



# Libya: the struggle for security

by Florence Gaub

Nearly two years have passed since the end of Colonel Qaddafi's dictatorship, but all is not well in Libya. What began as a popular uprising - that later gained international support through UN Security Council Resolution 1973 - has now turned into a potentially toxic security vacuum, culminating in the resignation of Chief of Staff Youssef al-Mangoush on 10 June and repeated clashes between civilians and a legalised militia in Benghazi which have left at least 35 people dead.

Unfortunately, these are only the latest examples in a string of violent incidents which have taken place over the last year, including attacks on the American, French and Tunisian diplomatic representations, offices of the Red Cross, police stations, and British and Italian embassy convoys. Further acts of aggression have included the occupation of Tripoli's airport and several oil installations, the siege of government ministries and, more generally, an increase in violent crime ranging from targeted assassinations to robbery - to the extent where a number of European states have called on their citizens to leave the country altogether. Libyan security is not in good shape, but the Syrian war has simply pushed the topic from the headlines.

## Starting from scratch

Libya's current predicament is not only the result of the implosion of its existing security structure

during the 2011 war - it is also due to the lamentable state of the pre-2011 security sector. Because of these two factors, there was very little that could be recycled and deployed in a brand new structure. The armed forces, previously estimated to number some 76,000 men, in reality totalled only 20,000. Not only was their arsenal outdated and badly maintained as a result of sanctions and neglect, but the troops were organised primarily with a view to protecting the regime from a *coup d'état*. The frequent rotation of officers, the allocation of positions based on tribal affiliation and loyalty rather than qualification, and the punishment of independent thinking all created an armed force lacking in leadership, morale, cohesion and effectiveness. Its officer corps consisted primarily of colonels, as the recruitment of junior officers had ceased following the 1993 coup attempt, and promotion to ranks higher than Qaddafi's own was politically inconceivable. Once the conflict erupted, these structural weaknesses and the extent to which official figures had been artificially inflated became apparent, with large numbers of troops defecting, deserting or simply not existing from the start.

Similar conditions existed in the police, or People's Security Force (formerly known as the Police at the Service of the People and the Revolution), which was estimated to be 45,000 strong - although these numbers, like those of the armed forces, did not reflect qualitative or quantitative realities. In contrast



to other security agencies, such as the Revolutionary Guards used primarily for regime protection, it was tasked with regular police responsibilities such as law enforcement, crime prevention and the management of prisons. Although still tainted by its human rights abuses, the People's Security Force possessed a marginally better reputation than the other forces in the fragmented security sector as it was less involved in acts of popular repression. Yet like the armed forces, the police was under-staffed and under-equipped, and displayed low levels of efficiency and effectiveness. As a result, neither the police nor the armed forces were in a position to offer the foundations on which the new Libyan security sector could be built.

Although the armed forces were not at the vanguard of popular repression and indeed were distrusted by the regime due to repeated coup attempts, the newly created Political Isolation Law bars any officer who commanded a unit under the previous regime from being employed in the military. If interpreted in a maximalist fashion, the new law could be used to target any officer or non-commissioned officer ranging from the ranks of sergeant major to colonel, potentially resulting in a haemorrhage of personnel and thereby making the urgently needed reconstruction of the armed forces even more difficult. In this respect, the law would go much further than the highly controversial Iraqi 'de-baathification' order that severely impeded the country's reconstruction efforts; it could therefore create more frustration which, in turn, could lead to even greater insecurity.

As a result of this law, the search for a new chief of staff to replace General al-Mangoush could prove quite challenging, given that general officers inevitably have command experience. An 'army integrity commission' is now tasked with the vetting of officer returnees - although its membership, precise mandate and methods of accountability are not yet clear.

Part of an on-going 'de-Qaddafi' campaign, the law does not distinguish between ranks, or size of the unit commanded, or even behaviour during the conflict. About 1,000 troops joined the uprising in the country's east early on, and the presence of officers with command and control experience contributed decisively to rebel advances. Nevertheless, tensions between rebels and deserted military staff existed throughout the campaign,

culminating in July 2011 in the assassination of rebel commander and former Libyan army general, Abdal Fatah Younis. While the majority of the armed forces simply deserted during the war, a few units - especially the 32nd brigade under the command of Qaddafi's son Khamis - were at the forefront of the brutal repression.

A similar situation can be found with the police forces. The fact that the uprising was triggered by deadly clashes between internal security forces and peacefully demonstrating protesters in Benghazi turned them into one of the first targets of popular anger. Stations were ransacked and burned, policemen attacked and lynched. Whatever was

left of Libya's internal security structure disappeared from the streets in the aftermath of the conflict, leaving Libya's public security in the hands of quickly proliferating militias. Although calls for the police to return to their posts emerged right after the end of the war,

its staff remained absent - for fear of reprisal, out of political conviction, or because of lack of infrastructure. The internal security apparatus is therefore being rebuilt from scratch - even more than the armed forces - at a time when Libya urgently needs it in place.

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### The militias: from solution to problem

As neither police nor armed forces were willing or able to be used in the fledgling post-war security architecture, a dangerous vacuum emerged which was rapidly filled by different militias who took it upon themselves to secure critical infrastructure, borders and urban spaces. The National Transitional Council, Libya's interim decision-making body, rejected in-country support (such as a UN observer mission) but failed to propose a sound alternative. Instead, security was managed provisionally in pockets - by emerging neighbourhood watch organisations, revolutionary brigades under no or limited supervision, or simply by armed gangs pursuing criminal goals.

As an interim solution, the council established the Supreme Security Committee (SCC) in October 2011, tasked to provide basic security - first in Tripoli and later in other cities - until formal security structures could be established. Although in uniform, and therefore representative of a state structure, the SCC initially (somewhat randomly)

recruited 26,000 young men who not only received very little training but also effectively operated outside of government control. With their numbers later swelling to about 100,000, the body quickly turned into a nationalised militia - and a fractured one at that, given that the SSC is itself split along several lines. Its members were said to be involved in the destruction of Sufi shrines in 2012 (which led to the resignation of the interim interior minister), the siege of government ministries in March 2013, violent clashes with civilians and attacks on Western embassies. Its disbandment, planned for the end of 2012, has been postponed several times but its overall number has been reduced - in Tripoli, for instance, from 49 units originally to 7. Provisionally created to provide security, the SCC therefore became a security concern in its own right.

Dealing with the militia problem requires taking into account that the groups are not homogenous and, consequently, have different interests as well as spoiler potential. While the militias have contributed to security in Libya since the end of the Qaddafi regime - in fact they are the only effective security agents these days - some of them have also been a source of *insecurity*, translating their coercive power into political capital by influencing the still fragile political process in a wholly unchecked way.

The double-edged nature of the militias quickly led to several proposals aimed at integrating them into the newly emerging security structure. As early as December 2011, interim Interior Minister Fawzi Abdelali proposed the integration of 50,000 militiamen into the fledgling security sector. Yet this figure turned out to be somewhat disconnected from certain realities. Not only was the overall number of police and military personnel required yet to be determined, but, crucially, the figure did not take into account the expectations of the militiamen themselves.

Out of a total population of 6 million, 250,000 men (of which probably not even half truly fought in the war) registered with the newly created body nominally tasked with integrating the militias, the Warrior Affairs Commission. However, only 6,000 of them wanted to be integrated into the armed forces, while 2,200 wished to join the border police, and 11,000, the oil guards. The vast majority desired either

to become civil servants in the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Defence (44,000) or open their own business (78,000). Given that 70 per cent of those who registered only have elementary or secondary education, the capacity of both ministries to absorb them meaningfully is questionable.

What remained of the armed forces was particularly reluctant to integrate too many militiamen, declaring initially the intention to absorb a maximum of 6,000, as they viewed their lack of professionalism to be incompatible with their own standards. This is not to say the police force was in favour of militia integration, but there was so little left of the internal security structure that

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it could muster virtually no opposition. In addition, the armed forces viewed the form of integration differently to the militias: while the latter sought (and still seek) to be integrated as whole units, the armed forces prefer to integrate the militiamen as individuals

in order to establish clear hierarchies, meritocratic principles, and certain codes of conduct.

In the meantime, some of the militias have altogether rejected being integrated into an existing force - which they perceive to be part of the former regime - and called for an entirely new military force made up of revolutionary fighters. Frustrated with the slow progress in the reform of the Libyan military, a number of revolutionary brigades joined forces to form the Libyan National Shield, essentially a parallel armed force in waiting. Nominally part of the Libyan military because its four divisions (East, West, South, Central) and reporting to the army Chief of Staff, the force is effectively entirely made up of revolutionary brigades who have undergone virtually no formal training. These were also the units involved in the clashes with civilians demanding their disbandment in Benghazi that led to the resignation of army chief al-Mangoush.

Other militias have begun to adopt government-like behaviour. The Zintan militia, in charge of Tripoli airport until April 2012, also began to carry out border control exercises and running the prison where Seif al-Islam al-Qaddafi, currently on trial for crimes against humanity, is an inmate. Aware of its clout, the militia has also begun to seize government property and act like an independent security agency rather than a spontaneously formed militia.

## Meanwhile, back in Tripoli ...

The implosion of Libya's security sector has not gone unnoticed in Tripoli - yet a number of factors have impeded its urgent reform. Jurisdictional disputes between the Warrior Affairs Commission, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defence have blocked the distribution of the 6 billion euros allocated for demobilisation. A lack of transparency and accountability has led to militiamen cross-registering with both the armed forces and the police. Rampant absenteeism and poor discipline have seriously affected foreign training programmes and allowed for trainees to be sent back to Libya before finishing their courses. And the rather slow political process (forming a government after the July elections took four months) has halted important security-related decisions such as the completion of a White Paper outlining Libya's defence vision, which would also serve as the starting point for reform and reconstruction.

The unstable political situation has also led to frequent changes of top personnel such as the minister of defence and the minister of the interior, while the very appointment of Army Chief of Staff al-Mangoush was challenged by two alternative (and rather insubordinate) nominations made by a group of army officers and eastern militias. In a flurry of attempts to regain power over a security sector spiralling out of control, a new plan now seeks to turn the revolutionary brigades into a national guard following the Canadian model - but even here there are different views on their exact role and command structure. Worse still, Libya's administration is so convoluted that no reliable figures are available concerning the police or military forces, the number of men active in militias, or the presence of small arms in the population.

Part of the current Libyan quagmire is that the conflation of internal and external security (hence the power struggle among the different bodies over demobilisation) is taking place alongside the emergence of a participatory political culture, the decentralisation of security and power structures, and the pursuit of a desire to comply with international standards of legitimacy and military professionalism. Yet while all of these factors are not negative *per se* (quite the contrary), their combination has led to a gridlock in the security sector at a time when North Africa faces serious challenges related to terrorism, state fragility, smuggling and drug trafficking.

On the plus side, the recruitment of junior officers has picked up, and the military educational system seems to be back on track. In addition, 26,000 men have registered with the police, and proper

basic training, lasting three months rather than a mere few weeks, is increasingly becoming the norm. On 18 June, the General National Congress passed a law ordering the dissolution of all militias by the end of 2013, if necessary, by force, and called for them to be integrated on an individual basis into the armed forces or police. This effectively annuls previous legislation semi-regulating the militias, but it remains to be seen how effective the Ministry of Interior will be in implementing the order. In any case, it is clear that the establishment of a security sector capable of safeguarding Libya will take several years, if not decades, since the institutions are starting virtually from scratch.

Libya, however, is not alone in its struggle for security. Its neighbours have recognised the implications of the country's security implosion (Algeria blames its January terrorist attack, at least in part, on Libya's small arms proliferation as well as uncontrolled spaces), and offers for training and cooperation have been made by several countries (Jordan, Turkey, France, Egypt, Tunisia, the United Kingdom, amongst others) and organisations, although their execution is hampered by a number of logistical factors.

The European Union, for its part, has announced the creation of a border assistance mission whose 110 personnel will start deploying shortly. Given Libya's vast borders (4,348 km land and 1,770 km maritime) shared with six countries (Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Sudan and Chad), the mission fills an important gap not only in Libyan but also regional security, consisting as it does of training, advice and mentoring. NATO, too, is currently exploring potential areas of security cooperation.

Given the regional context and Libya's proximity to Europe, it is clear that Libyan security needs to be addressed collectively as soon and as fast as possible. The longer *insecurity* reigns, the more difficult its deconstruction will be.

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