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# INSECURITY AND GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN SOUTHERN LIBYA

Frederic Wehrey

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## About the Author

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## Summary

Southern Libya remains a region of endemic instability wracked by communal conflict, a shortage of basic services, rampant smuggling, and fragmented or collapsed institutions. The region has long existed on the periphery of Libya's politics and international concerns—but that must change. Increasingly, the vacuum of governance in the south has drawn in political actors from northern Libya and outside states. Extremists seeking refuge in the south and migrants being smuggled through the region directly impact the security of Libya, neighboring states like Tunisia, and Europe.

### Sources of Insecurity in the South

- The main driver of insecurity is the collapse of already fragile institutions and social pacts after the 2011 revolution and, more importantly, the inequitable distribution of economic resources.
- The outbreak of fighting among Arab, Tabu, and Tuareg tribes across the south can be largely attributed to competition for fixed economic streams derived from smuggling routes and access to oil fields.
- Interference by northern political actors is a further irritant: the payment and arming of young men from the south by warring factions aligned with loose coalitions has prolonged and intensified local conflicts.
- Extremism remains a challenge in the south but should not be overblown. Terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the so-called Islamic State have not found strong purchase in southern towns but have exploited the lack of southern governance for logistics and training.

### Recommendations for Libyan Authorities and the International Community

- **Implement immediate-impact projects to demonstrate the reach and legitimacy of Libya's government.** A key imperative is the provision of basic services such as electricity, medical care, and cash reserves.
- **Support civil society initiatives in the south related to the security sector, especially cross-tribal, cross-communal endeavors.** Many of these have already had a beneficial impact on security, whether through cross-communal dialogue, support to victims of war, children's education, or technical training.

- **Restart government salaries in the south, resolve the national identification quandary, and empower municipal budgets as part of a broader security-sector payroll reform effort.** Libya's government should prioritize distributing salaries to security actors via municipal authorities.
- **Begin a series of national dialogues with security actors from across the country on a road map for reconstituting the security sector.** Give special consideration to a locally constituted force that harnesses the strength of existing municipal and provincial security actors while also tethering them to a national command.

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## Introduction

Libya's southern region has long been regarded as a zone of endemic insecurity, isolated and disconnected from the political affairs of the north. Increasingly, though, the region's afflictions have rippled across the country, out to Libya's northern neighbors, like Tunisia, and to the shores of southern Europe. Southern Libya is becoming a new theater for national conflict between forces allied with Khalifa Hifter and armed groups supported by the coastal city of Misrata and factions in the west. Moreover, the region is a major hub for transnational migrant smuggling networks moving northward to Europe: any attempt by European powers to stop the migrant crisis at Libya's shores will fail unless southern security and governance issues are addressed. Finally, extremists from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the self-proclaimed Islamic State have exploited the growing lawlessness to develop their logistics and create safe havens, though their actual penetration into southern society is more limited than commonly assumed.

Since the 2011 revolution over Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi, security issues that are present elsewhere in the country have afflicted the south, compounding problems unique to the region. Meager sources of local revenue along with institutional weakness, particularly in the security sector and in municipal governance, are among the south's most pressing challenges. Added to this are conflicts over identity, authenticity, and citizenship, which include the legacy of the late dictator's divide-and-rule policies and his preferential recruitment from certain tribal constituencies into his security brigades. Communal and ethnic-based competition over oil fields, smuggling routes, and borders has been compounded by national political conflict and meddling by both Libyan actors from outside the south and transnational actors outside Libya.

The following discusses the main drivers of insecurity in the south, key security actors—both informal and formal—in specific locales, and recommendations for the Libyan government and the international community.

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## Contested Identities: The Tabu and the Tuareg

Resentment over unequal access to citizenship rights is one of the most significant pressure points contributing to insecurity in the south. Much of this stems from Muammar Qaddafi's cynical manipulation of citizenship to secure the loyalty of tribal constituents in the south. More broadly, it stems from the

systematic marginalization of two major non-Arab communities in the south, the Tabu and the Tuareg, to whom the Libyan dictator promised full citizenship rights in return for service in his security forces, particularly in the case of the Tuareg. These promises never materialized, and combined with economic competition and institutional collapse, their legacy has proved to be a major driver of conflict in the post-2011 era.

### **The Tabu**

The Tabu are a dark-skinned African people who dwell in the Tibisti Mountains of northern Chad, southeastern Libya, and parts of Niger and Sudan. Historically, they have been a clan-based society of camel herders, speaking a language of Nilo-Saharan origin. In Libya, they have always been a people apart. They suffered under the Libyan monarchy, even though King Idris—whom Qaddafi overthrew in 1969—counted them among his bodyguards. New citizenship laws were established under the monarchy that required written family records. Yet the Tabu have an oral culture, being seminomadic and mostly illiterate.<sup>1</sup>

Their status under Qaddafi got worse. His Arabization project excluded them. He used them as pawns in his dispute with Chad over a piece of uranium-rich land called the Aouzou Strip, which includes the Tibisti Mountains. During Libya's occupation of Aouzou, he offered citizenship to thousands of Tabu while enlisting others in his war with Chad. Then, after his defeat, when the International Court of Justice awarded the Aouzou Strip to Chad in 1994, he abandoned the Tabu. He revoked their citizenship, denying them access to jobs and travel, and failed to invest in local education and medical care.<sup>2</sup>

Life took on an increasingly hellish quality for the Tabu. Nowhere was this more evident than in the southeastern oasis town of Kufra, where the Tabu have lived for hundreds of years. By this point, they lived as a stateless people in tin-roofed cardboard shacks, with no running water or electricity. All the while, the Tabu's neighbors in Kufra, the Arab Zway tribe, lived in villas and drove Mercedes trucks, enjoying Qaddafi's favors. The Zway also controlled the local oil fields and smuggling routes: gasoline and subsidized goods like semolina, sugar, and cooking oil moved south, while African migrants moved north.<sup>3</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the Tabu were among the first to join the 2011 uprising. Their opposition leaders returned to Libya from exile in Norway. Qaddafi dispatched emissaries to woo them with cash, weapons, and, again, offers of citizenship, but these overtures failed. Tabu defectors from the army joined with Zway counterparts, putting aside their mutual enmity for the moment. The nearby Sudanese government supplied them with arms and even sent troops, payback for the then Libyan ruler's support for the Darfurian rebel group, the Justice and Equality Movement. After Kufra fell, the Tabu moved north and west, to guard the southern frontiers. At the war's end, they controlled a vast

swath of border crossings, oil fields, water reserves, and armories. And for a brief period, they had hope.<sup>4</sup>

“Everything was like a paradise then, no Tabu, no Zway,” a Tabu fighter-turned-activist said in a February 2016 interview. The Tabu joined with other ethnic and linguistic minorities across the country in demanding cultural rights and political representation. But, he added, “I knew we would face problems. Everybody was talking about Tabu power.”<sup>5</sup>

The new transitional government recognized Tabu control of the Chadian and Sudanese borders through the Tabu militia commander and longtime opposition leader, Isa Abd al-Majid Mansur. He and other Tabu grew rich on smuggling profits—and bolder in their political demands. The Tripoli authorities proved unwilling to address these grievances. They seemed especially stubborn on citizenship. “The government doesn’t want to open that door,” the Tabu activist said.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the 2012 election, the Zway electoral administrators working with the National Transitional Council de-registered a sizable number of Tabu voters on the grounds of fraudulent citizenship. While there was undoubtedly some basis for this in some cases, it enraged the Tabu. The country’s new authorities, they believed, clung fast to the old prejudices of the Qaddafi regime.

It was in Kufra that the tensions first boiled over in February 2012. The Zway had lost their share of smuggling operations and other sources of income and wanted these assets back. They had set up their own checkpoint south of the city, just meters from a Tabu one. Then a Tabu man killed a Zway shopkeeper. Zway militias shelled the Tabu slums with mortars and rockets. A mixed neighborhood of Swedish-built apartments called Swaydiya separated the two sides. Civilians died in the reckless crossfire.<sup>7</sup>

In what would become a recurring pattern, the Tripoli government sent the Benghazi-based Libya Shield militias to stop the fighting. They failed, siding with the Zway and shelling Tabu neighborhoods. Things settled down when another Benghazi-based militia led by a more impartial commander took over from the Libya Shield. Delegations of tribal elders from across the country converged on the stricken city to hammer out a peace deal in July 2012, leaving the Zway in control. Yet most of Kufra’s institutions, like schools and banks, remain segregated to this day.<sup>8</sup> The town has seen continued outbreaks of violence, cross-border incursions from Sudan, and the rise of Salafi militias dominated by the Zway.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, the rise of Tabu power following the 2011 revolution threatened communal relations with the Tuareg to the west.

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**After the uprising, the Tabu grew rich on smuggling profits—and bolder in their political demands. The Tripoli authorities proved unwilling to address these grievances.**

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### The Tuareg

The Tuareg are a historically nomadic, pastoralist society stretching across the Sahara and the Sahel in southern Libya and parts of Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. They speak a dialect of Amazigh (or Berber) known as Tamasheq. Starting in the 1970s with the oil boom, a younger generation of Tuareg shifted to a transnational remittance economy of migrant labor and smuggling.<sup>10</sup> For many from drought-afflicted Niger and Mali, oil-rich Libya seemed a paradise, and Qaddafi encouraged them to come north for work. Once they arrived, however, he recruited many into a pan-Saharan military force called the Islamic Legion, meant to project his power in Africa and the Levant.

Alongside Bangladeshis, Eritreans, Mauritians, and Sudanese, the Tuareg fought in Chad and Lebanon during the 1980s. “We were cheap soldiers,” one of these veterans told the author.<sup>11</sup> Some had joined expecting that Qaddafi would help empower them back home in Mali and Niger. The Libyan dictator certainly encouraged this belief, hosting Tuareg insurgents in Libya for so-called congress meetings and, in 1980, setting up a Popular Front for the Liberation of the Greater Arab Central Sahara with a political wing and a military training camp near Bani Walid.<sup>12</sup> He beamed Tamasheq radio broadcasts into the Sahel. Yet when Tuareg veterans of the Islamic Legion went back to Mali and Niger to lead rebellions in the early 1990s, Qaddafi abandoned them.

Throughout Qaddafi’s reign, the Tuareg remained a people on the margins. They suffered under the dictator’s Arabization policies, even if he treated them as honorary Arabs and claimed some Tuareg lineage himself. Their ramshackle towns in the south were sorely undeveloped, despite the discovery of oil nearby. Lacking education, young men joined Qaddafi’s elite security forces, like the Thirty-Second Reinforced Brigade led by the Libyan dictator’s son, Khamis, and the exclusively Tuareg Maghawir Brigade based in Ubari, while others joined the Revolutionary Committees.

When the 2011 revolution started, some Tuareg broke with the regime, like Libya’s ambassador to Mali, Musa al-Koni, who later became the Tuareg’s representative on the National Transitional Council and, later still, went on to be a member of the Presidency Council of the United Nations (UN)-backed government in Tripoli before resigning in January 2017.<sup>13</sup> Many other Tuareg, especially those in the security brigades, stayed loyal and fought the revolutionaries. After the war, Tuareg soldiers of Sahelian origin looted Libyan armories and went to Mali, where they led an insurgency. They helped establish a short-lived semistate in the north known as Azawad. Other Libyan Tuareg struggled with the taint of having sided with Qaddafi.

Toward their Tabu neighbors, though, they maintained a degree of amity. As minorities in the new Libyan state, the Tabu and the Tuareg worked together in pressing for their rights. Both had been denied citizenship and had suffered from underdevelopment. Their activists staged sit-ins at government ministries in Tripoli. They protested in front of oil fields, demanding employment and

identification cards. At one point, Tuareg and Tabu leaders issued a joint statement threatening autonomy for the south.<sup>14</sup>

Much of their cooperation stemmed from a remarkable treaty the Tuareg and the Tabu had signed in 1894 called the *midi-midi* (roughly meaning “friendship” in Tamasheq). For years they’d fought, mostly over control of caravan routes and pastures. The *midi-midi* accord defined a boundary between them in Libya and in the desert to the south. West of the mountain corridor connecting Niger with Libya, the so-called Salvador Pass, was Tuareg land, and east of that was for the Tabu.

For over a hundred years, the *midi-midi* kept the peace, through drought, displacement, and dictatorship. But then, following the eruption of conflict across southern Libya in 2012, it unraveled.

## Flashpoints of Communal Conflict in the South

Though conflict and social tensions range far and wide in the south, two locations in particular—Sabha and Ubari—bear watching because of their propensity to draw in other social and political actors from across the region. Both suffer from a witches’ brew of afflictions: they are ethnically and tribally mixed; they suffer institutional weaknesses, especially in the security and justice sectors; and they are situated near major sources of fixed income, whether smuggling routes or oil fields. In addition, they have been the targets of meddling by northern and external actors.

### Sabha

Sabha has special importance as the provincial capital of the south and a historic hub along north-south supply routes, and, recently, for migrant smuggling. It has always been a contested city. In the 1800s, Sabha had been the seat of a twelve-year sultanate ruled by a local tribe, the Awlad Sulayman, until the Ottomans rallied rival tribes to overthrow it.<sup>15</sup> The Italians followed a similar strategy of divide and conquer. After Libya’s independence, the Awlad Sulayman again ascended to power, which they held until Qaddafi’s coup. The dictator broke their reign by putting his own tribe, the Qadhadhfa, in charge of security institutions and key sources of income, such as cigarette smuggling. The Awlad Sulayman suffered a loss in status. At the end of the 2011 revolution, they saw a window of opportunity, turning on their former overlords. Non-Arab tribes saw their chance too. And in the years that followed, unspoken pacts and power hierarchies collapsed.

Open conflict erupted in Sabha in March 2012, reportedly beginning with a carjacking. A Tabu killed a well-known Awlad Sulayman official from the electric company and stole his four-wheel-drive truck. The situation escalated when a reconciliation meeting at the Qaddafi-era People’s Hall ended in a gun

battle. Militias from the Awlad Sulayman and other Arab tribes descended on the Tabu quarters in Tayuri and nearby Hajara. Five days of clashes followed, with 147 people killed, mostly Tabu, and over 70 homes destroyed.<sup>16</sup>

Sabha's weak police force was powerless in the face of the warring militias. The transitional government in Tripoli dispatched the Benghazi-based Special Forces, led by Colonel Wanis Bukhamada, to try and enforce order. It was a stopgap measure that failed to address the roots of the fighting. The spark of the conflict was a murder and the attendant payback, but that masked something deeper: the fighting was a contest between the Awlad Sulayman and the Tabu, onetime allies during the revolution, for the region's lucrative smuggling trade and over salaries for their young militiamen.

After the fighting spread to Sabha, the Special Forces imposed a temporary truce.<sup>17</sup> But as security in Benghazi worsened in early 2013, Bukhamada pulled his soldiers out, creating a vacuum once more. The Awlad Sulayman stepped in, trying to dominate the city's nascent police force and control the illicit cross-border trade. By early 2014, the Tabu were pushing back. They assassinated an Awlad Sulayman militia leader as revenge for his role in earlier clashes. A second round of fighting started. The Qadhadhfa joined with the Tabu, seizing the Tamanhint military air base while the Awlad Sulayman grabbed the city's Italian-era citadel, Fort Elena, which sits above Sabha. Sabha descended once again into violence. Entire districts were no-go zones, ruled by militias and criminal gangs. The numbers of murders and kidnappings soared. Schools closed; nobody went outdoors. Young men perished in gun battles for control of a single gas station.<sup>18</sup>

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**Ostensibly mandated to restore peace in the area, the Third Force in practice ended up taking sides among the city's warring tribes and faced recurring protests calling for its departure.**

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Once again, the Tripoli government responded by deploying a coalition of militias, this time the Misrata-led Third Force. Ostensibly mandated to restore peace in the area, the Third Force in practice ended up taking sides among the city's warring tribes and faced recurring protests calling for its departure. It also encountered clear limits on its ability to prevent outbreaks of conflict. In the

summer of 2016, some of its forces redeployed north to assist the Misrata-led assault against the Islamic State in Sirte. In November 2016, fighting broke out again in Sabha after a monkey owned by a Qadhadhfa shopkeeper pulled the hijab off a passing schoolgirl from the Awlad Sulayman tribe, which then retaliated by killing three Qadhadhfa.<sup>19</sup> Within days, the incident escalated into a grim battle involving tanks and crew-served weapons. Violent crime remains another serious problem; in 2016 alone, 286 people were killed and 153 were kidnapped in Sabha.<sup>20</sup>

## Ubari

The southeastern town of Ubari derives its strategic significance from its proximity to the Algerian-Nigerien border and major oil fields. Like Sabha, it holds a mix of tribes and ethnicities. Most of the population are Arabized Africans, the so-called *abali*, who are descended from sub-Saharan slaves. The Tuareg are the next-largest group. The Tabu are a minority.

The Tuareg say that Ubari is firmly in the Tuareg zone defined by the *midi-midi*, but the Tabu argue they have just as much of a right to be there. And in the months after the 2011 revolution, they started asserting this claim. Flush with cash from their newfound smuggling profits, they started buying property in Ubari. They also secured access to the nearby Sharara oil field by serving as guards under the Zintani militias who controlled it.<sup>21</sup> The Tuareg, having been already expelled from the border town of Ghadames in communal fighting, grew alarmed at yet another blow to their influence in the area, namely the Tabu's control of an asset that they believed lay squarely on their turf.

Regional pressures only added to the sense of Tuareg decline vis-à-vis the Tabu. In 2014, Algeria closed its border with Libya, and French patrols in the Salvador Pass in Niger drastically curtailed the Tuareg's traditional cross-border movement. The Tuareg accused the French forces based at Madama in Niger—just 100 kilometers (62 miles) from the Libyan border—of turning a blind eye to Tabu smugglers and fighters transiting north. “Madama is the source of our *fitna* [chaos],” a Tuareg tribal leader told the author.

One afternoon in September 2014, a security force in Ubari tried to arrest some Tabu men who were illegally selling gasoline in the town center. Things escalated, with a Tuareg shooting a Tabu and then vice versa. A committee of elders arrived and managed to establish a truce. That night, a convoy of sixty or so Tabu fighters arrived from the mostly Tabu town of Murzuq to the east, hitting Tuareg militia compounds in western Ubari with heavy machine-gun fire. In the week that followed, Tabu militias pushed through Ubari, burning Tuareg homes as they went. Tuareg militias raced to the top of Tende Mountain and started firing on the Tabu neighborhoods below.

The fighting had economic consequences for all of Libya. In November 2014, Misratan militias assisted the Tuareg in seizing the Sharara oil field from the Tabu, who'd been allied with their rivals, the Zintanis. In response, Zintani militias in the north closed off a section of the pipeline that connects Sharara to the port of Zawiya on the Mediterranean Sea.

The fighting in Ubari slowed to a grinding exchange of mortars and snipers. Hundreds of families fled; hundreds of people died. Shelling destroyed entire neighborhoods, schools, and the downtown area. Both the Tripoli government and its rival, in Tobruk, tried repeatedly to end the fighting, enlisting the help of multiple tribal mediators (even though they were both parties to the conflict) before the government of Qatar, with Algerian assistance, stepped in. Tabu and Tuareg delegates were invited to Doha, where they eventually reached an accord in November 2015.<sup>22</sup>

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**There remain rejectionist and revanchist Tuareg figures, who seek either a separate homeland or greater hegemony in the west over cross-border trade.**

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A shaky peace is currently holding due to both the mutual restraint of the town's Tuareg and Tabu brigades and the efforts of Hasnawi brigades, which deployed to the city as peacekeepers in February 2016. Hasnawi soldiers, most of whom hail from Shati, set up checkpoints throughout Ubari and on key approaches to the town. The Hasawna occupied the Tende Brigade headquarters on the city's southern flank, as well as nearby Tende Mountain—a strategic vantage point that offers an excellent defilade into the city below.<sup>23</sup>

Recovery has been slow but steady. Fighters from outside Ubari have for the most part departed the area, with the exception of some Tabu units from al-Qatrun who have not returned to their hometown. Although both Tabu and Tuareg interlocutors praised the Hasawna for separating the armed factions, the peacekeeping deployment has done little to heal the deep damage to the town's social fabric. The return of displaced families remains a key source of tension. So, too, does the endemic competition for scarce economic resources—black-market petrol sales, smuggling, and oversight of the area's oil fields—that contributed to the conflict in the first place.

Signatories to the 2015 peace agreement proclaimed it to be a new *midimidi* agreement. But there are also rejectionist and revanchist Tuareg figures, who seek either a separate homeland or greater hegemony in the west over cross-border trade.

“When you return to Ubari, God willing, we will be back on Tende Mountain,” one Tuareg activist told the author in early 2016.<sup>24</sup>

## **Underlying Drivers of Insecurity Across the South**

Aside from these two flash points, the southern region faces a number of structural drivers of conflict related to its weak and fractured security sector; the absence of a meaningful local economy, despite the presence of oil fields, and effective border control; and harmful meddling by northern and outside actors. Jihadi militancy is currently a somewhat marginal threat to the south, but it could find greater social purchase among aggrieved tribes or communities or amid a worsening breakdown of governance.

### **A Fractured and Tribalized Security Sector**

As is the case elsewhere in Libya, the security sector in the south can best be described as a shaky symbiosis between the remnants of the old regime—Qaddafi's security brigades, police forces, and intelligence units—and newer revolutionary groups composed of untrained youths, as well as informal security actors, such as tribal mediators.

Unfortunately, nearly all of these actors have taken on a highly communal or ethnic character. In many cases, these bonds were solidified by the country's transitional authorities through the creation of auxiliary security bodies under the Ministry of Interior or Ministry of Defense. With few exceptions, they have become agents of conflict rather than enforcers of peace. Within cities, they have grabbed assets such as banks, hospitals, public buildings, and arms depots. In neighborhoods beset by crime, they run protection rackets and extort businesses. They have competed over the south's limited resources, for example by jostling for border control posts (which allow a monopoly over smuggling) or by seizing airfields and oil fields (which position them to be guards and interlocutors with foreign oil companies).<sup>25</sup>

But even when they play a beneficial role in policing, they are beset by deficiencies in manpower, equipment, and pay. For example, in the Tuareg town of Ghat, near the Algerian border, a hybrid brigade called the Martyrs of Essene—originally drawn from defected officers, police, and civilians—joined the now-defunct Supreme Security Committees and, by many accounts, played a helpful role in guarding municipal and parliamentary voting polls.<sup>26</sup> But its members have said the group's transition to a more formal police force has been obstructed by the Tripoli-based National Salvation Government's decision in early February 2015 to link government salaries to national identification cards, which many Tuareg lack.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, the role of informal social mediators—*hukuma* (wise men) and tribal councils—has been beneficial in obtaining ceasefires and separating armed factions. But this is not a durable institutional foundation on which to build a peaceful political order in the south.

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**Informal social mediators have helped obtain ceasefires. But this is not a durable institutional foundation on which to build a peaceful political order in the south.**

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### **Porous Borders and Endemic Smuggling**

Border control in the south, even under Qaddafi, was always patchy, with the late dictator devolving oversight of lucrative smuggling routes to tribes to secure their loyalty. In the absence of local income, illicit trade has become a deeply ingrained feature of the south's socioeconomic landscape. The south's security actors are often inextricably complicit in this trade, and when they attempt to combat it, they suffer from shortfalls in equipment, personnel, and pay. This capacity deficit, along with the south's dire economic situation, has produced a moral calculus among even well-intentioned border actors: arms, narcotics, and militants are intercepted, while fuel, subsidized food, cigarettes, and illegal migrants are allowed to pass, subject to a fee.

A key border-control deficiency is municipal governance capacity. Nowhere in the south is this more apparent than in the town of Ghat. Long cut off from the outside world after the closure of the Algerian border and fighting in nearby

Ubari, Ghat's municipal leadership oversees the Libyan frontier stretching from Algeria to Niger. The commander of a local border militia, *Katiba 411*, exclaimed that he was forced to patrol a 230-kilometer stretch of border with Algeria with just 230 men.<sup>28</sup> Since the closure of the Algerian border, smuggling traffic has shifted entirely to the Nigerien border into Ghatrun, along a Tabu-controlled route—a net loss for the Tuareg. The commander lamented the draconian punishments Algeria inflicted on Tuareg smugglers who he said were trying to eke out a living. He needed more equipment, body armor, night-vision goggles, and vehicles, sending repeated appeals to Bayda and Tobruk, but to no avail. As in the case of policing bodies elsewhere, the linkage of salaries to national identification cards has severely obstructed border-control capacity.

Ghat's leaders have long appealed to the Tripoli government and to outside actors like the European Union (EU) and the UN for greater direct assistance to Libya's border municipalities. "We asked the Europeans to pressure Algeria to open the border to relieve our suffering," a municipal council member said, lamenting that the area's Tuareg were cut off from kin across the border, as well as access to medical care and basic goods.<sup>29</sup> Ghat's suffering was somewhat relieved in February 2016 when the first fuel convoys, accompanied by Hasawna guards, made their way along the road from Ubari into the city.<sup>30</sup> But as of early 2017, Ghat was still afflicted by widespread power outages, water cuts, money shortages, and isolation.

The weakness of border control is even more apparent in Sabha, a longtime way station for Sahelian migrants moving northward. Here, migrants work as day laborers in impoverished neighborhoods like Ghurda, crowding dozens into single rooms, trying to save the 30 dinars they earn per job for the perilous northward journey; others are coerced into forced labor or prostitution.<sup>31</sup> Once they embark on the journey, packed into cargo trucks, these migrants face violent abuse, sexual assault, and abandonment. "If you faint or fall off, they leave you," one migrant from Nigeria said. "The drivers beat us with long wooden sticks."<sup>32</sup>

Underlying the Sisyphean struggle against illicit trafficking is the fact that as long as the local economy remains underdeveloped, any law enforcement and technical and bureaucratic improvements will likely fail. At their core, smuggling and the struggle for resources are deeply entrenched socioeconomic problems.<sup>33</sup> The lure of fuel smuggling is especially enticing—a liter of gasoline that costs 10 cents in Libya will fetch a dollar in Chad.<sup>34</sup> With the disappearance of tourism—long a source of local revenue—after the revolution, smuggling has become even more endemic. Attempts to curtail this livelihood have produced violent conflict. It was the attempt by an Ubari security committee to stop black-market fuel sales that contributed to the Tabu-Tuareg fighting. One Tabu notable wondered in 2016: "Yes, smuggling is wrong. But why crack down on it now, especially when alternate means of income have not been developed?"<sup>35</sup>

More recently, the EU has taken steps to address capacity in southern Libya on the migrant challenge, pledging funds to municipalities for the construction

of migrant detention centers. Unsurprisingly, several mayors in the south rejected the plan because it would shift too much of the burden to them in the form of a technical solution, without addressing the push-pull drivers of migrant flows and smuggling—namely, the absence of a local economy.<sup>36</sup>

### **Nationwide Polarization and Meddling by Northern Actors**

Aside from the south's institutional weaknesses, communal tensions, and economic deficiencies, it has been plagued by the eruption of national political conflict, the so-called Dawn-versus-Dignity struggle. This has resulted in the monetization, by way of a pay-for-hire arrangement, of security in the south. The results have been profoundly destabilizing. The payment of salaries to young combatants and the provision of arms represent a cynical manipulation of communal groups that had previously enjoyed a degree of social balance and coexistence for decades and sometimes centuries. While interference from northern and outside actors is not the sole cause of the south's undoing, it is a contributing factor.

Lured by the promise of salaries, the Tabu have fought alongside the Petroleum Facilities Guards led by Ibrahim Jathran, the Saiqa (the Special Forces) in Benghazi, and various Zintani brigades in the northwest. Major Tabu brigades fighting in Benghazi include the Twenty-Fifth Brigade, the Desert Shield, and the Martyrs of Umm al-Aranib. For their part, the Tuareg have also fought for Zintani militias—particularly those that absorbed members of Qaddafi's security brigades like the Thirty-Second Reinforced Brigade. The Dignity-Dawn conflict has also produced an influx of weapons: Dignity forces reportedly have funneled Emirati arms via Egyptian aircraft to Tabu clients, and the Dawn faction has armed the Tuareg in Sabha and Ubari and, farther east, the Zway in Kufra.

The latest outbreak of national conflict in the south occurred with the movement to a military base at Jufra, already occupied by the Third Force, of fighters affiliated with the Companies for the Defense of Benghazi (Saraya al Difa' 'An Benghazi)—a coalition of anti-Hifter militias, some composed of old Benghazi brigades that enjoy support from both Misratan power brokers, support networks in Qatar, and some factions in Tripoli.<sup>37</sup> The eruption of fighting between the Companies and Libyan National Army (LNA) forces aligned with Hifter escalated to air strikes in late 2016 and early 2017, killing and wounding several officials from Misrata. In December 2016, an LNA-affiliated unit drawn from local Qadhafha, Tabu, and Magarha members ejected the Misratan Third Force from a base in the town of Brak, north of Sabha. In March 2017, the Companies seized the Sidra and Ras Lanuf terminals from the LNA, which the LNA soon recaptured. The seesaw fighting demonstrates the continued importance of bases and airfields in the south—which straddle

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**Aside from the south's institutional weaknesses, communal tensions, and economic deficiencies, it has been plagued by the eruption of national political conflict.**

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key supply lines into Misrata, the oil crescent, and Benghazi—as foci of intense national conflict.

The results have been more mixed where northern groups have intervened under the guise of stabilization, such as the deployment of the Libya Shield to Kufra and, more recently, the Third Force to Sharara, or the Matiga-based Special Deterrence Force (Quwwat al-Rada'a al-Khasa) to act as prison wardens in Sabha. With few exceptions, these northern actors have not been truly national or neutral but often deeply partisan, lending preferential treatment to certain communities in the south.

### *The Third Force*

The Third Force was developed originally as a coalition of soldiers drawn from mostly Misratan brigades who were dispatched by the chief of staff of the National Salvation Government in early 2015, ostensibly to stabilize Sabha after communal fighting primarily between the Awlad Sulayman on the one hand and the Qadhadhfa and the Magarha on the other. A more implicit motive was to deny the opposing pro-Dignity forces access to the south, especially strategic assets like air bases, as well as secure trade routes and military lines of supply from the Sahel to Misrata's port and free-trade zone.

After a ceasefire and the withdrawal of Tabu and Awlad Sulayman units, the Third Force moved into secure key positions in the city, such as the Italian-era fortress, the military police headquarters, and the nearby Tamanhint military air base. The force expanded its deployment west toward Ubari but never entered the town for fear of stretching its supply lines and becoming enmeshed in the conflict. In Murzuq and areas farther south, where Tabu brigades such as Barka Wardaku's Desert Shield and Ramadan Laki's Umm al-Aranib Martyrs militia hold sway, the Third Force does not have troops but maintains "an intelligence presence," according to one Misratan commander.<sup>38</sup>

A key feature of the Third Force's local policing has been the arming and equipping of southern communal groups. Broadly speaking, the Third Force has supported the Awlad Sulayman and the Tuareg against the Tabu, Qadhadhfa, and Magarha (all rivals in cross-border smuggling), many of whom it broadly labels as loyalists or Dignity supporters. Smaller tribes like the Hasawna, Mahamid, and Awlad Bu Sayf have also enjoyed preferential treatment from the Third Force. According to one Third Force commander, many of these groups are recruited as auxiliaries for the Third Force. "We chose 150 from each tribe in Sabha for a total of 1,200," the commander said.<sup>39</sup> These auxiliaries are given weapons, radios, uniforms, and salaries, and they are directed to police specific areas in Sabha.

The limits of this auxiliary approach have become apparent in the upsetting of southern balances of power and the effect of Third Force weapons and payments in reducing the incentives for social reconciliation. In many neighborhoods, the Third Force cannot enter but rather dispatches local auxiliaries, which have dragged the Third Force into open conflict. In the summer of

2016, for example, the Third Force and its allied militias—the Ahrar Fezzan, Bahr al-Din, and Awlad Sulayman—clashed with Qadhadhfa gunmen. Even the force’s erstwhile allies view it with distrust. One Tuareg commander in Ubari noted the Third Force’s suspect loyalty, saying that it “eats with the wolves, cries with the shepherds.”<sup>40</sup>

### *The Special Deterrence Force*

Another non-southern Libyan security actor whose impact has been mixed is the Special Deterrence Force (SDF), commanded by Abdelraouf Kara. Based at Matiga airport in Tripoli, the SDF arose from the postrevolutionary, Salafi-leaning militias that dominated the policing sector, primarily from the neighborhood of Suq al-Jumaa on Tripoli’s eastern flank.<sup>41</sup> In Tripoli, it focused initially on counternarcotics but has recently shifted to combating the Islamic State. In Sabha, the SDF deployed as the result of an alliance between southern Salafi militia commanders from the Awlad Sulayman and the Third Force.

The SDF’s most important function was running official and unofficial prisons in Sabha. Some were temporary holding facilities, where up to thirty or forty prisoners were kept before transfer to Tripoli. They included those accused of serious crimes as well as moral infractions like consuming alcohol. In prison, the SDF administered a heavy dose of Salafi ideology. “We have some people who were captured who didn’t know the Koran,” said one SDF warden. “In the prison, they now have an Islamic library.”<sup>42</sup> Perceptions of the SDF in Sabha have been mixed: while some applaud its capability and resistance to corruption, others resent the imposition of Salafi ideology, which many view as foreign.

### **The Specter of Extremism in the South**

Transnational jihadists operate in southern Libya, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Murabitun, and Ansar Dine, whose fighters draw on a long history of local knowledge stretching back to the Sahelian insurgencies of the 1990s and Algeria’s civil war.<sup>43</sup> After the revolution, these groups established links with local armed groups and jihadists in the north, particularly the northeast in Benghazi, Derna, and Ajdabiya. The south’s logistical pipeline for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb fed into Ansar al-Sharia networks, ferrying Algerian, Malian, and other Sahelian jihadists to northern camps and onward to Syria.<sup>44</sup> Conversely, Ansar al-Sharia reportedly funneled volunteers southward to Mali.<sup>45</sup> Ansar al-Sharia trained fighters loyal to the seasoned Algerian jihadist Mukhtar Belmokhtar, prior to their January 2013 attack on the Tiguentourine gas facility in In Amenas, Algeria.

Local collaborators in southwestern Libya have facilitated some of this transnational presence and movement. Among the most frequently cited entities is Border Guards Brigade 315, an Ubari-based militia headed by a former army officer and Islamist educator named Ahmed Umar al-Ansari, whose forces are

based on the city's southern edge, adjacent to the Tende Brigade's compound along a cross-border route through the Salvador Pass into Niger.<sup>46</sup>

That said, the Tuareg's political and communal opponents have often exaggerated the depth and scope of extremist penetration, particularly in Ubari and farther west. To be sure, interlocutors in Ghat, Ubari, and Uwaynat acknowledge the jihadists' presence, pointing to evidence of camps around Ghat and in the valleys of the Acacus Mountains.<sup>47</sup> But the presence is mostly logistical and the result of weak administrative and police control in the south, rather than widespread social support. For example, the In Amenas attackers in 2013 passed through areas north of Ghat, but local brigades lacked the forces to stop them. For its part, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb seems squarely focused on the Sahel as its primary arena of expansion, using Libya for logistical depth, despite having called in the summer of 2016 for its fighters to assist with fighting Dignity forces in Benghazi.<sup>48</sup> Where jihadi relationships exist with local armed groups, they result from convenience and a shared interest in keeping borders uncontrolled. Aside from this presence, the penetration of radical ideology into the Tuareg's southern areas or into the south's social fabric more broadly is minimal, notwithstanding the exaggerated claims of the Dignity and Tabu factions.

Similar qualifications apply to the Islamic State and so-called intelligence reports from various Libyan political camps about the Islamic State's spread after Sirte, and these accounts should be carefully scrutinized given these groups' vested interest in portraying their adversaries as harboring terrorists. The Islamic State never extended its reach into southern Libya and now, with its defeat in Sirte, faces even bleaker prospects. Any movement to the south will encounter not only a crowded marketplace of armed groups tied to local communities and tribes but also al-Qaeda-affiliated networks, whose fortunes have rebounded relative to the Islamic State. Already in northeastern Libya, a number of fighters who defected from al-Qaeda-affiliated groups like Ansar al-Sharia to the Islamic State are now switching back to the al-Qaeda brand. Whether and how this dynamic plays out in the south remains to be seen.

That said, there are Islamic State cells and camps south of Sirte, such as the one that was bombed by U.S. aircraft in late January 2017, as well as farther south, near Sabha. The Islamic State has shown its capacity to wreak havoc in the area, as evidenced by its reported attack on electricity infrastructure between Jufra and Sabha.<sup>49</sup> In addition, there were reports in the summer of 2016 of an Islamic State presence in Libya's uncontrolled southeastern corner, near the oases of Kufra and Tazirbu along the Sudanese border, where the terrorist group reportedly reached an arrangement with local smugglers to protect its supply lines to the north.<sup>50</sup>

## What Can the Libyan Government and Outsiders Do?

The south's problems are multifaceted and will likely take years, if not generations, to address. A crucial first step is recognizing that the south's troubles are deeply interwoven with those of the rest of Libya. Too often, southern interlocutors feel disconnected from their representatives and politics more broadly in the north. Second, Libyan authorities and international backers must address deeper institutional deficits in the south rather than focus on short-term fixes like military deployments or technical border control arrangements. Finally, developing a sustainable economy in the south that can undercut the allure of smuggling will be a generations-long challenge.

**Implement a number of immediate-impact projects to demonstrate reach and legitimacy.** International donors should assist the Libyan government in providing a number of urgently needed, quick-win initiatives in the south to demonstrate its visibility and commitment and to rebuild shattered trust. In many southern areas, needs currently include basic services (in late 2016, for example, parts of the south endured fifteen successive days of power outages). In a positive first step, the Libyan government's Stabilization Facility, funded by twelve international donors and implemented by the United Nations Development Program, has identified Ubari as one of its priority locations to receive local aid to infrastructure and services and delivered a portion of this aid in January 2015. In December 2016, the Stabilization Facility allocated \$2 million for Sabha's health services, water, and garbage collection.<sup>51</sup>

Beyond these quick-win initiatives, the south faces enormous challenges of building legitimate, alternative sources of revenue that can wean young men away from the lure of smuggling and participation in armed groups. The International Organization of Migration's community stabilization programs currently under way in Sabha and al-Qatrun are examples of municipal initiatives that can be replicated elsewhere.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, much remains to be done to repair the south's ruptured social bonds. In Ubari, the most pressing areas identified by interlocutors include general postconflict repair to houses and infrastructure, post-trauma care, medical supplies and pharmaceuticals, children's education, the return of displaced people, administrative training, and information technology training. Many in Ubari fondly remember a computer center, sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development, that provided young people with training until it was destroyed in the fighting.<sup>53</sup>

**Implement a phased withdrawal of nonsouthern security actors.** Successive northern deployments to the south have done some good, but they have also been destabilizing insofar as these northern groups have favored certain communal clients and often act as agents of the national Dawn-versus-Dignity political struggle. Southern security actors and northern-based formations, like the Third Force, should agree on a transitional road map for handing over policing functions to a locally recruited and municipally controlled force that is tethered to the Ministry of Interior in Tripoli.

**Support civil society initiatives in the south related to the security sector, especially cross-tribal, cross-communal endeavors.** In the absence of robust state institutions, a plethora of civil society groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) has filled the void in the south. Many of these have had a beneficial impact on security, whether through cross-communal dialogue, support to victims of war, children's education, or technical training. In the security sector, an illustrative example of NGO activism has been the Free Libyans charity association, which organized a workshop in Sabha for members of the border guards on dealing with illegal migrants. The workshop provided training on psychological support, first aid, human rights, and data management. Partnering these sorts of initiatives with the Libyan government can do much to increase capacity in the south and bolster trust.

**Restart government salaries in the south, resolve the national identification quandary, and empower municipal budgets as part of a broader security-sector payroll reform effort.** The practice of paying salaries from the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Interior directly into personal bank accounts of militia leaders has proved tremendously destabilizing and counterproductive. At the same time, efforts to link salaries to national identification cards have run up against a catch-22 in the south due to the fact that many communities do not possess these documents as a result of Qaddafi's cynical divide-and-rule policies. The Libyan government should prioritize the distribution of salaries to local security actors via municipal authorities.

**Under the supervision of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya or another third party, begin a series of national dialogues with security actors from across the country, including the south, on a road map for reconstituting the security sector.** Across the country, various schemes for demobilizing and integrating militias have failed (the Warriors' Affairs Commission, the Libya Shields, and so on). This has happened because of a lack of national consensus about what kind of military Libya needs and because such programs were captured by various political factions. A dialogue among security actors could help develop this vision while also specifying actionable steps and building trust among disparate actors. Libyan security actors and international patrons should give special consideration to a variant of a locally constituted force that harnesses the strength of existing municipal and provincial security actors while tethering them to a national command. The force would be given a specific timeline for phased transition into a reserve force, while more formal police and military forces are being trained.

Libyan actors, with the support of international organizations like the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, have developed a number of schemes for this type of force.<sup>54</sup> What has been lacking is political consensus and the will to implement them. For the south, a provincially constituted force may prove the most beneficial solution to give local communities ownership of security. This can also provide the type of security capability needed to take on the southern region's unique challenges.

## Notes

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