and even its expansion is not unlikely. It has already been pointed out that the motives of the conflicts are based on positions (pro or con) on the former regime (which was prominent before Gaddafi's demise) that then developed into regional and tribal conflicts, making differences immensely difficult to contain.

2. Ideological polarization emerged in the early period of liberation and began to stain the transitional period. For example, there is a fierce campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood, nourished by the propaganda of the former regime and has had impact on a certain segment of society to the extent that being singled out as belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood is enough to deny an individual the right to occupy an official post. Meanwhile, warning people against secularists and liberalists has become part of a crossfire fuelled by calls for the adoption of Sharia law and incitement against whoever rejects it. It should be noted that the conflict in the ranks of the armed battalions has drifted towards ideological polarization between Islamist and liberalist trends, and even among the various Islamist trends, namely the Muslim Brotherhood and opposing Islamist groups.
3. After liberation, it became clear that the power struggle would take on the dimension of religious extremism. Many armed groups have been established on the basis of religious Jihadist Salafism, as many areas east of the country have witnessed incidents of bombings and excavation of what had been turned into shrines of those known as "saints" from whom people seek blessing. The incidents caused a huge row among the Sufi orders. Many called for the need to hold arms to protect graves and tombs in response to the extremists; and publications appeared in public places, markets, and on walls calling for the closing of barber shops, wedding halls and shops selling tobacco, and implied the threat of using force "to remove those evils."
4. Those involved with the former regime are also a factor that provokes conflicts as they highlight differences and encourage some of the armed groups to sow chaos for the stability of the situation will accelerate their exposure and bring them to justice. This includes anyone involved with the former regime through crimes of murder, torture and confiscation of funds and theft of public capital. Revolution forces fear that the integration of these elements into the new system is risky and will cause discontent among the grassroots, but that rejecting them will create a factor of disturbance and provide room for pockets of resistance against the revolution. However, the accusation of complicity with the former regime is also used by rival forces against one another for elimination especially as during Gaddafi's reign, employment in Libya was concentrated in the public sector. Despite the intensity of this conflict, the new leaders cannot handle this legacy, and official statements and practices concerning it are ambiguous at times and contradictory at others.
5. The formation of military groups on the basis of regions for purposes imposed by the war on the former regime (battalions of Misrata, Zintan, Jadu, Yafran, Nalut,

Gharyan, Zawiya, Sabratha, Tripoli, Tajura, and other areas in the east) contributed to obstructing the process of integration. Furthermore, with the duration of the stalemate, sensitivities increased among these groups especially at points of friction in the capital or its outskirts, and also during the liberation of Bani Walid, Sirte, Sabha, Ubari, and other southern cities. Competition among rival regional formations has escalated since the liberation of Tripoli to the point that the transitional government has become incapable of taking action with respect to plans of disarmament and integration of the rebels. The main aspects of this competition, which jeopardised integration programmes, are that lists of names of rebel groups presented to the transitional government reflect the degree of rivalry and tension. This is also the case in the western mountain regions which witness serious tensions and much of the estrangement between those who started revolution in its early days and those who joined after the fall of the regime as well as between the Arab and Berber rebels.

## Brotherhood of Arms

The challenge posed by the former regime during the war contributed to the convergence of rebel battalions throughout Libya, and the liberation phase was met with high levels of cooperation, support and altruism. Soon after the liberation, accusations were exchanged among the most prominent leaders of the military contingents in the east and the west over their respective roles in the war and the failure of each party towards the other.

The complexity of security conditions and the outbreak of armed clashes during confrontation with the former regime constituted an element of proximity and cooperation during the war, but the formation of military and security on a regional basis will probably be the biggest obstacle to the establishment of a unified national army. It is likely that regional loyalties will continue as a means to achieve a balance in order to control the situation and establish security.

Furthermore, cooperation after liberation has been limited to army contingents belonging to the adjacent areas and security coordination circles obsessed with tracking down those who supported the regime in the war, as well as providing logistical support at times of needs.

## Possible Scenarios

Given the current circumstances portrayed in the inability of both the council and government to accelerate the process of democratisation, and in the lack of mechanisms for integrating rebel brigades, the possibility of internal conflict is likely. In light of such failure, regional contradictions and the clashes resulting thereof are likely to impose a scenario where tribal blocs may become more like alliances based on blood ties and kinship (Khout al-Jad: a term given to tribes linked by bonds of kinship that are not strong but have ancient roots, such as the relationship between the Qadhadhfa, Warfalla and Zintan tribes), which will be a relative guarantor of the stability of the situation. Perhaps greater confrontations may occur if things go bad between two areas belonging to two different blocs. The problem with this scenario is that it will impose a political map that will have nothing to do with the aspirations of the revolution, and would prevent executive authority from controlling the situation, thus locking it up in narrow confinements.

This scenario is consolidated by the fact that many of the battalions maintain an intransigent position towards the demands of the transitional government to dissolve themselves and integrate with the Ministry of Interior or Defence, and continue to occupy government buildings, farms, palaces and resorts owned by members of the former regime in Tripoli and other cities. They also continue to impose their agenda on many of the security and even administrative issues and commit offences. All of this may lead to a potential confrontation with government forces.

Meanwhile, the government's inability to impose security prompts security battalions to exercise one of the functions of the Ministry of Interior and its subsidiary bodies, namely hunting down and prosecuting those who collaborated with the former regime, those who are believed to be a fifth column, or even rebels that committed offences. This has aggravated sensitivities among armed groups and led to clashes. For instance, arresting a person who had committed a crime during the Gaddafi era makes his affiliation with a tribe or region a blatant attack on that tribe or region. It is likely that things may deteriorate because of the confusion in the government, especially since the assault on the Transitional Council, the confrontations that took place in Bani Walid, and the tension that has prevailed in some of Tripoli's districts which is believed to be orchestrated by elements opposing the 17th February revolution. However, the battalions remain in disagreement over their classification of offenders, and the way to deal with them. This is expected to be one of the reasons for the conflict to continue between battalions.

The second scenario involves speeding up the rebuilding of the Libyan army and security forces, not only by making use of the former units of the two institutions – especially those that have not stained their hands with people's blood – but also by including new elements, as well as calling upon members of rebel battalions to join. This scenario assumes a gradual integration of the rebels for the growth of state institutions, while outlaw rebel battalions decrease in number simultaneously as the state takes the upper hand. However, such an approach cannot yield fruit unless the government and the National Transitional Council become more representative of the Libyan public and their ambition.

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