
Research
Paper

Middle East and North
Africa Programme

June 2021

The Libyan Arab Armed Forces

A network analysis of Haftar's military alliance

Tim Eaton



Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, is a world-leading policy institute based in London. Our mission is to help governments and societies build a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world.

Contents

	Summary	4
01	Network analysis of Libyan armed groups	6
02	Inside the LAAF's armed networks	11
03	Leveraging external support	26
04	Utilizing networks in the 'state'	30
05	Conclusions: Prospects for the LAAF alliance	38
	About the author	41
	Acknowledgments	41

Summary

-
- On the eve of its offensive on Tripoli in April 2019, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) of Khalifa Haftar appeared set to dominate the Libyan political system. Unlike other armed groups, which remained tethered to their social bases within communities, the LAAF expanded its territorial control and absorbed new, diverse forces into its structure. As it developed, early allies were sidelined and lost influence while opponents were treated with brutality.
 - Although the LAAF has a formal chain of command, power lies in the hands of Haftar and his close associates. It is best understood as an alliance of networks of varying composition:
 - The strongest parts of the LAAF are those integrated elements, or praetorian units, that operate under the direct control of Haftar and his circle.
 - A significant proportion of the LAAF is formed of ‘parochial’ networks (with close ties to their local social bases) that operate as franchises; their leadership has limited collaboration with other network leaders beyond Haftar’s inner circle.
 - Units inspired by the ultraconservative Madkhali-Salafi movement form a significant and growing component of the LAAF. They are currently prevalent in localized parochial groups, though they have the potential to develop into a national ‘vanguard’ network (with strong ties based on their ideological kinship).
 - Since 2014, Haftar has sought to cohere and integrate this unwieldy alliance through a combination of narrative-building, coercion and external support. However, the LAAF has not evolved into an integrated organization owing to the contradictory political goals and motivations of its component parts and the predominant role of personal relationships.
 - Haftar has penetrated and subverted the fragmented networks of the hollowed out eastern Libyan authorities, which are bereft of vertical ties to clearly distinguishable social bases, dominating the ‘state’ in eastern Libya with impunity from 2015 to 2021.
 - The failure of the Tripoli offensive, and subsequent retreat, has imperilled LAAF gains. Internal tensions within the LAAF’s alliance have become increasingly apparent as security has deteriorated in the eastern city of Benghazi.

- The March 2021 creation of a new Government of National Unity, the first unified national government in Libya since 2014, endangers Haftar's capture of institutions and resources in the east. The ongoing reformulation of alliances sets the stage for a potentially violent re-contestation of power that could see the unity of the LAAF crumble.
- External support has been critical to the development of the LAAF and is indispensable for its maintenance. Dependence on foreign mercenaries and external states is now greater than ever. Consequently, Haftar is highly vulnerable to shifts in the policies of his external backers.

01 Network analysis of Libyan armed groups

Libyan armed groups should be viewed as networks of actors that traverse the political, economic and security spheres rather than discrete sets of armed actors.

The proliferation of armed groups amid and following Libya's 2011 civil war received significant attention from analysts. After the downfall of the regime of Muammar Gaddafi, researchers published detailed studies examining the social origins of the diverse range of fighting units that fought against the regime and the challenges of integrating them into the new state security architecture. In contrast, after the governance split of 2014 – when rival legislatures and governments emerged in the east and west of the country – the security space received comparatively little attention.

More recently, research into this area has increased with the publication of a series of in-depth papers assessing the trajectory of the country's armed groups, their evolution and the nature of their relationship to state authority,¹ the communities that they claim to represent, and their models of revenue generation.² These studies have sought to understand why the 'state' – despite direct sponsorship and nominal integration of the majority of these groups under state structures – has been unable to reform the security sector and establish a coherent chain of command for the

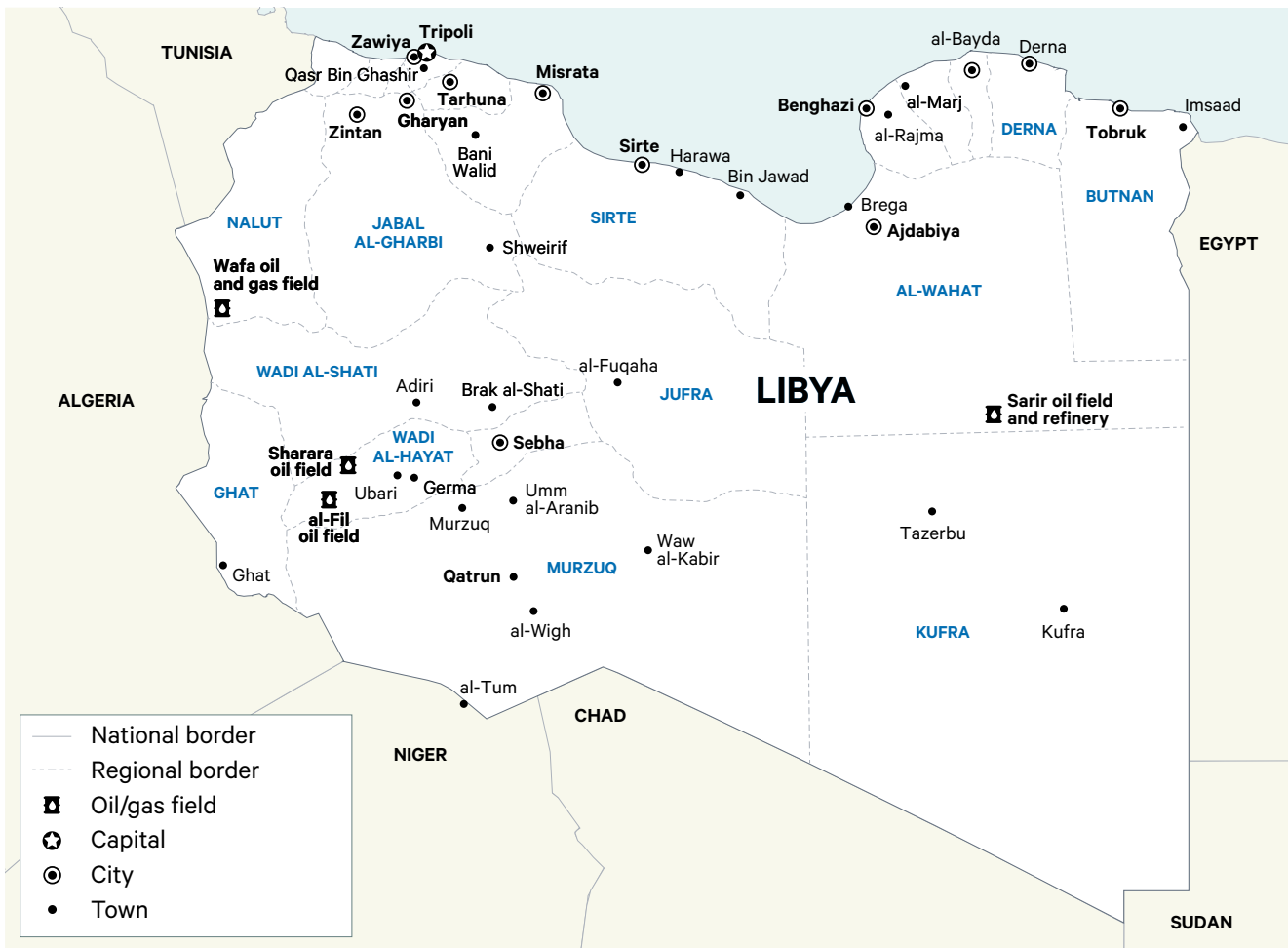
¹ Badi, E. (2020), *Exploring Armed Groups in Libya: Perspectives on SSR in a Hybrid Environment*, Research Paper, Geneva: DCAF Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, <https://dcaf.ch/exploring-armed-groups-libya-perspectives-ssr-hybrid-environment>.

² Eaton, T., Alageli, A., Badi, E., Eljarh, M. and Stocker, V. (2020), *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014: Community Interests and Economic Dynamics*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/03/development-libyan-armed-groups-2014/1-introduction-development-armed-groups-2014>.

country's national military.³ Researchers have explored when and how groups have mobilized, from collective action in the face of unified threats⁴ to the protection of narrow interests and revenue sources.⁵

At the heart of this research are two areas of focus: the first relates to the nature of state authority in Libya – or the lack thereof, particularly in light of the civil war – while the second pertains to the role of armed groups within society. This paper examines these challenges through a socio-institutional analysis that views the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), and the state structures it engages with, as networks. The findings show how LAAF leader Khalifa Haftar has forged alliances in the security space as well as the public and private sectors, and demonstrate what this approach may mean for the future of the LAAF.

Map 1. Map of Libya



³ Al-Shadeedi, H., van Veen, E. and Harchaoui, J. (2020), *One thousand and one failings: Security sector stabilisation and development in Libya*, Conflict Research Unit Report, The Hague: The Clingendael Institute, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/one-thousand-and-one-failings.pdf>.

⁴ Lacher, W. (2020), *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Progress in Violent Conflict*, London: I.B. Tauris.

⁵ Eaton, T. (2018), *Libya's War Economy: Predation, Profiteering, and State Weakness*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/04/libyas-war-economy-predation-profiteering-and-state-weakness>.

Situating Libya's different armed groups within a socio-institutional understanding of the state and society is complicated by the current fragmented security situation and the degree of social embeddedness and fluidity of many of these forces. A better way of conceiving of these groups is to consider them as networks competing against other networks for power in an increasingly divided operating environment rather than units of armed groups formed by discrete sets of actors and interests. Such a framing also helps to compare the structures of armed groups beyond the classical distinctions of regular and irregular forces as well as their interests outside the military realm.⁶ A socio-institutional understanding of Libyan armed groups as networks can also aid what Wolfram Lacher has dubbed the need to 're-socialize' armed groups.⁷ An enduring feature of many Libyan armed groups is their social embeddedness within communities, particularly in areas with high social cohesion.

The socio-institutional framework can be used to distinguish between armed organizations based upon the development of horizontal ties between leaders and vertical ties between leaders and a social base.

The socio-institutional framework developed by Paul Staniland can be used to distinguish between armed organizations based upon the development of horizontal ties between leaders and vertical ties between leaders and a social base.⁸ While Staniland's approach focuses squarely on insurgent actors, it has utility here as a tool to enable an analysis of organizational power and to understand the potential evolution or devolution of armed groups more broadly.

Box 1. Types of networks and their features⁹

Horizontal ties link people across space and connect different geographic and social sites. They are formed between individuals from beyond a single social and geographic locale. Strong horizontal linkages among leaders underpin collective action and interaction among geographically mobile leaders who are not fixed to a particular local community.

Vertical ties are created by relations of information, trust and belief that link organizers to local communities. Organizers can use these to build or sustain political, economic or social projects in these communities.

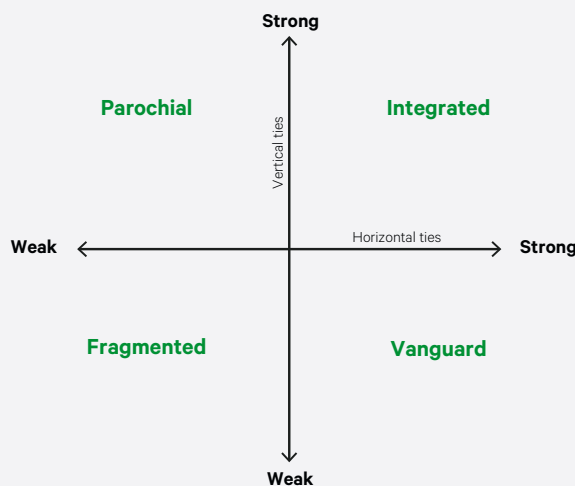
⁶ Eaton, T. (2021), 'The Libyan Arab Armed Forces: A Hybrid Actor?', War on the Rocks, 27 January 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-libyan-arab-armed-forces-a-hybrid-armed-actor>.

⁷ Lacher (2020), *Libya's Fragmentation*, p. 106.

⁸ Staniland, P. (2014), *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell: Cornell University Press.

⁹ Adapted from Staniland (2014), *Networks of Rebellion*.

Figure 1. Types of armed networks



Integrated networks:

- Leadership unity and discipline at the centre;
- Formal mechanisms to incorporate and socialize new members; and
- Leaders and foot soldiers are connected through institutions.

Vanguard networks:

- Tight leadership that creates central institutions but fragile local control;
- Clear political guidelines, as well as the production and reproduction of ideological visions; and
- Emerge when strong horizontal and weak vertical pre-war social ties have been mobilized by rebel leaders.

Parochial networks:

- Central leader lacks consistent control over main commanders as the group resembles a coalition of distinct sub-organizations;
- Leaders draw on vertical linkages to local communities without strong horizontal ties to one another; and
- Local embeddedness, drawn from pre-war vertical ties that are converted into local units and factions.

Fragmented networks:

- Cannot routinely achieve organizational control at either the central or local levels; and
- Recruitment of subgroups with nowhere else to go and diffuse collections of fighters undermine local control.

Network analysis of the LAAF

Since asserting leadership over a loose alliance of armed groups in 2014, Khalifa Haftar has built a military alliance that held a strong grip over all aspects of life in eastern Libya, empowered allies to dominate the security landscape in southern Libya and almost succeeded in capturing the capital, Tripoli. The nature of the Haftar-dominated LAAF has, however, been a point of contention. For its Libyan supporters, it is simply 'the army': a national state force. For its international supporters the LAAF is, at least, a viable partner. For its detractors, however, it resembles a collection of militias of varying composition. For most analysts, the claim that the LAAF constitutes an army does not hold up to scrutiny. While some of its elements resemble 'regular' units, the majority of the LAAF consists of groups that have rallied on a tribal and geographic basis, along with a substantial contingent that have mobilized along ideological (Salafi) lines. Power clearly lies in the hands of Haftar and his close associates, who retain authority and operate outside the formal chain of command, which has led observers to describe the LAAF as a 'family enterprise'.¹⁰

This paper will use the typologies developed by Staniland to assess the LAAF rather than getting caught up in the complexities of adopting labels that make normative assumptions about the LAAF's relationship to state authority – i.e. focusing on whether it is a 'state' or 'non-state' actor – or assessments over the application of terms that are used to either connote legitimacy – such as 'army' – or used pejoratively – such as 'militia'.¹¹ A socio-institutional framing helps to identify different types of networks that comprise the LAAF and its supporters, and how they have evolved over time. This shows that the LAAF is a very different organization in different parts of Libya and is, in fact, an unwieldy alliance of forces with contradictory interests and ideological outlooks. It also helps to explain the relative successes and failures of Haftar's attempts to develop the LAAF as an integrated organization, while providing clues to its potential trajectory.

¹⁰ Lacher, W. (2020), *A Most Irregular Army: The Rise of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces*, SWP Middle East and North Africa Research Division Working Paper N°2, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/2020WP02_FG06_lac.pdf.

¹¹ Eaton (2021), 'The Libyan Arab Armed Forces: A Hybrid Actor?'

02

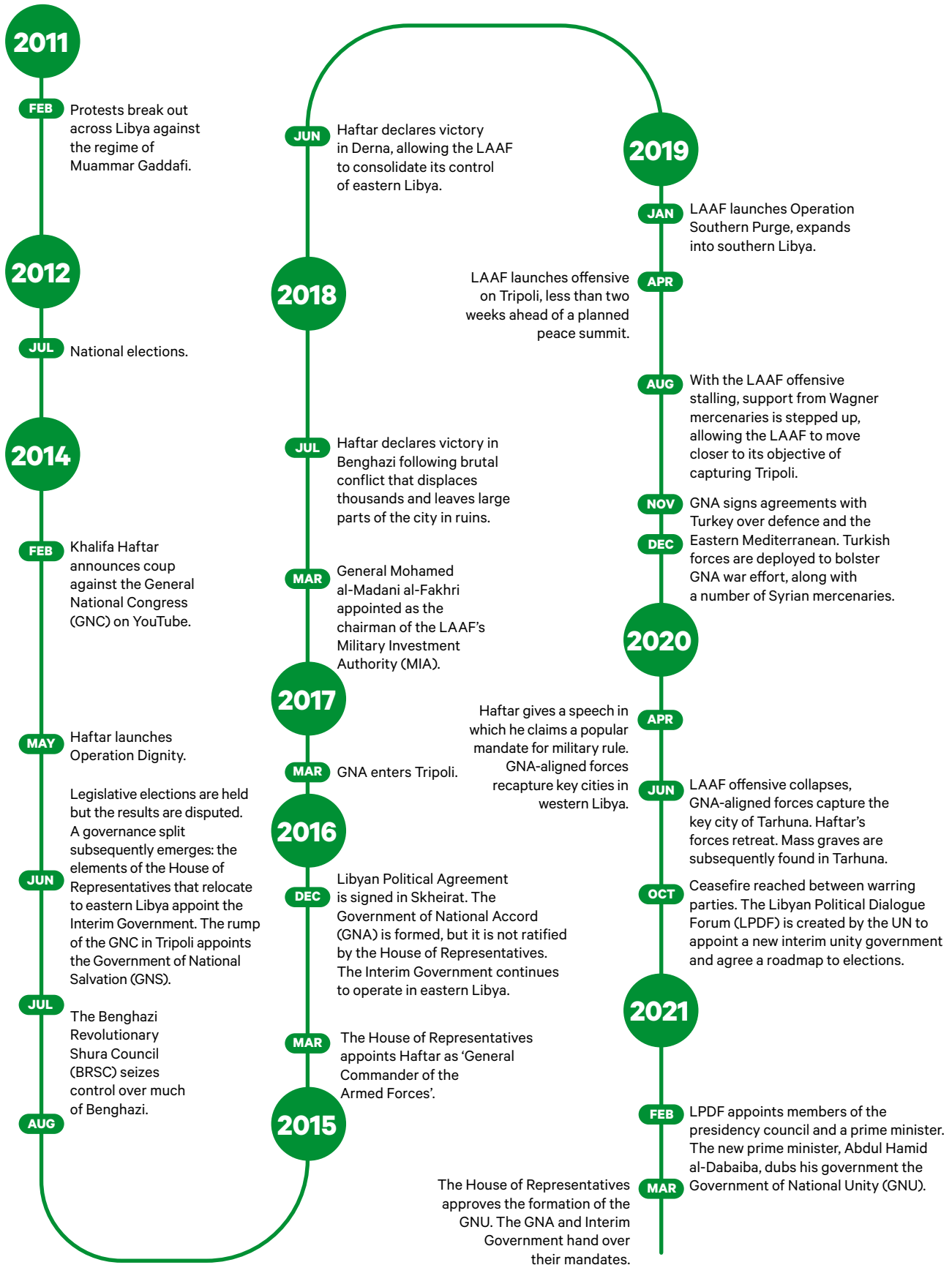
Inside the LAAF's armed networks

Unlike other Libyan armed groups, which remain tethered to their social bases within communities, the LAAF has expanded its territorial control by absorbing new groups into its structure.

In February 2014, Khalifa Haftar announced in a YouTube address that the 'Libyan army' was set to 'rescue' the nation by removing the General National Congress (GNC) – the first legislative authority of Libya after the fall of Gaddafi. Haftar had been among the cohort of officers that had supposedly been forced into retirement by the GNC a year earlier. His call to arms fell on deaf ears and resulted in Haftar fleeing to eastern Libya to reach safety. It was from the east that he would announce the formation of Operation Dignity, a military campaign launched on 16 May 2014 by a loose alliance of armed groups against Islamist-leaning battalions in Benghazi, and claim leadership of Libyan armed forces. The descent into conflict between Operation Dignity in the summer of 2014, from which the LAAF developed, and Operation Dawn, which mobilized forces in response, led to a governance split with parallel state entities emerging.¹² Despite being ostracized by the UN-led peace process that formed the Government of National Accord (GNA) in December 2015, the LAAF alliance emerged as the most capable armed network in Libya, developing a strong hold over eastern Libya and expanding into southern Libya.

¹² Forces that took part in Operation Dawn aligned with the re-constituted Tripoli-based part of the GNC (the legislature elected in 2012), while the LAAF aligned with the Interim Government. The GNC formed the Tripoli-based Government of National Salvation. The Government of National Salvation was dissolved upon the formation of the Government of National Accord in 2015 following UN-led negotiations. The House of Representatives' failure to ratify the Government of National Accord meant that the Interim Government continued to operate in areas of the country under LAAF control.

Timeline. The rise (and retreat) of the LAAF



Source: Compiled by the author.

Haftar forged the LAAF through alliances with four networks of actors with overlapping interests, including army officers and their armed groups, initially from the revolutionary camp but later from either side of the revolutionary divide; armed elements of the eastern autonomy movement; armed groups fighting Islamist-leaning groups in Benghazi, drawn from eastern tribes and the Saiqa Special Forces; and armed factions drawn from adherents of the growing ultraconservative Madkhali-Salafi trend.¹³

Haftar was effective in moulding his narrative and positioning himself to align with parochial networks, such as the armed elements of the eastern autonomy movement and those fighting Islamist-leaning groups in Benghazi. These parochial networks possessed strong vertical ties between their leaders and their communities, which allowed them to build and maintain their forces in their locality. However, the leadership of the groups possessed limited horizontal ties to leaders in other areas, inhibiting their ability to form a coherent integrated force or to collaborate effectively. The Madkhali-Salafi groups, while showing the potential to develop vanguard networks (due to strong horizontal ties through their ideological outlook), still overwhelmingly displayed the characteristics of parochial networks. Many of the army officers that have allied with Haftar fit the vanguard profile, with strong horizontal ties among leaders developed through their experiences in the military but in many cases relatively weak vertical ties with local communities.

Haftar has sought to cohere and integrate this unwieldy alliance through a combination of narrative-building, coercion and external support.

Since 2014, Haftar has sought to cohere and integrate this unwieldy alliance through a combination of narrative-building, coercion and external support. The LAAF has displayed considerable ideological dexterity. For example, the framing of Operation Dignity as a project to restore, or resurrect, 'the army' to fight against 'terrorist' elements was broad enough to resonate with the contradictory interests within the alliance. For the officers, this operation in Benghazi represented a return to state order and the pursuit of a national project. For the former regime loyalists, it presented a chance to avenge their 2011 defeat. For all, it represented a means of assembling forces to combat local foes, most notably Islamist-leaning groups. It also tapped into a desire of these factions to be an official or legitimate element of the state.

As the LAAF emerged from its bloody victories in Benghazi and Derna, it needed a new framing to justify its expansion into southern Libya, known as the Fezzan, in 2019 and then towards Tripoli later that year. Operation Southern Purge in January–March 2019 drew upon the state order narrative once more, but this time with an emphasis on the restoration of order and clamping down on criminality to facilitate the takeover of the region by pro-LAAF elements.

¹³ For a detailed analysis of these dynamics, see Lacher (2020), *A Most Irregular Army*.

The later Tripoli offensive (2019–20) fused all of the narratives above and was framed as a means to liberate the capital from the yoke of the militias. And, when the offensive collapsed, the LAAF was quick to mobilize nationalist fervour and to agitate against Turkey's support for the Government of National Accord (GNA) by conjuring historical images of Ottoman conquests as if to show that history was repeating itself.

Elements from the Gaddafi-era armed forces

The LAAF has sought to embrace elements of the Gaddafi-era military that fought on both sides of the revolution. Haftar was a career officer in the Libyan military prior to his capture by Chadian forces in 1987, when he defected for an ill-fated stint with an exiled Libyan opposition movement. He participated in the 2011 revolution alongside the rebels in a minor role. Such credentials facilitated the formation of alliances with other prominent commanders who had fought with the rebels, such as Abdul Razzaq al-Nadhouri, who would be appointed chief of staff of the 'Libyan National Army' by the House of Representatives in August 2014. Nadhouri previously headed an armed force made up of rebels and officers who defected from Gaddafi's security brigade in al-Marj, which would come to be known as Brigade 115, one of the strongest units that joined Operation Dignity at its inception.¹⁴ Other key recruits included Saqr al-Jarushi, who had been fired as chief of the Libyan air force in 2013. His status ensured that air force officers placed their aircraft under Haftar's command. Career officers became leading commanders in the LAAF; for example, Abdul Salam al-Hassi, an officer within Saiqa, who rose to lead its operations room in Gharyan in the initial phase of the Tripoli offensive before being demoted after the operation failed.

Figures such as Nadhouri and Jarushi have made pliant allies for Haftar. Nadhouri has not been central in the decision-making processes since Haftar's appointment as general commander of the Armed Forces in 2015. Except for his position as military governor of Bin Jawad-Derna from 2016 to 2018, Nadhouri has generally performed subsidiary tasks such as heading the LAAF-led COVID-19 Committee and Benghazi's Security Committee. The latter position is bolstered by his role on the Benghazi Stabilization Committee, which is intended to oversee the reconstruction of the city of Benghazi. Nadhouri has used his position to rapidly accumulate properties in Benghazi, Tolmeita and al-Marj.¹⁵ The unit he commanded, Battalion 115, is now led by his son, Abdul Fatah, though it is not as prominent as it once was.¹⁶

From 2016, Haftar sought to integrate Gaddafi loyalist officers into the senior leadership of the LAAF in an attempt to expand his military alliance. Figures such as Mohamed Bin Nayel sought to rally pro-regime elements in the Fezzan, which developed into the 12th Brigade. Belgasim al-Abaj was deployed to his native Kufra in January 2018 and later to engage more broadly in the Fezzan as head of the

¹⁴ Research interview carried out as part of the Chatham House Hybrid Armed Actors in the Middle East and North Africa project (hereafter references to interviews carried out as part of this project are referred to as 'Research interviews'), August 2020.

¹⁵ Research interview, August 2020; Lacher (2020), *A Most Irregular Army*.

¹⁶ Research interview, August 2020.

Southern Operations Group as the LAAF sought expansion. Another former regime loyalist, al-Mabrouk Sahban, ascended to the leadership of the 12th Brigade following Bin Nayel's death in 2020.

Others emerged to command prominent units within the LAAF, such as Hassan Maatoug al-Zadma (Battalion 128), Masoud Jeddi (Battalion 116) and Omar Morajea (Tariq Bin Ziyad Brigade). More is noted about these formations later in this chapter. Each of these leaders had fought on the side of the regime in 2011. The integration of such figures, and Haftar's outreach to their social bases, presented the opportunity for expansion of the LAAF's power base at a time when ties with pro-revolutionary elements of the alliance, such as Osama Juweili's forces in Zintan, had ended.

Benghazi-based armed groups

Haftar's accords with armed groups from Benghazi represented a marriage of convenience. Alliances with armed groups drawn from the Awagir tribe – based on the outskirts of Benghazi and represented by leaders such as Faraj Egaim, Ezzedine Wakwak and the brothers Salah and Khalid Bulghib – made up the bulk of Haftar's fighting force to combat Benghazi's Islamist groups.¹⁷

Further fighters were provided by the Saiqa Special Forces. When Operation Dignity launched, Saiqa had more civilian recruits than professional holdovers from the Gaddafi era. Saiqa's enlarged ranks added to the manpower deployed in the operation but also considerably weakened the ability of senior commanders to control local forces.¹⁸ Expansion led to the fragmentation of the group.

These developments have led to extreme violence and unconstrained behaviour. The late Saiqa officer Mahmoud al-Werfalli was subject to an International Criminal Court arrest warrant following the conduct of a series of summary executions.¹⁹ Similar dynamics exist within Ayad al-Fsay's Awliya al-Dam, which is alleged to be responsible for the disappearance of the House of Representatives member Siham Sergiwa, in July 2019, after she made critical remarks about the LAAF.²⁰

Haftar subsequently sought to fragment and/or marginalize these local armed groups through a combination of violence, supplying arms to erstwhile allies and the exploitation of rifts among their leaders to disrupt horizontal ties among them. These strategies proved effective, in turn constraining the ability of these commanders to build groups that could mobilize horizontally, as a broader constituency. As a result, local Benghazi groups remained functionally independent but weak. This approach enabled Haftar to remove a prominent and oppositional commander from the Barassa tribe, Faraj al-Barassi, in June 2015.²¹

¹⁷ Lacher (2020), *A Most Irregular Army*, p. 10.

¹⁸ Badi (2020), *Exploring Armed Groups in Libya*, p. 16.

¹⁹ International Criminal Court (2018), 'Case Information Sheet: The Prosecutor v. Mahmoud Mustafa Busyif Al-Werfalli', <https://www.icc-cpi.int/CaseInformationSheets/al-werfalliEng.pdf>.

²⁰ Amnesty International (2019), 'Libya: Fears mount for abducted woman politician a month since she went missing', 16 August 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/08/libya-fears-mount-for-abducted-woman-politician-a-month-since-she-went-missing>.

²¹ Lacher (2020), *A Most Irregular Army*, pp. 14–5.

Senior members of the Awagir tribe subsequently challenged Haftar by accepting leading positions in the GNA, which was formed in December 2015. Mehdi al-Bargathi, a prominent Awagir commander who had supported Operation Dignity, was appointed GNA defence minister but was sidelined following his alleged connection to a massacre of LAAF-affiliated fighters in Brak al-Shati in 2017. A further attempt by the GNA to court Awagir support was made in September 2017 when Faraj Egaim was appointed GNA deputy interior minister. However, following his return to Benghazi, multiple attempts were made on his life and forces loyal to Haftar detained him in November the same year. Following a thawing of relations with Haftar, Egaim re-emerged in July 2019 as the head of a counterterrorism force affiliated with the LAAF.²²

However, while it has been able to marginalize the leaders of such groups and prevent them from obtaining heavy weaponry, the LAAF must retain a *modus vivendi*. The careful treatment of Egaim sought to head off his threat without causing more Awagir factions to break away from the LAAF.²³ Similarly, the LAAF response to the International Criminal Court issuing an arrest warrant for the Saiqa officer Werfalli was to detain him and to provide assurances to international actors about an investigation, only to release him later.

As the LAAF's fortunes deteriorated on Tripoli's frontlines in 2019, Haftar attempted a rapprochement with Awagir actors. This included outreach to Khalid Bulghib, one of those marginalized in previous years, to re-form his Military Intelligence Support Forces as an auxiliary force to support the offensive. Bulghib refused.²⁴ Haftar also leaned on Werfalli to muster further forces for the LAAF, appearing in Bani Walid in April 2020 with cash to aid recruitment.²⁵

The inability of the LAAF to provide security in its stronghold of Benghazi has been exposed as elements of the LAAF alliance compete against one another operating outside of the law without any accountability from civilian or LAAF police and prosecutors. While the impunity of such groups has long been a source of tension, a series of high-profile events from November 2020 onwards illustrated the scale of the problem. On 10 November 2020, Hanan al-Barassi – a prominent lawyer and critic of the LAAF who had threatened to share evidence implicating Saddam Haftar (Khalifa Haftar's son) in crimes – was gunned down in Benghazi in broad daylight.²⁶ On 2 March 2021, a video went viral of Mahmoud al-Werfalli sacking the offices of the Benghazi branch of Toyota.²⁷

Over the subsequent two weeks, there were several local meetings of social constituencies demanding investigations into extrajudicial killings, openly challenging Haftar in a way not seen in previous years. On 18 March, the bodies of a number of men were discovered in Benghazi's Hawari district. Their hands

²² Eaton et al. (2020), *Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014*, p. 23.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Research interviews, July and August 2020.

²⁵ Lacher, W. (@W_Lacher) (2020), 'Over the past ten days, there have been consistent reports that Mahmoud al-Werfalli, who notoriously filmed the mass executions he carried out and is wanted by the ICC, is in the Bani Walid area to mobilize a force for Haftar's war effort', tweet, 29 April 2020, https://twitter.com/W_Lacher/status/1255425746568384513.

²⁶ Human Rights Watch (2020), 'Libya: Outspoken Benghazi Lawyer Murdered', 11 November 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/11/libya-outspoken-benghazi-lawyer-murdered>.

²⁷ YouTube (2021), 'The militias of "Mahmoud Werfalli" assault a car dealership and destroy the contents of the headquarters' (Arabic), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbhYBGUMeCE>.

were bound and each reportedly had been shot in the head.²⁸ The spiral continued the following week when Werfalli was murdered by unknown masked gunmen in Benghazi.²⁹ Reflecting the complex relationship of Werfalli to the LAAF, General Command issued a statement mourning Werfalli's death while speculation reigned over potential LAAF involvement in the killing. Benghazi's military prosecutor was reportedly fired for stating that Werfalli was undergoing psychiatric treatment.³⁰

These fast-paced developments illustrate that LAAF partners in Benghazi are far from integrated into the LAAF's structure, remaining a confluence of parochial and increasingly fragmented groups. Some loyalties are extremely weak. The selection (February 2021) and approval (March 2021) of a new national government was unfolding at the same time as the situation in Benghazi deteriorated. These dynamics will be analysed in the next chapter, but it should be noted that they are already impacting the security dynamic. On 25 April 2021, the GNU appointed Egaïm to the same position in the Ministry of Interior he held previously, seemingly another attempt to dilute Haftar's hold on power.³¹

The Madkhalis

The launch of Operation Dignity in May 2014 created a self-fulfilling prophecy by providing a threat that would unite Benghazi's Islamist-leaning armed groups under the aegis of the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council (BRSC).³² The BRSC seized control over much of Benghazi in July and August 2014, in turn helping to exacerbate the common threat to the groups aligned with Operation Dignity and mobilizing popular support for Haftar. The assassination of a number of Salafi figures in Benghazi in this period, combined with a hostile relationship towards the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist-leaning groups provided the rationale for Madkhali-Salafi adherents³³ to join with Operation Dignity.³⁴ Some Madkhali elements were interspersed among Haftar's forces fighting in Benghazi, as was the case within subunits of the Saiqa Special Forces, while others were part of specific Madkhali formations, such as the Salafi Battalion and the Tawhid Brigade. Madkhali formations, including Tawhid (now restructured and renamed LAAF Battalion 210) and the Salafi Battalion (now incorporated into the Tariq Bin Ziyad

²⁸ The number of bodies varies from 8–15 depending on the report. See Reuters (2021), 'Libya to Investigate Discovery of Bodies in 2021', 20 March 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-libya-security-idUSKBN2BCOCE>.

²⁹ Reuters (2021), 'Gunmen kill wanted Libyan commander in new sign of instability', 24 March 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-idUSKBN2BG2TU>.

³⁰ Assad, A. (2021), 'Head of military prosecution in Benghazi dismissed after Al-Werfalli remarks',

30 March 2021, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/news/head-military-prosecution-benghazi-dismissed-after-al-werfalli-remarks>.

³¹ Harchaoui, J. (@JMJalel_H) (2021), 'Faraj Eqaim used to hold that same position under Serraj, but Haftar held him in captivity between Nov 2017 & Aug 2018. They then reconciled', tweet, 25 April 2021, https://twitter.com/JMJalel_H/status/1386391734758699009.

³² Lacher (2020), *A Most Irregular Army*, p. 11.

³³ Madkhali-Salafis are adherents of the Saudi cleric Rabee al-Madkhali, although they do not self-identify as Madkhalis. Madkhalis are typically seen as 'quietist' Salafis who focus on spreading the faith (*daawa*), privileging obedience to the ruler and neither employing violence against rulers nor participating in institutional politics. However, the lines between characterizations of Salafis are blurred. For an analysis of these dynamics, see Collombier, V. (2020), *Salafi Politics: 'Political' and 'Quietist' Salafis in the Struggle for the Libyan State*, Research Project Report, Fiesole: European University Institute, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69113/QM-02-20-018-EN-N.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

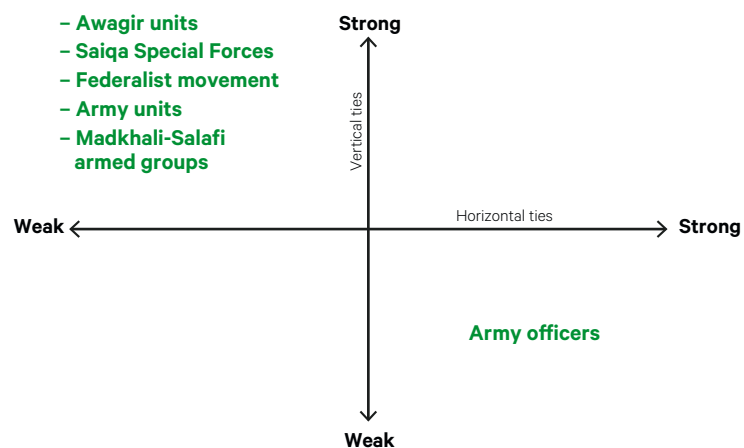
³⁴ International Crisis Group (2019), *Addressing the Rise of Libya's Madkhali-Salafis*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°200, Brussels: International Crisis Group, p. 10, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/200-libyas-madkhali-salafis.pdf>.

Battalion) remain critical elements of the LAAF structure. Yet, the nature of their integration illustrates that this is not a broad vanguard constituency that has strong horizontal links across the country. The Madkhali fighters in groups such as Battalion 210 are appointed due to tribal affiliation, although some groups are concentrated due to geographical location. Other groups with a significant Madkhali component include Kufra-based Subul al-Salam and several units drawn from the northwestern coastal cities.

Madkhali-dominated groups have established ties with counterparts across the country, and even across the LAAF–GNA divide. One example of this was when the GNA-affiliated Special Deterrence Force (SDF) sent three ambulances to LAAF-affiliated Subul al-Salam in Kufra in 2017.³⁵ In the pivotal city of Sirte, Madkhali-dominated forces – Battalion 604 and Battalion 110 – that were trained by the GNA-aligned and Madkhali-led SDF switched allegiance to the LAAF. The LAAF was reported in February 2021 to be preparing to establish Tariq Bin Ziyad brigade's headquarters in the city,³⁶ presumably to capitalize on the Madkhali ideological ties in the city with the 604 and 110 battalions.

While the networks of Madkhali armed actors are developing, they predominantly remain manifested in localized groups, reflecting their parochial nature. There are indications that, given time and shared experience, these groups could develop into a national vanguard network based on ideological kinship. The presence of a well-resourced and externally backed cadre of Madkhali clerics, which has come to dominate the religious authorities in eastern Libya and is seemingly growing in influence in other areas of the country, is strengthening vertical ties between the leaders and the social base of these groups. Madkhali fighters have been a critical asset in the LAAF's campaigns since mid-2014 and look set to grow in influence over social and military affairs.

Figure 2. Operation Dignity Units (2014)



Source: Chatham House research.

³⁵ Harchaoui, J. and Lazib, M. (2019), *Proxy War Dynamics in Libya*, Virginia: Virginia Tech School of Public and International Affairs, p. 8, <https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/91990>.

³⁶ Hawari, O. (2021), *How Sirte Became A Hotbed of the Libyan Conflict*, European University Institute, February 2021, https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/69879/PB_2021_05_MED-EN.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

The development of the LAAF's praetorian units

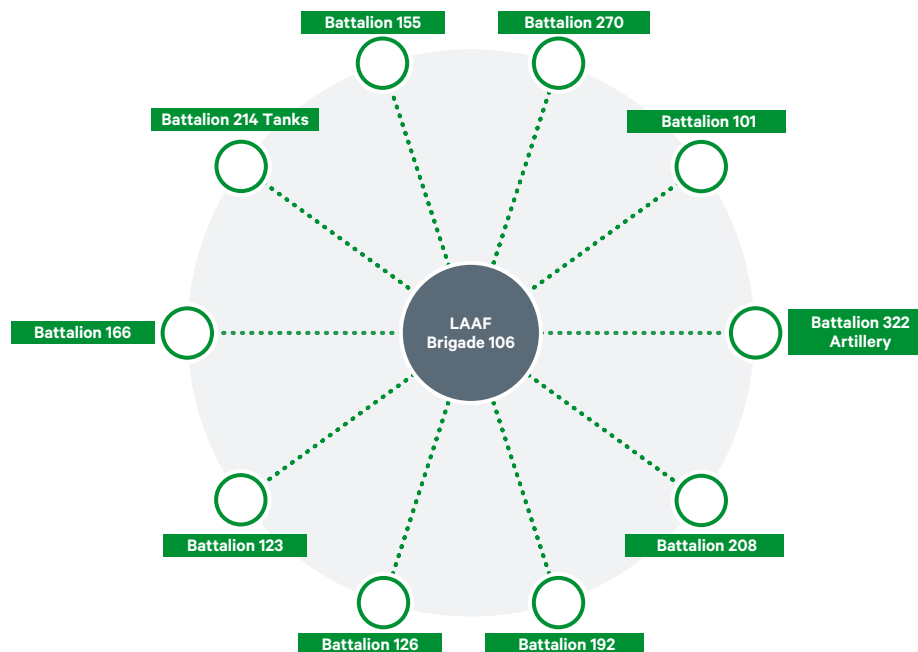
Critical to Haftar's attempts to centralize power within the LAAF has been the development of loyalist formations that function akin to a praetorian guard. Since 2016, many existing units with army and revolutionary origins have been absorbed into such units. Critically, while these brigades seek to some degree to recruit across tribal lines, they are overwhelmingly under the control of Haftar, his family and his kinsmen from the Ferjan tribe. The terminology can be confusing, however, as some battalions are considerably larger and more powerful than existing brigades, and the establishment of both a series of operations rooms and military zones further complicates the command structure.

Brigade 106 is the largest single group within the LAAF in terms of manpower, equipment and territorial control. It originated in 2014 when it was in charge of Haftar's personal protection. It was officially formed in 2016 as a battalion before being substantially expanded in 2018 to the status of a brigade made up of at least 10 battalions from Benghazi and Ajdabiya.³⁷ Brigade 106 is an elite force that can also draw upon auxiliaries from Salafi groups and eastern tribes. It has been steadily supplied with graduates from the military college since 2016 and very well supplied with arms and materiel, befitting the image of a modern army that Haftar seeks to project.

The leadership of Brigade 106 reflects the duality of the LAAF's chain of command. Its official commander is Major General Salem Rahil, but Haftar's son Khalid operates as its de facto leader. Rahil was promoted in mid-2019 following Brigade 106's struggles in the Tripoli offensive, where it failed in its pivotal objectives in Zawiyah and suffered severe losses before being withdrawn. The brigade contains an increasing number of subunits that are powerful groups in their own right. The de facto leader of Battalion 155, a subunit of Brigade 106, is Haftar's distant cousin from Tripoli, Bassem al-Buaishi, despite the fact he has no military training. He is Haftar's 'first secretary' and a trusted adviser. Another Brigade 106 subunit, Battalion 166, is unofficially led by Ayoub Bousayf al-Ferjani, Haftar's son-in-law and personal 'second secretary' within the General Command. Bousayf emerged from military training in Jordan in 2017 directly with the rank of major. His previous experience had come from fighting in 2011 with the Ajdabiya-based Mujahid Belqacem Haftar Battalion – named after Khalifa Haftar's father. Battalion 166 belongs to the new generation of LAAF praetorian units. It is well equipped and made up of new young recruits who graduated from the LAAF-run military training college in Benghazi, in addition to veteran officers from the Gaddafi-era's security apparatus. It integrated into Brigade 106 in 2018.

³⁷ These include Battalions 101, 111, 124, 126, 155, 166, 192, 208, 270 and 321. Data from research interviews, July and August 2020.

Figure 3. Brigade 106 and its subunits



Source: Chatham House research.

Elsewhere in eastern Libya, the LAAF has sought to consolidate groupings under commanders with strong relations with Haftar. One example is Brigade 73, which was formed in 2018 by amalgamating 11 pre-existing groups stretching from the east of Benghazi to Tobruk, including al-Marj and al-Jabal al-Akhdar.³⁸ Brigade 73 was formed around Battalion 276, a unit that comprises a significant number of military officers from the Gaddafi-era and that was among the initial forces to have supported Operation Dignity. Brigade 73 is led by General Ali al-Qataani, who previously commanded Battalion 276.

Expansion through the ‘franchise’ model

Beyond eastern Libya, the LAAF operates a franchising model whereby individual commanders are able to reach an accommodation with Haftar and his inner circle to expand their forces under the aegis of the LAAF. This strategy mirrors the early engagement between Haftar and parochial groups in eastern Libya during the development of Operation Dignity. These franchises are not a natural fit with the LAAF’s organizational structure of military zones and operations rooms, which perhaps explains the regular shifts in the LAAF’s formal structure. Analysts have variously described the LAAF as something like a Ponzi scheme or a franchising

³⁸ The 11 pre-existing groups that form Brigade 73 are Battalions 2, 120, 123, 153, 157, 165 (Juwayfi), 298, 303, 409, 276 and Sussa’s 2nd Company. Data from research interviews, July and August 2020.

model.³⁹ Indeed, incorporation into the alliance brings access to financial resources as well as technical and operational support from external states (these elements of the LAAF are covered below in Chapter 3).

Perhaps the best example of the LAAF franchise model is the development of Battalion 128. It was set up in September 2016 by Hassan Maatuuq al-Zadma, a young military police major trained under the Gaddafi regime. With private funding he rallied a core group of fighters in his hometown of Harawa, mainly from the Awlad Suleiman tribe, to protect it against incursions by Islamic State (ISIS), which at that time controlled Sirte. The alliance with Maatuuq presented an opportunity for the LAAF leadership to build a bridge to the Awlad Suleiman, and consequently the southern region known as the Fezzan. In the context of the LAAF's westward expansion strategy, this alliance reflected the changing political situation at the time, namely the LAAF's outreach to Gaddafi loyalist constituencies. Initially called the 2nd Company of Battalion 204, Maatuuq's group became Battalion 128 in June 2017, when it formally integrated into the LAAF. It has since grown into one of the alliance's largest and most influential forces. Since 2018, Battalion 128 has been based near Hun, Jufra. Through its many companies it also has a presence in other parts of Libya, including in Ajdabiya, Sebha, Ubari, Uwainat and Ghat.

The core membership of Battalion 128 stems from Harawa, 70 kilometres east of Sirte, where Maatuuq recruited relatives and fellow members of his Awlad Suleiman tribe. Most other 'first generation members' are also from the Greater Sirte or Ajdabiya areas and include many Zway tribe members. As the battalion expanded, recruiting individual fighters and incorporating pre-existing groups in different parts of the country, it became far more diverse, integrating Warfalla, Majabra, Hamamla, Ahali, Hasawna, Tuareg, Tawargha and others. Before they joined the battalion, some of these groups were operating as auxiliaries. From 2017, Mahamid, Tuareg and other auxiliary fighters from southern and central Libya were recruited for military operations. Maatuuq has also been hosting fighters from two Sudanese rebel groups at the battalion's Jufra base.⁴⁰

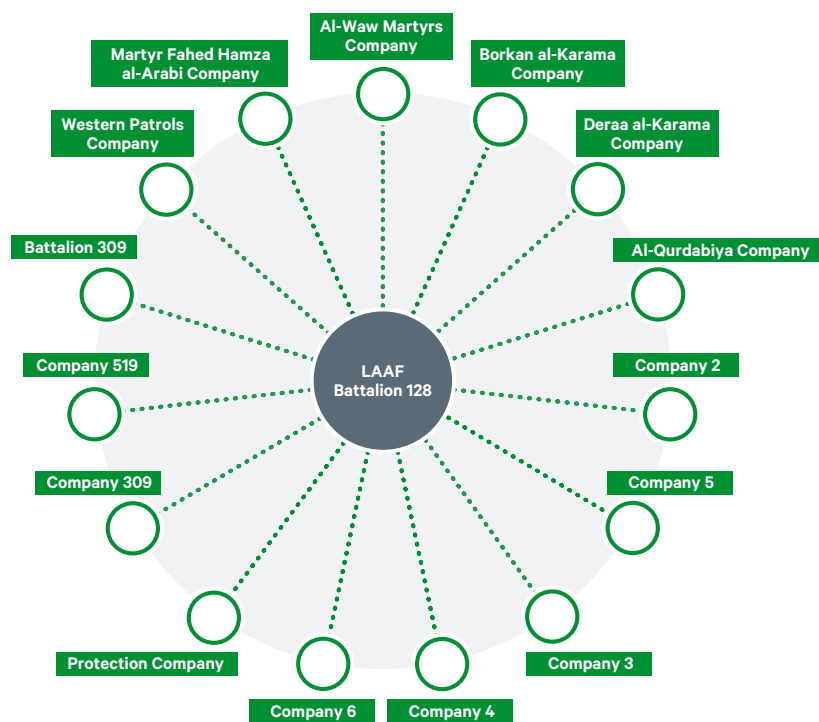
Battalion 128's expansion accelerated in 2019 in the context of the Tripoli offensive, which most of its companies took part in. Since its creation, its structure has been modified frequently; new units (companies) were set up for specific operations and contexts or to reward auxiliary fighters, and some of them have been restructured and renamed. The battalion has in some cases opportunistically preyed on armed groups that were sidelined by the LAAF's advances, taking over some of their elements. This strategy has been particularly visible in Sebha and Ubari. Battalion 128's 'acquisition' of fighters in western Libya is also helping its expansion. Mohamed Abu Nuwara, one prominent field commander, stems from Zawiya.

³⁹ Tarek Megerisi describes the LAAF's expansion as a Ponzi scheme. Megerisi T. (2019), 'While You Weren't Looking, General Haftar Has Been Taking Over Libya', *Foreign Policy*, 1 April 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/01/while-you-were-not-looking-general-haftar-has-been-taking-over-libya-oil-united-nations>. Emadeddin Badi refers to the LAAF's operation as a franchise. Badi (2020), *Exploring Armed Groups in Libya*, p. 57.

⁴⁰ Wanjala, T. B., Ciesay, P., Darracq, V., Dobronravina, N. and Yadav, R. (2020), *Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan (S/2020/36)*, <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2020/36>.

Battalion 128 may have the greatest geographic reach of all LAAF forces. Through the incorporation of smaller groups from areas as far apart as Ajdabiya and Ghat, it has influence across a vast area as well as in many tribes and communities. The LAAF command has facilitated this expansion through the provision of resources and security mandates. Indeed, Battalion 128 was instrumental in the LAAF's progressive expansion into the Fezzan, aided by the group's ties to Awlad Suleiman in Sebha. It gained visibility at the start of 2019 when it was among the few non-Fezzan LAAF-affiliates taking part in Operation Southern Purge.

Figure 4. Battalion 128 and its subunits



Source: Chatham House research.

The relationships between the LAAF and its franchises are underpinned by mutual interest: the horizontal ties between Haftar's inner circle and franchise commanders are personalized rather than institutionalized. This leaves them prone to fragmentation.

Such dynamics are illustrated by the recruitment of Masoud Jeddi's forces into the LAAF. Jeddi's armed groups have shifted affiliation in accordance with the prevailing power structure at the national level, illustrating a transactional approach to forming alliances. A low-ranking police officer in the Gaddafi era who fought for the regime in 2011, Jeddi gained a foothold in Sebha using Salafi networks and cultivating a public image of efficient law enforcement after 2011. He co-founded in early 2012 the Faruq Battalion, a policing entity that was notorious for its tough detention practices. This was dissolved in 2013 when Jeddi set up a sub-branch of the SDF in Sebha with the help of the SDF Tripoli and its leader, Abdul Raouf Kara. Between 2014 and 2017, the SDF was broadly

aligned with the Libya Dawn camp and the Misratan Third Force in the Fezzan (both antagonistic towards the LAAF). But, as Haftar shifted his focus to the Fezzan and put his weight behind the late Mohamed Bin Nayel at the start of 2017, Jeddi pledged allegiance to the LAAF and, while maintaining connections to SDF Sebha, established a new entity: Battalion 116.

Battalion 116 has become one of the LAAF's most powerful elements in the Fezzan despite its blurred mandate, uncertainties over its official formation,⁴¹ limited professional training and widespread allegations of Jeddi's involvement in illicit practices. In this incarnation, the group has become less outwardly religious. It comprises largely fighters with limited military training and, while it had a mixed tribal composition when it was part of the SDF structure, its composition is considerably less diverse today with the majority of its fighters being from the Awlad Suleiman tribe.

Since 2018, Battalion 116 has been involved in a succession of LAAF military campaigns in southern and central Libya and in Tripoli. Over the course of Operation Southern Purge, Battalion 116 gained ground within Sebha as the LAAF command reallocated security mandates. It took part in the controversial Murzuq offensive alongside Battalion 128 and other smaller contingents.⁴² During 2019 several new units were set up under Battalion 116, from Jufra to Tarhuna, likely in an attempt to diversify the make-up of the force. These new units formed a significant contingent of Battalion 116's deployment to Tripoli's frontlines. However, Jeddi's history of working with military actors across the spectrum raises questions over the sustainability of his relationship with the LAAF.

Intermediaries: Network brokerage

The LAAF has sought to identify individuals who can act as brokers with other networks of communities and armed factions to negotiate alliances. This has occurred in different guises, such as through the appointment of commanders with relationships with social leaders – such as General Belgasim al-Abaj – as well as through non-military figures. For example, Saleh al-Latyush, a Magharba tribal leader based in Benghazi, was a pivotal figure in negotiating the transition of control of the 'oil crescent' – the region comprising much of Libya's oil and gas infrastructure – from commanders associated with Ibrahim Jadhran to

⁴¹ Battalion 116 and the Deterrence Operations Sebha-Bawanis (the latter formed out of the SDF Sebha) exist in parallel to one another. In principle the first is a military battalion while the second is a special law enforcement group, but in practice the line between them is blurred.

⁴² The fact that Battalions 128 and 116 are predominantly Awlad Suleiman and that the fighters who entered Murzuq took part in acts of violence and looting spurred resistance from the Tebu community against the LAAF campaign. The battalions were quickly pulled out and replaced by the Tebu-led Khalid bin al-Walid Battalion.

LAAF-affiliated commanders.⁴³ Naji al-Moghrabi, an LAAF officer who commanded Battalion 298 and also hails from the Magharba tribe, was brought in to head the Petroleum Facilities Guard associated with the LAAF and the eastern authorities.

The LAAF has also sought to reach out to religious figures. Its relationship with the prominent Madkhali-Salafi preacher Tariq al-Durman (also known as Abu al-Khatib) in particular appears critical to the maintenance of support from Madkhali-dominated armed groups drawn from the Nafusa mountain city of Zintan and the northwestern coastal cities of Sabratha and Surman. This includes the al-Adiyat Brigade that is reported to take Durman's orders. Its fighters seek to position themselves as an elite strike force and were active on the frontlines in the 2019 Tripoli offensive. Durman also maintains a strong relationship with a group akin to a popular police force named the Committee of the 200, whose membership is drawn from across the social groups of Zintan.

The LAAF has sought to identify individuals who can act as brokers with other networks of communities and armed factions to negotiate alliances.

A cleric from Zintan, Durman has over the past few years become a leading Madkhali-Salafi figure. In the context of the struggle for control of Libya's religious space, he became known as a strong opponent of the Islamist trend that advocates direct engagement in politics embodied by Mufti al-Sadeq al-Ghariani and the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁴ Durman's followers increased rapidly, not just in Zintan but also in nearby cities and across the country, as he began delivering Friday sermons and reaching out to followers via social media and a weekly programme on a local religious channel (al-Quran al-Karim Channel). Durman's rise has reportedly been facilitated by his strong relationships with the Saudi and Emirati authorities.⁴⁵

Durman long toed a cautious line over endorsing Haftar, likely the result of a combination of his existing relations with Madkhali-oriented groups aligned with the GNA and the need to avoid exacerbating Zintan's internal divisions over support for the GNA and the LAAF. In December 2019, Durman made his position overt and authorized fighters to join the LAAF against the 'traitors' in Tripoli and the Turkish 'aggressors'.⁴⁶ After a warrant was issued for his arrest by GNA

⁴³ For analysis of Haftar's relationships with tribal figures and of the deal with Latyush, see Pargeter, A. (2020), 'Haftar, Tribal Power and the Battle for Libya', War on the Rocks, 15 May 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/haftar-tribal-power-and-the-battle-for-libya>. Latyush was locked in a battle for influence of the Magharba tribe with Ibrahim Jadhraan, a former commander in the Petroleum Facilities Guard and prominent federalist who had imposed a lengthy oil blockade in the oil crescent and sought to export oil directly in 2013–14. For analysis of the importance of control of the oil crescent, see Eaton, T., Cheng, C., Mansour, M., Salisbury, P., Yazigi, J. and Khatib, L. (2019), *Conflict Economies in the Middle East and North Africa*, Chatham House Report, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/conflict-economies-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

⁴⁴ From 2014, Durman issued numerous statements accusing al-Ghariani of misleading the faithful with false fatwas and promoting terrorism. See Abu Abdallah al-Kor Ghali (2016), Sheikh Abu al-Khitab Tareq Darman al-Zintani: al-Sadeq al-Ghirbani is not a decision-maker (Arabic), 22 October 2016, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwg2_S0svuM.

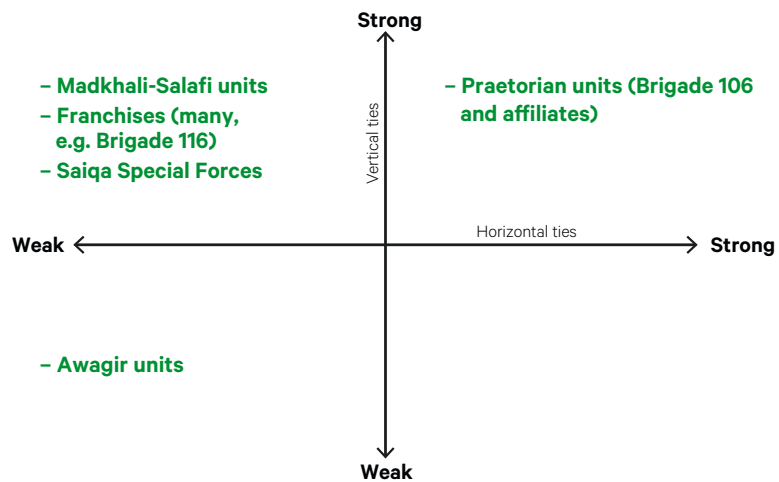
⁴⁵ Research interviews, August, September and November 2020.

⁴⁶ When the Zintan Revolutionaries' Military Council commander Abdul Salam Busitta was killed at the frontline in June 2019, followed by his successor Majdi al-Tabtash in December 2019, Durman was no longer bound by these loyalties and changed his discourse.

authorities in January 2020, Durman reportedly relocated to eastern Libya. He, and the vanguard networks that are closely associated with him, have strong relations with Haftar's son Saddam – this is their channel of communication rather than the official LAAF chain of command.

Other actors have sought to position themselves as network brokers for the LAAF. Mesbah Basim, a notable elder of the city of Zawiyah who has settled in Benghazi, joined several delegations to Zawiyah to negotiate what appeared to be a neutrality pact ahead of the LAAF offensive on Tripoli in 2019. The discussions resulted in the release of several high-profile prisoners by Haftar in March 2019 and in return the establishment of an LAAF material supply camp near Zawiyah. However, the deal did not result in the neutrality of Zawiyah groups. One of the prisoners released by Haftar, Mahmoud Bin Rajab, was the first commander to disregard the neutrality pact. A significant number of Zawiyah groups and fighters mobilized to oppose the LAAF offensive, capturing 128 members of Brigade 106, which had seized a key checkpoint on the entry to Tripoli, some of whom were found to be minors.⁴⁷ What remained of the tenuous agreement broke down following the LAAF's launch of airstrikes on Zawiyah in late 2019 and local armed groups overran its supply camp near Zawiyah. Despite the failure of the agreement Basim has continued to attend gatherings to showcase 'tribal' support for Haftar, in Tarhuna in February 2020 and in Cairo in June 2020.

Figure 5. LAAF units (2021)



Source: Chatham House research.

⁴⁷ Lacher, W. (2019), *Who is Fighting Whom in Tripoli? How the 2019 Civil War is Transforming Libya's Military Landscape*, Briefing Paper, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, p. 6, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-SANA-BP-Tripoli-2019.pdf>.

03 Leveraging external support

The LAAF's development has been made possible by extensive external support. In the wake of military defeats in 2020, the LAAF is more reliant on external states and networks of foreign fighters than ever before.

The degree of support provided by external states to the LAAF has been foundational to Haftar's ability to restructure his forces and exert control over them. Financial and material support principally from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt allowed him to develop the LAAF's air power as well as to provide sophisticated weaponry, cash incentives and training to existing and would-be allies. The control of weapons provision has facilitated the LAAF's efforts to establish a monopoly over heavy weapons.⁴⁸ Haftar's growing military resources were complemented with increased financing as the LAAF solidified its revenue streams from eastern-based authorities that were backed by Goznak, a state-owned Russian company (these elements are discussed in the next chapter).⁴⁹

Haftar has relied upon the resources and ally networks of his external backers to fund armed groups to bolster his forces. The contribution of mercenaries has enabled the LAAF to conduct its campaigns beyond eastern Libya, where it has struggled to project force, an indication of the limits of Haftar's command and control of his sprawling eastern-based forces. This is also likely a testament to fears of the consequences of leaving a vacuum in his strongholds by deploying large contingents of his most loyal forces outside the region.

From 2014, Darfurian armed groups have sought to leverage their alignment with Haftar to consolidate their ties with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE who backed Haftar and – importantly – opposed the Sudanese government of then

⁴⁸ Eaton et al. (2020), *Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014*, p. 54.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

President Omar al-Bashir.⁵⁰ The Sudan Liberation Army faction led by Minni Minawi (SLA-MM) became the main Darfur rebel movement in Libya. It was joined by, and coordinated its activities with, other splinter factions that would form the Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces (GSLF).⁵¹ These forces participated in the LAAF's recapture of Jufra in 2017 and its expansion in southern Libya in 2019, and they also provided protection for the LAAF rear in the oil crescent following the launch of the 2019 Tripoli offensive.⁵²

However, the Darfurian armed factions themselves operate as a network of parochial organizations whose leaders share strategic objectives and coordinate actions but the organizations are far from integrated, let alone integrated elements of the LAAF. Darfurian rebels have fought with competing forces in Libya. For example, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) fought alongside anti-LAAF forces in 2018, reportedly clashing with the SLA-MM in the oil crescent.⁵³ Darfurian groups did not play a prominent role in the early phases of the Tripoli offensive. The SLA-MM and JEM are alleged to have reached an agreement in May 2019 not to fight each other.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, there were reports of the SLA-MM, GSLF and other Darfurian fighters on the Tripoli front lines after November 2019, allegedly at the instigation of Egypt and the UAE.⁵⁵ These deployments continued until June 2020 when LAAF forces were defeated on the Tripoli frontlines and forced into retreat. Darfurian groups subsequently relocated to Harawa and the Jufra basin.⁵⁶

The interaction of the Darfurian groups with the LAAF has become more formalized, reflecting the importance of their role in the LAAF's war effort. Darfurian commanders are reported to have travelled to Benghazi to meet with the LAAF's top commanders; however, it is Saddam Haftar who is reportedly their main interlocutor in the LAAF leadership.⁵⁷ At the operational level, the Darfurian armed groups deal with LAAF affiliates. Those based in the town of Harawa receive daily supplies, ammunition, food and fuel from Hassan Maatouq al-Zadma's Battalion 128. Zilla-based forces reportedly receive daily supplies from the forces of Hilal Musa.⁵⁸

The signing of the Juba Agreement for peace in Sudan in November 2020 has impacted the future status of Darfurian armed groups in Libya. While negotiations among Sudanese factions remain complex over settling their disputes with the Sudanese government, the Juba Agreement has triggered movements of Sudanese mercenaries to Darfur. The SLA-MM is reported to have moved 40 vehicles, while JEM has apparently moved dozens.⁵⁹

⁵⁰ Tubiana, J. and Gramizzi, C. (2018), *Lost in Trans-nation: Tubu and Other Armed Groups and Smugglers along Libya's Southern Border*, Report, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/U-Reports/SAS-SANA-Report-Lost-in-Trans-nation.pdf>.

⁵¹ Some reports have asserted that 1,000 men from the Sudanese Rapid Support Forces (also known as the Janjaweed) had been deployed to Libya in support of Haftar, but the UN Panel of Experts for Sudan found 'no credible evidence' of their presence. See Wanjala, T. B., Ciesay, P., Darracq, V., Dobronravin, N. and Yadav, R. (2021), *Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan (S/2020/36)*, p. 19, <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2020/36>.

⁵² Tubiana and Gramizzi (2018), *Lost in Trans-nation*, p. 21.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ Wanjala et al. (2021), *Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan (S/2021/40)*, p. 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵⁹ Choudhury, L. M., Aoun, A., Badawy, D., de Albuquerque Bacardit, L. A., Marjane, Y. and Wilkinson, A. (2021), *Final report of the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to Security Council resolution 1973 (2011) (S/2021/229)*, p. 7, <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2021/229>.

Darfurian commanders have developed direct relationships with the UAE. The LAAF distributes support provided by the UAE to the Darfurian groups.⁶⁰ There are reports that Darfurian commanders have met with UAE counterparts in eastern Libya and also in the UAE, effectively bypassing the LAAF.⁶¹ The UAE has also sought to bolster LAAF forces with foreign recruits. This has included recruiting Sudanese men via an entity called Black Shield Services and training them in the UAE for deployment in Libya. Legal cases are currently underway in Sudan in which such recruits have claimed that they were duped into being deployed in Libya's oil crescent, saying that they believed that they would be operating as security guards within the UAE.⁶²

The interaction of the Darfurian groups with the LAAF has become more formalized, reflecting the importance of their role in the LAAF's war effort.

The role of mercenaries deployed by the Russian paramilitary organization Wagner Group to support the LAAF has been instrumental. This relationship appears dependent on state-level relations. The Wagner Group entered Libya in the first half of 2018, but, critically, it stepped into the battle for Tripoli in August 2019 to bolster the LAAF's faltering offensive. In the autumn of 2019, Wagner mercenaries had become an essential component of Haftar's operation.⁶³ The Wagner Group is known to have close links to Russia's President Vladimir Putin and is described by the US State Department as a surrogate for Russia's Ministry of Defence.⁶⁴ The Kremlin has maintained implausible denials of such links, insisting that the Wagner Group is a private military contractor, despite widespread reports of serving Russian military officers operating within it.⁶⁵ The US Africa Command has estimated that around 2,000 Wagner operatives were in Libya between July and September 2020.⁶⁶

The funding of the Wagner Group is also the subject of speculation. In 2020, the US Defense Intelligence Agency concluded that, while evidence is ambiguous, the UAE 'may provide some financing for the group's operations'.⁶⁷ The UAE's

⁶⁰ Wanjala et al. (2021), *Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan (S/2021/40)*, p. 23

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23

⁶² Trew, B. (2020), 'Sudanese men hired as shopping mall security guards 'tricked' into fighting in Libya civil war', *Independent*, 3 November 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/sudan-libya-civil-war-tricked-fighting-b1554374.html>.

⁶³ Harchaoui, J. (2021), 'The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Way to More Influence in Libya', *War on the Rocks*, 7 January 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-pendulum-how-russia-sways-its-way-to-more-influence-in-libya>.

⁶⁴ US Department of Defense (2020), *East Africa Counterterrorism Operation, North and West Africa Counterterrorism Operation - Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, p. 36, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Nov/25/2002541626/-1/-1/1/LEAD%20IG%20EAST%20AFRICA%20AND%20NORTH%20AND%20WEST%20AFRICA%20COUNTERTERRORISM%20OPERATIONS.PDF>.

⁶⁵ Barabunov, I. and Aksenov, P. (2020), 'The circumstances of the death are 'none of our business.' An officer who could have died in Libya was buried near Orenburg' (Russian), *BBC News*, 14 February 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-51501122>.

⁶⁶ US Department of Defense (2020), *East Africa Counterterrorism Operation, North and West Africa Counterterrorism Operation - Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

ambassador to the US has denied the country has financed the Wagner Group.⁶⁸ It is clear that LAAF commanders do not possess any meaningful control over Wagner forces, as illustrated by the latter's sudden withdrawal from the Tripoli frontlines in March 2020.⁶⁹ In other countries where Wagner has deployed, such as Syria and the Central African Republic, it has sought to develop its own revenue streams through engagement in the oil and mining sectors.⁷⁰

As Turkish support flooded in to repel Haftar's forces from Tripoli in December 2019, the LAAF's ranks were bolstered by the addition of Syrian mercenaries. The recruitment of these fighters came through the networks of the LAAF's external backers. In March 2019, Haftar opened an 'embassy' in Damascus and recruitment (organized by the Wagner Group) appears to have begun in earnest, targeting – among others – former rebels who had fought against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad and had now reconciled with it. Some were drawn from Russia-backed Syrian forces.⁷¹ By June–September 2020, the Pentagon concluded that 2,000 'Russian-backed' Syrian fighters were in Libya.⁷²

Non-Libyan mercenaries have therefore become an important component of the LAAF – one that is clearly dependent on financing from the alliance's external backers and the leveraging of their networks. Their presence fundamentally undermines the LAAF's nationalist narrative and illustrates the contradictions between its public stance and its operational model. The removal of foreign fighters is a key pillar of the ceasefire agreement of the 5+5 military talks reached in October 2020, but expectations are low. The principal gains made by the LAAF in its advance on Tripoli came following the influx of foreign support, and external backing helped it prevent further advances by GNA-affiliated forces following the collapse of the offensive. Consequently, it is likely to be its external backers that have the deciding say on which forces may stay or go.

⁶⁸ Mackinnon, A. and Detsch, J. (2020), 'Pentagon Says UAE Possibly Funding Russia's Shadowy Mercenaries in Libya', *Foreign Policy*, 30 November 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/30/pentagon-trump-russia-libya-uae>.

⁶⁹ Harchaoui (2021), 'The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Way to More Influence in Libya'.

⁷⁰ Stronski, P. (2020), 'Implausible Deniability: Russia's Private Military Companies', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2 June 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/02/implausible-deniability-russia-s-private-military-companies-pub-81954>.

⁷¹ Trew, B. and Bourhan, R. (2020), 'Inside the murky world of Libya's mercenaries', *Independent*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/libya-war-haftar-gna-syria-russia-wagner-uae-tripoli-a9566736.html>.

⁷² US Department of Defense (2020), *East Africa Counterterrorism Operation, North and West Africa Counterterrorism Operation - Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress*, p. 36.

04 Utilizing networks in the ‘state’

The LAAF exploited the weakness of civilian authorities in eastern Libya to dominate the ‘state’ space. The selection of a new, national government threatens to undermine the LAAF’s privileged access to resources.

The growth of the LAAF must be seen in the context of the development, and division, of state structures in Libya. Operation Dignity aligned with the faction of the House of Representatives (the legislature elected in 2014) that relocated to Tobruk in eastern Libya and re-formed the Interim Government. This provided the LAAF an opportunity to exert leverage over fragmented civilian authorities with weak vertical ties to their social bases. The LAAF’s ability to tap into the narratives of counterterrorism and its portrayal of itself as ‘the army’, aided the development of such ties. While this system worked to the advantage of the LAAF, the weakness of the economy in eastern Libya – the inability to sell oil or access international finance without going via Tripoli authorities and a lack of capital – led to the development of a system reliant on burgeoning debt. In recent years, this has placed limits on the financial support that the LAAF could tap.

This provided the LAAF an opportunity to exert leverage over fragmented civilian authorities with weak vertical ties to their social bases.

The March 2021 selection of a new Government of National Unity (GNU) has broken the LAAF’s hold over the networks of power within civilian authorities in areas under its control. This is likely to lead to a series of bargaining processes as eastern-based actors and communities seek access to state rents through GNU affiliates directly, rather than through the auspices of the LAAF. At the time of writing, the extent to which the GNU will facilitate funding to the LAAF is unclear, casting the LAAF’s ability to sustain its patronage networks in further doubt.

Subverting state authorities

The House of Representatives, dominated by its speaker, Agila Saleh, operated in the east of the country as the vehicle that legitimized the LAAF's formal 'state' power, albeit on a contested basis. Since 2015, it has passed a raft of legislation that enables the LAAF to acquire powers to overtake the competencies of the Interim Government, to access significant revenue and to increasingly cannibalize the public and private sectors. Key legislation includes the January 2015 creation of the post of general commander of the armed forces (to which Haftar was appointed in March 2015), the anti-terrorism law of the same year and two laws on military investment in 2016 and 2018.⁷³

Between 2014 and 2021, Saleh dominated the legislative agenda of the House of Representatives, which had been reduced in size and subject to consistent procedural violations and a lack of due process. Haftar is, according to the legislation that created his position, subject to the oversight of Saleh. However, this is not the case in practice. Following the UN-mediated Libyan Political Agreement in 2015, Saleh worked with Haftar to undermine the newly established GNA. The formation of a Defence Committee in 2016 established a mechanism to directly channel funds from the eastern authorities to the LAAF, supplementing the salaries received from Tripoli-based authorities for those individuals already on the payroll prior to the 2014 split. This mechanism has provided the means through which the Central Bank of Libya (CBL) branch in al-Bayda could provide financial support. The governor of the al-Bayda branch reported in 2019 that one-third of its spending had been directed to the LAAF over the previous three years.⁷⁴

The LAAF has progressively sought to subvert the governing authorities in eastern Libya, making clear Haftar's desire to 'become' the state. The process through which the LAAF has sought to expand its powers and ultimately replace civilian government shows this. Following the launch of the offensive on Tripoli in April 2019, Saleh declared a 'state of mobilization', triggering additional procedures for resourcing the LAAF. In October 2019, he authorized the LAAF general command to move ahead with implementation of its mobilization plan, which was announced on television by Aoun al-Ferjani, head of the LAAF's Control Authority and one of Haftar's closest allies. Subsequently, a communiqué attributed to the LAAF announced that all taxes and customs duties collected by state institutions and state-owned companies would come under the control of a newly created LAAF Mobilization Authority. However, while some funds were raised – including a reported LYD 200 million (approximately \$140 million, according to the exchange rate at the time) from telecoms companies – the budgets of schools and other state services were not diverted to the LAAF as Ferjani had declared. The Mobilization Authority has not been formally constituted.

⁷³ A detailed account of these elements is provided in Eaton et al. (2020), *Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014*.

⁷⁴ Alwasat (2019), 'Al-Hibri: One-third of the budget over the last three years has been allocated to the army' (Arabic), 19 February 2019, <http://alwasat.ly/news/libya/236465>.

In April 2020, Haftar gave a speech in which he claimed a popular mandate for military rule.⁷⁵ The statement came more than three months after the LAAF had imposed a blockade of eastern oil ports, and only weeks before the collapse of its Tripoli offensive. It also came at a time when Saleh was putting forward to the international community his political plan to agree the formulation of a unified government, a direct challenge to Haftar, who effectively had controlled international negotiations for eastern Libya since 2017. The lack of support from Russia and Egypt for Haftar's announcement of military rule may explain its failure to be implemented.⁷⁶

The collapse of Haftar's Tripoli offensive in June 2020 led to further efforts to bolster the position of Saleh in international negotiations. The image of a beleaguered Haftar given second billing to Saleh at a June 2020 press conference in Cairo illustrated this. Haftar was pushed to support the initiative of his now rival. However, the threat posed by Saleh was constrained by his limited capacity to control eastern constituencies. As speaker of the House of Representatives, Saleh has sought to present himself as the man who can deliver for the interests of tribal factions in the east.

While civilian authorities remained in place, pro-Haftar groupings in the House of Representatives diluted what remained of oversight mechanisms.

While civilian authorities remained in place, pro-Haftar groupings in the House of Representatives, most notably from the National Sovereignty Bloc, diluted what remained of oversight mechanisms through their positions on committees and support for the military takeover. One notable member of the bloc is the member for Benghazi, Tariq al-Jarushi, who is the son of the senior LAAF commander Saqr al-Jarushi. Tariq has been a prominent supporter of the LAAF agenda in the House of Representatives. Another example is Said Sbaqa, a member of the Martyrs, Wounded and Missing People Affairs Committee. Sbaqa is noted as someone who will oppose any discussion that negatively impacts the committee in the House of Representatives.⁷⁷ Several members of the House of Representatives have developed close personal relations with Haftar.⁷⁸ A prominent example is al-Salihin Abdul Nabi Saad, a member for Tobruk, who sits on the Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Committee and has openly supported Haftar. These political actors have tied their political fates to Haftar's fortunes and are part of the LAAF's extended network.

⁷⁵ Libyan Arab Armed Forces (2020), 'Speech of the General Commander of the Libyan Armed Forces Khalifa Haftar to the Libyan People' (Arabic), YouTube, 27 April 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZRcWEuUeVGQ>.

⁷⁶ Harchaoui (2021), 'The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Way to More Influence in Libya'.

⁷⁷ Research interviews, June 2020.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

The LAAF has worked to subjugate state institutions operating in areas under its control, which has brought it into conflict with the Interim Government. Haftar's relationship with Interim Government Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thinni was tense. And, as financing and liquidity tightened in 2020, relations between the two sides worsened. In particular, a dispute emerged over allocations of funding to the LAAF. Interim Government Finance Minister Kamal al-Hassi was detained by the LAAF for reportedly refusing to sign off on the paperwork for this funding. The LAAF publicly accused Hassi of financial mismanagement.⁷⁹

Disputes over the LAAF's commercial engagements through its Military Investment Authority (MIA) led Thinni to issue a letter in June 2020 to his ministers instructing them to cease cooperation with that body. This was followed up by a similar letter from Minister of Interior Ibrahim Bushanef. The letters clearly state that the Interim Government believed the LAAF's commercial activities violated the law.⁸⁰

Economic capture and rent distribution via the Military Investment Authority

The LAAF's MIA is its vehicle for economic expansion in the public and private sectors. The military investment law, passed by the House of Representatives in 2016, facilitated the development of this body. Its founding represented a shift in the LAAF's vision of its role and a clear effort to mimic the model in neighbouring Egypt (that is, emphasizing a prominent role for the military in the economy). Haftar appointed General Mohamed al-Madani al-Fakhri as the MIA's chairman in June 2017. As the former interior minister of the Interim Government, he is a key figure in the LAAF network and the architect of much of its economic model. Fakhri was replaced in December 2019 but continues to be closely connected with the LAAF's economic activity. Aoun al-Ferjani and Saddam Haftar are also closely linked to the MIA, illustrating once again the pre-eminence of Khalifa Haftar's inner circle across all key spheres. Saddam Haftar married Fakhri's daughter in November 2020.

The MIA expanded rapidly under Fakhri's leadership. It is now engaged in a wide variety of fields, from agricultural projects to road and infrastructure building and export of scrap metals. On 5 December 2017, Haftar wrote to Thinni to announce his intention to bring 96 projects – in agriculture, production and heavy industry – under the 'protection' of the LAAF.⁸¹ The provisions of Law 3 (2018) that officially establishes the MIA are wide-reaching and vague.⁸² No clear accountability mechanisms are in place, with oversight provided only by Haftar as the LAAF's general commander.⁸³ The advantages of this arrangement to the

⁷⁹ Research interviews, June 2020; Alwasat (2020), 'Employees of the Finance Department Demand the Release of the 'Interim' [Government] Minister of Finance' (Arabic), 17 July 2020, <http://alwasat.ly/news/libya/289496>.

⁸⁰ Copies of the letters were shared widely on social media. See: <https://www.facebook.com/Burkanly/posts/2617123831897096>.

⁸¹ For a copy of the letter, see Choudhury et al. (2021), *Final report of the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to Security Council resolution 1973 (2011) (S/2021/229)*, pp. 110–15.

⁸² State of Libya (2018), Law 3 (2018), 13 November 2018, <https://site.eastlaws.com/GeneralSearch/Home/ArticlesTDetails?MasterID=1936722>.

⁸³ There are few specifications of the governance procedures of the MIA: its board of directors is to be appointed by the commander in chief. The regulations of the MIA are left to the commander in chief to 'act upon the proposal of the Board of Directors'.

MIA are considerable. For example, the law states that it is exempted from export taxes and administrative fees, which gives companies and entities owned by the LAAF a significant competitive advantage. The law grants a large number of legal powers to the MIA, allowing it to invest in projects of its choosing, to establish companies, to open offices and accounts overseas, and to seek loans and credit, among other things.⁸⁴

Through this framework, the MIA provides a springboard for the LAAF's interventions in the public and private sectors to benefit its networks and ensure that profitable businesses must operate through the LAAF. The dynamics at play in the public sector are illustrated by the MIA's attempts to sell subsidized fuel to the international market, which demonstrates how it oversteps its contested legal mandate. In September 2019, the eastern authorities announced the formation of a parallel Brega Petroleum Marketing Company (BPMC) breaking away from the Tripoli-based BPMC.⁸⁵ This was used by the LAAF as a means of obtaining control of the fuel sector. In November 2019, the MIA and the BPMC signed a contract handing responsibility for fuel distribution from BPMC to the MIA. The MIA then signed an onward contract with a newly formed UAE-based ship charterer Emo Investment Trading and Marketing of Oil and Derivatives LLC to sell fuel.⁸⁶ The MIA planned to create a floating fuel station that would sell fuel from the Libyan coast to commercial non-Libyan clients. This would ensure a significant profit for the MIA because it was either receiving the fuel at heavily subsidized rates or not paying for it at all. It would also mean that fuel intended for the Libyan market at subsidized rates would be sold internationally. However, international pressure forced the MIA to abandon the project.⁸⁷

The distribution of economic rents among key LAAF commanders and affiliates is notable in the property sector and also within illicit markets.⁸⁸ The MIA's expansion into the Fezzan and its attempts to control major agricultural projects illustrate these dynamics. As part of its westward expansion, the MIA established a Chamber of Commerce for West and South Libya. This is headed by Salem Maatuq al-Zadma, the brother of Battalion 128 commander Hassan Maatuq al-Zadma. Under the name Agricultural Projects Protection Force, southern units of Battalion 128 took control of the Maknusa and Irawen agricultural projects in May 2020.

A similar process took place in Kufra through the MIA's establishment of the Kufra and Wahat Development and Investment Agency in January 2019, but this has fallen prey to conflict among rival LAAF factions. Then-MIA head Fakhri

⁸⁴ Each provision is, however, qualified by stating that the activity must remain within the bounds of 'the legislation in force'. It is on these grounds that the Interim Government has objected to the MIA's activities, noting that they violate the legislation in force, most notably Commercial Law 20.

⁸⁵ Eaton et al. (2020), *Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014*, pp. 28–9.

⁸⁶ For details of the deal, see: Faucon, B. and Talley, I. (2020), 'Libyan Warlord's Oil Foray Draws U.S. and U.N. Scrutiny', *Wall Street Journal*, 3 June 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/libyan-warlords-oil-foray-draws-u-s-u-n-scrutiny-11591206614>. For a copy of the contract signed by the MIA, see Choudhury et al. (2021), *Final report of the Panel of Experts on Libya*, pp. 482–8.

⁸⁷ In May 2020, a French frigate deployed as part of the EU's Naval Force Mediterranean Operation IRINI to enforce the UN arms embargo on Libya instructed the ship in question, the *Jal Laxmi*, not to dock in Tobruk so the fuel could not be loaded. See Energy Voice (2020), 'French navy and UN intervene to stop Libya-bound tanker', 1 June 2020, <https://www.energyvoice.com/oilandgas/africa/242678/french-navy-and-un-intervene-to-stop-libya-bound-tanker>.

⁸⁸ For an account of LAAF engagement in illicit practices, see Noria Research (2019), *Predatory economies in eastern Libya: The dominant role of the Libyan National Army*, Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/eastern-libya-lna>.

appointed the LAAF Kufra Military Zone commander, General Belgasim al-Abaj, as the agency's director. However, Abaj's decision to place a local construction fund under the new local MIA entity led to a backlash. The move encroached on the financial interests of the LAAF-affiliated Subul al-Salam Brigade that dominates the city. Saddam Haftar sought to mediate. In October 2020, Abaj was summoned to Benghazi for questioning in developments that appear directly related to the factional conflict. It is unlikely he will return to a leadership position in the LAAF. The incident illustrates the balance that the LAAF command seeks to strike through the distribution of rents and the uneasy relations between elements of its alliance, as well as the limitations of seeking to centralize command structures of a local group such as Subul al-Salam. Abaj, a Gaddafi-era intelligence official, was regarded with suspicion by Subul al-Salam, particularly for his perceived conciliatory approach to relations with the local Tebu community, with whom Subul al-Salam has poor relations.

The emergence of a new national executive threatens LAAF interests

The emergence of a new national executive in Libya in March 2021 represents an unfolding realignment of structures and powers that has broken LAAF dominance of the state sector and threatens to reverse its gains. On 5 February 2021, a new Government of National Unity (GNU), under the leadership of Prime Minister Abdul Hamid al-Dabaiba and President of the Presidency Council Mohamed al-Menfi, was selected through the auspices of the UN-led Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF).⁸⁹ The GNU was approved by the House of Representatives⁹⁰ – sitting in both Tripoli and Benghazi – on 10 March, making it the first unified Libyan government since 2014. Over the course of March 2021, the two pre-existing governments – the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) and the internationally unrecognized Interim Government – handed authority over to the GNU.

The nature of Haftar's relationship to the GNU is unclear. While Haftar was not invited to be a member of the LPDF, he retained influence over the process through members of the Forum that were aligned with his camp.⁹¹ At the LPDF, Agila Saleh was considered the frontrunner to lead the new government on a shared ticket with then GNA Minister of Interior Fathi Bashagha. Saleh and Bashagha were defeated

⁸⁹ The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) is a group of Libyan figures selected by the UN in October 2020 to agree a political process for the formation of an interim unity government and a pathway to elections. Selected by the UN Support Mission in Libya, it comprises members of the House of Representatives and the High State Council (a consultative body created in 2015), alongside members of civil society and other figures. The LPDF agreed upon the selection criteria on 18 January 2021 and voting for the new government took place on 5 February. In the final count, 73 votes were cast, with one LPDF member abstaining.

⁹⁰ The House of Representatives had been split into separate factions. Prior to the vote to approve the GNU in Sirte, the House of Representatives had two principal factions operating from Tripoli and Benghazi. Thirty-seven members of the Tripoli-based faction did not attend the Sirte-based vote. See Tripoli-based House of Representatives statement, 10 March 2021: https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=756603708317970&ref=watch_permalink.

⁹¹ These include figures such as House of Representatives members for Sirte, Hassan al-Zarqa, and al-Marj, Sultana al-Mismari. For a full list of LPDF members, see UN Support Mission in Libya (2020), 'Members of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum' (Arabic), https://unsmil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/ldpf_2020_-_final_list_of_participants_-_arabic_0.pdf.

in the second round, however, by Menfi and Dabaiba. The defeat of Saleh reduced the threat to Haftar's primacy, particularly given the limited public profile of Menfi, who hails from the city of Tobruk in eastern Libya.⁹²

Haftar has been able to exert influence over the process of government formation through the inclusion of loyal ministers, but his influence has limits. A clear example of this was the ability of Saleh to ensure that Dabaiba changed the composition of his proposed government in order to secure approval from the House of Representatives. On the eve of the House of Representatives vote, the names of a number of ministerial nominees were switched. Among those removed from the list were individuals with close personal links to Haftar. Notably, the Benghazi mayor Saqr Bujwari was dropped at the last minute in favour of Hussein al-Qatrani – who has close ties to Saleh – as deputy prime minister.⁹³ Qatrani, who hails from the Awagir tribe, has since presided over the handovers of Interim Government ministries to the GNU.⁹⁴

On the security front, the reunification of the Ministry of Interior poses a challenge to the LAAF-dominated architecture in eastern Libya, which has enabled the LAAF to militarize policing and the judicial process. The tensions in this system are illustrated in the challenges of ensuring any kind of process of justice for extrajudicial killings. The Dabaiba government has, however, left the critical post of minister of defence effectively vacant, placing the prime minister himself in charge. Long-standing issues over the supposed chain of command within state-affiliated forces remain undecided.

The terms of the re-assertion of authority by the Tripoli-based GNU remain unclear, creating ambiguity over the impact on the LAAF.

GNU control over the economic institutions of the state imperils the LAAF's aforementioned financial model of extracting funds from the Interim Government and the eastern branch of the Central Bank of Libya. The reunification of the House of Representatives will also dilute the influence of the pro-LAAF bloc. In January 2021, representatives of the GNA and Interim Government agreed a 'unified' budget that would represent an agreement over spending and effectively re-unite the Central Bank of Libya. This was a significant step as the CBL branch in al-Bayda had been running a separate monetary policy to the CBL in Tripoli until that point. As a result, the GNU inherited an agreement over the re-assertion of the Tripoli-based government through CBL reunification and the reunification of government ministries.

⁹² The selection criteria of the LPDF determined that candidates for the new government must represent east, west and southern Libya to ensure a balance of interests in the new executive.

⁹³ Vernhes, S. (2021), 'Libya: Haftar and Muslim Brotherhood big losers of new government', *The Africa Report*, 18 March 2021, <https://www.theafricareport.com/72259/libya-haftar-and-muslim-brotherhood-big-losers-of-new-government>.

⁹⁴ See documentation of these handovers on the Interim Government Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/GovernmentLY>.

Critically, the terms of the re-assertion of authority by the Tripoli-based GNU remain unclear, creating ambiguity over the impact on the LAAF. There are few indications that the GNU is planning to pose a direct threat to the position of the LAAF within security structures in eastern Libya, potentially allowing the status quo to remain. On the economic front, the agreement over budgetary spending represented a 'consolidated' budget (i.e. it combined the spending plans of east and west) rather than representing a budget settlement that agreed upon a unified national economic programme. This nuance is important as it speaks to the extent to which the LAAF will be able to directly access resources from state entities as it had done in 2015–21. While this balance is yet to be determined, it is clear that the LAAF has more limited leverage over the Tripoli-based GNU and CBL than it did over the Interim Government and eastern branch of the CBL, making it likely that its ability to extract funds from the state will be constrained. This may also incentivize LAAF affiliates to negotiate with the officials in charge of that distribution and further weaken Haftar's hold on power. On the other hand, a potential influx of capital to the east made possible by the appointment of the GNU and its power-sharing formula will provide opportunities for the LAAF to capture further funds, particularly if expenditure is not transparently overseen.

05 Conclusions: Prospects for the LAAF alliance

The LAAF's prospects are ultimately constrained by the dominance of personalities over its institutions and the contradictory political goals and motivations of its factions.

The collapse of the LAAF's Tripoli offensive placed Haftar's forces under unprecedented pressure. His ambitions for controlling the whole of Libya were proven beyond his reach, leading to much speculation regarding his future. In the circumstances, the LAAF's unwieldy alliance has proven resilient, but is now under mounting strain following the breakdown of security in Benghazi and the formulation of the GNU. The LAAF faces an uphill struggle to navigate these threats.

The LAAF has not become an integrated organization for two main reasons. First, while the skilful manipulation of narratives has been used to present a pretext for the recruitment of a wide range of groups and communities, a closer look at LAAF components reveals contradictory political goals and motivations. The aspirations of those seeking eastern autonomy were always out of kilter with Haftar's centralizing authoritarian tendencies, while the LAAF's recruitment across the revolutionary divide creates obstacles for building cooperation among its subunits. Moreover, the ultimate social goals of the Madkhali-Salafi groups sit uncomfortably with other elements of the alliance. As a result, LAAF factions struggle to coalesce around specific goals and objectives.⁹⁵ This limits its ability to create horizontal relationships of trust and collaboration.

⁹⁵ Staniland identifies this as a key measure of cohesion within insurgent organizations.

Second, the modus operandi of the LAAF reveals that personalities rather than institutions hold sway. Foremost among these is Haftar, of course, but also his sons Saddam and Khalid. Mirroring a defining feature of parochial networks, the chain of command is separate from the actual locus of power. The LAAF contains in-groups and out-groups, and it lacks the relations of information, trust and belief required to institutionalize its power. This is seen in the frenzied positioning that followed reports that Haftar had died or was suffering from a serious illness in 2018, as potential conflict brewed between Haftar's sons and the General Command over succession.

Against the backdrop of political developments in Tripoli and the fracturing of LAAF control in Benghazi, it is difficult to see how the LAAF will overcome these defects. Indeed, the above factors link directly to the potential causes of its breakdown or weakening. Lessons from the failures of other parochial groups illustrate that the lack of strong horizontal ties can lead to infighting among rival commanders.⁹⁶ In the LAAF's case, this is a considerable threat given the differences among its subunits. Such infighting could be brought about by internal struggles among rivals. Here, the brewing conflict among local armed factions in Benghazi merits attention, and future attempts to coax commanders away from the LAAF are likely. Nonetheless, the praetorian units retain the ability to protect Haftar in eastern heartlands outside of Benghazi, even if they lack the capacity to project power across the country. The centrality of Haftar as an individual, meanwhile, makes the septuagenarian leader's health pivotal to the survival of the alliance. Alternatively, the establishment by other LAAF commanders of direct relationships with external states could end Haftar's monopoly and see rivals emerge.

External support has been critical to the development of the LAAF and is indispensable for its maintenance. Its principal path to unifying or 'fusing factions'⁹⁷ has come via external sponsorship that provided Haftar with resources. Combined with the potential for distribution of rents – through economic opportunities and state funding – this has also produced a pull factor as would-be allies covet the supplies that Haftar can provide. This makes the LAAF especially vulnerable to shifts in policy by those external states.

There is already anecdotal evidence that the UAE is establishing direct relationships with LAAF commanders and particularly with Darfuriian armed groups. Moreover, the interests of Russia impact the LAAF's relationship with Russia-backed mercenaries. Moscow has also engaged other constituencies, notably of the former Gaddafi regime,⁹⁸ and it could move its support from Haftar to other political actors if it sees this as opportune.

Finally, the importance of maintaining the LAAF's ability to leverage income from the Libyan state has been understated. Should the GNU be able to place limitations on the LAAF's extraction of state funds, this will also constrain its ability to distribute patronage to its allies, potentially causing them to seek other patrons.

⁹⁶ Staniland (2014), *Networks of Rebellion*, p. 28.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁹⁸ There are numerous reports of Russia's outreach to the Gaddafists. See Al-Atrush, S. (2020), 'How a Russian Plan to Restore Qaddafi's Regime Backfired', Bloomberg, 20 March 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-03-20/how-a-russian-plan-to-restore-qaddafi-s-libyan-regime-backfired>.

Implications for policy

For Western policymakers, a socio-institutional understanding of the networks that comprise the LAAF and its partners has practical implications for key areas of engagement in the security, political and economic sphere.

On the security level, discussions of security sector reform are the focus of much analysis and strategy development. The broad implications of the socio-institutional analysis here are that the LAAF cannot be simply integrated into a reformed national force. Its elements suffer from some of the same flaws that have plagued their opponents: personalized command structures, limited training, and engagement in illicit activity and rights abuses. In its praetorian units, the LAAF has developed a core of trained and well-equipped forces that have developed strong ties among recruits and commanders and maintain strong horizontal links among the leaders of a diverse range of communities. These forces would be strong candidates for inclusion in a unified Libyan military. But it is clear that the predominance of familial relationships in their existing command structure would have to change for them to be integrated into a national chain of command and for 'state' authority to prevail. Other elements of the LAAF are, however, more parochial networks in nature, possessing weak horizontal ties across space. The LAAF has relied on individuals to cohere such forces rather than meaningfully incorporating them into its structure, indicating that such affiliations remain transactional.

On the political level, Western policymakers must recognize that Haftar does not, and never did, hold a monopoly over the interests of areas under LAAF control. His emergence as the sole interlocutor for eastern Libya in international negotiations between 2017 and 2020 bolstered his credentials locally, providing him with further credibility. A lack of willingness to challenge human rights abuses by his forces disempowered local opposition. A socio-institutional analysis of the LAAF illustrates that, while Haftar has sought to centralize power around a clique of family members and close associates, he is dependent on continuing negotiations with social constituencies as the bulk of his forces are not functionally integrated within the alliance. The lesson here is that further direct outreach to those constituencies is required from the international community if genuine reconciliation is to be facilitated and to prevent an arbitrary distinction between eastern and western Libya being unwittingly exacerbated.

International attempts to accommodate Haftar have also given carte blanche to the LAAF to dominate the 'state' space in eastern Libya. As this paper has illustrated, the LAAF has leveraged its position to obtain revenues through state financing mechanisms and also to dominate the private sector, using state resources to help underwrite the development of its patronage network. Internationally mediated discussions over economic reform and the distribution of resources are yet to broach this sensitive issue, with their focus remaining on implementing short-term measures to prevent further economic hardship being inflicted on Libyans. However, the LAAF's expansion in this realm cannot be ignored any longer. Meaningful agreement over institutional reunification in Libya, and therefore a consolidated national budget, should place clear limits on LAAF revenue generation.

About the author

Tim Eaton is a senior research fellow with the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House, where he focuses on the political economy of the Libyan conflict. In 2018, Tim authored a report on the development of Libya's war economy, in which he examined the increasing connection between economic activities and violence. In 2019, he was lead author of a major paper that compares the economic drivers of conflict in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. In 2020, he was lead author on an in-depth Chatham House analysis of the development of armed groups in Libya since 2014. Prior to this, Tim managed Chatham House's research on the Syrian conflict. An Arabic speaker, Tim previously worked for BBC Media Action, the BBC's international development charity, on projects in Iraq, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, and helped to set up and manage its Libya bureau from 2013 to 2014.

Acknowledgments

This paper draws upon fieldwork and research interviews undertaken by Valerie Stocker, Mohamed Lazib, Mohammed Abdusamee, and two other researchers who chose to remain anonymous. The paper would not have been possible without these contributions. Any errors are, however, the sole responsibility of the author. The author would also like to thank Erica Gaston, Wolfram Lacher, Emadeddin Badi, Jalel Harchaoui and Tarek Megerisi for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Thanks also to Nicole El Khawaja for managing the project and this paper and Michael Tsang for editing the text.

Hybrid Armed Actors in the Middle East and North Africa Project

This paper is part of a Chatham House project on Hybrid Armed Actors in the Middle East and North Africa that aims to analyse the developing role of these actors in Iraq, Lebanon and Libya. It is the second in a planned series of papers on each of the three country contexts, with a respective focus on the Popular Mobilization Forces, Hezbollah and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder. Please direct all enquiries to the publishers.

Chatham House does not express opinions of its own. The opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author(s).

Copyright © The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2021

Cover image: Members of the self-proclaimed eastern Libyan National Army (LNA), Benghazi, 18 June 2020.

Photo credit: Copyright © Abdullah Doma/AFP/Getty Images

ISBN 978 1 78413 479 2

This publication is printed on FSC-certified paper.
designbysoapbox.com



Independent thinking since 1920



**The Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House**

10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T +44 (0)20 7957 5700

contact@chathamhouse.org | chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223