

Armed Groups in Libya: Typology and Roles

Eight months after the death of Col. Muammar Qaddafi, security in Libya is contested by an increasingly complex set of state and non-state armed actors. Nevertheless, available analysis on the situation in Libya tends to oversimplify what is an intricate and fluid security environment. Some reports refer to all non-state armed groups simply as ‘militias’ (AI, 2012). Use of such terms risks obscuring critical differences among groups’ goals and tactics (Small Arms Survey, 2006, p. 248). It can also misrepresent the multifaceted roles armed groups play in post-conflict security environments. Understanding and distinguishing among the heterogeneous armed groups operating in the country is thus critical for effective international policy, especially as revolutionary forces continue to view state security institutions with suspicion.

This *Research Note*, based on a forthcoming Small Arms Survey publication and extensive field research, investigates the evolving nature of armed groups in Libya with a focus on Misrata, Libya’s third-largest city.¹ The report proposes a typology designed to refine the analysis of armed groups; it also reviews the controls revolutionary forces exercise over their weapons.

The emergence of armed groups in Libya

The ‘17 February Revolution’ began in mid-February 2011 with mass protests in Benghazi (see Map 1). Demonstrations quickly devolved into armed conflict in Benghazi, Misrata, and the Nafusa Mountains as Qaddafi’s forces cracked down on demonstrators (Al Jazeera, 2011). The escalation of violence and the threat of heavy civilian casualties led the UN Security Council to pass resolution 1973 on 17 March 2011, mandating member states and regional organizations to ‘take all necessary measures’ to protect civilians (UNSC, 2011, para. 4). France, the UK, and the United States immediately enforced a no-fly zone and began military strikes against Qaddafi ground forces that were threatening Benghazi (McGreal, 2011). NATO assumed responsibility for operations on 31 March 2011 (NATO, 2011).

Usually portrayed as chaotic and disorganized, the Libyan revolution was fragmented and decentralized, as exemplified by the emergence of revolutionary brigades (*kata’ib*)² in Misrata. The brigades began as uncoordinated street-fighting cells but evolved into organizations

Map 1 Libya



capable of operating tank divisions and coordination using Global Positioning System and Google Earth technologies. The forces in Benghazi, Misrata, and Zintan began with a handful of guns but now control much of Qaddafi's vast arsenal of conventional weapons and munitions. Post-revolutionary armed groups began emerging in the later stages of the war, further complicating the security environment.

A typology

Four distinct types of non-state armed groups are currently operating in Libya: revolutionary brigades, unregulated brigades, post-revolutionary brigades, and militias.

Revolutionary brigades account for an estimated 75 to 85 per cent of all experienced fighters and weapons not controlled by the state.³ They formed in the early stages of the war and are intensely cohesive, with strong allegiance to their leaders. A distinct feature of the revolutionary brigades is their consensus-oriented decision making. This feature was evidenced within brigades and among brigade commanders.

Several types of local coordinating structures formed during and after the war, including military councils and unions of revolutionaries, which have gained importance since the end of fighting.

Critically, revolutionary brigades possess significant combat experience—as individuals and, more importantly, as fighting units. This distinguishes them from post-revolutionary groups that emerged later in the war.

Revolutionary brigades are typified by the fighting groups that emerged in Misrata and Zintan. In Misrata, as of November 2011, 236 revolutionary brigades were registered with the Misratan Union of Revolutionaries, accounting for approximately 40,000 members.⁴ Estimates suggest the force is comprised of students (41 per cent), private sector workers (38 per cent), public sector employees (11 per cent), professionals such as doctors (8 per cent), and unemployed individuals (2 per cent).⁵

Unregulated brigades are revolutionary brigades that broke away from the authority of local military councils in the later stages of the war. Senior military leaders claim that, as of March 2012, there were six to nine unregulated brigades in Misrata—less than four per cent of the total number of operational groups in the city.⁶ They underwent formation processes similar to those of revolutionary brigades and, as a result, developed a cohesive organizational structure and significant military capacity.

Yet the leaders of the unregulated brigades chose not to integrate into local military councils, thereby changing important aspects of their structure and legitimacy. While these groups operate in a lawless environment, they conform to social expectations of their constituencies—principally the communities from which brigade members originate. These brigades are responsible for a disproportionately high number of human rights abuses (HRW, 2011; 2012).⁷

Post-revolutionary brigades emerged to fill security vacuums left behind by defeated Qaddafi forces. These groups are most common in pro-government or pro-Qaddafi⁸ neighbourhoods such as Bani Walid or Sirte, but they also exist in other cities and towns that were less affected by the conflict. Post-revolutionary brigades are increasing in number because of the extent and prominence of loyalist communities in Libya (ICG, forthcoming). Yet while their hasty emergence prevented these groups from becoming as cohesive and militarily effective as the revolutionary or unregulated brigades, they are gaining experience by taking part in ongoing post-revolution communal conflicts.

Recent fighting in Zuwara illustrates the complexity of post-revolutionary groups and their relationship to the social networks in which they are embedded. Like many recent clashes in Libya, the recurring violence between the Berber city of Zuwara and its Arab neighbours al-Jumail and Reghdalin is driven by long-standing ethnic divisions and Qaddafi-era grievances (Gumuchian, 2012; ICG, forthcoming). Once sparked, the violence has quickly degenerated into communal strife

between amorphous groups on behalf of their city or ethnic group. If tensions continue to flare up, more cohesive fighting units will probably emerge.

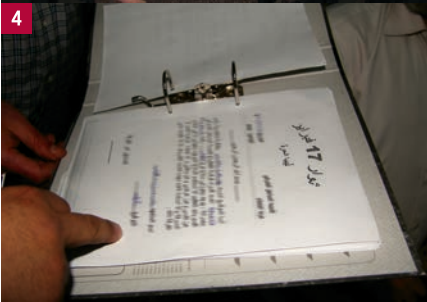
Militias refer to a distinct collection of armed groups, including criminal networks (such as smuggling networks), and violent extremists. Militias represent a very small fraction of the groups operating in Libya. In general, the resilience of these groups is untested as they have not yet been subjected to sustained attacks from either state authorities or other armed groups.

Violent extremists operating in Libya have received particular attention by counter-terrorist specialists and the international media (Isa, 2011, pp. 155–65; Robertson, Cruickshank, and Karadsheh, 2012). Unlike in Syria, which has seen regular and coordinated suicide and car bombs, the operational capacity of extremist groups in Libya has, thus far, been limited (Sly and Warrick, 2012). That said, the frequency, severity, and sophistication of attacks have been increasing since the end of the war (Al-Tommy, 2012).

The National Army vs. the National Shield

A power struggle is underway over the rebuilding of the National Army. The revolutionary brigades see themselves as 'guardians of the revolution' (Kirkpatrick, 2011). They distrust the Ministry of Defence and the National Army because much of its wartime leadership remains intact. To safeguard the 'ideals of the revolution', revolutionary brigades created a national network of revolutionary unions and established the National Shield, a national army-in-waiting. The National Shield's four divisions—east, west, centre, and south—reflect the regional power bases of the revolutionary brigades (ICG, forthcoming). In the Misrata region, 7,000 revolutionary fighters are incorporated into the central division of this force.⁹

Revolutionary brigades assigned control of the National Shield to the chief of the National Army, Maj. Gen. Yousef al-Mangoush, thereby circumventing the National Army



Arms and ammunition storage in Misrata, 2012:

1. buried arms and ammunition container;
2. open-air storage;
3. rocket-propelled grenade launcher with homemade registration tag; and
4. good conduct pledge for use of signed-out weapons.

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bureaucracy. Thus far, revolutionary brigade commanders have trusted Maj. Gen. al-Mangouch. The practical result, however, is that he controls two national armies. The National Shield has already been deployed in coordination with other state and non-state armed groups to subdue violence in Kufra, Sabha, and Zuwara (ICG, forthcoming).

Weapons control

As the largest non-state force in the country, Libya's revolutionary brigades probably account for 75 to 85 per cent of the seasoned fighters and weapon stockpiles outside of government control. In Misrata, where brigades control more than 820 tanks, dozens of heavy artillery pieces, and more than 2,300 vehicles equipped with machine guns and anti-aircraft weapons, this percentage is thought to be much higher.¹⁰

Visits to six weapons storage facilities undertaken in March 2012 in Misrata indicate that both revolutionary and unregulated brigades exercise substantial control over light weapons and other conventional weapons.¹¹ The brigades have permanent guard duty at storage sites and control procedures, including through weapon registration and sign-in and sign-out sheets.

Yet interviews with local military commanders and civilian leaders suggest that inadequate storage facilities for weapons and ammunition present a safety risk. These sources also highlighted the need for additional technical expertise for the construction of such storage sites.

In contrast to controls over light and heavy weapons, the regulation of the estimated 30,000 small arms held by brigade members in Misrata remains almost exclusively in the hands of their individual holders, who usually store their rifles at home.¹² Military and civilian leaders identify the proliferation of small arms as a significant developmental challenge. They argue, however, that revolutionaries will have to trust the national army before any disarmament can take place. Efforts to reduce the amount of small arms in circulation are also hindered by

persistent rumours of future government weapon buy-back programmes, which encourage fighters and civilians to retain their weapons.

In January 2012, prominent scholars and clerics in Libya forbade the sale of small arms. While the overall effect of the ban is unknown, it has forced the trade underground, increasing the price of assault rifles on the black market.¹³

Conclusion

Security concerns dominate the political landscape in Libya. Understanding the different histories, objectives, and capabilities of existing non-state armed groups has important ramifications for policy-makers. While some groups continue to present a threat to stability, others are playing an active role in securing the country's future. Effective international policy needs to recognize these distinctions. ■

Notes

- 1 This *Research Note* draws on the author's doctoral research, carried out between July 2011 and March 2012 and supported by the Berghof Foundation and the British Economic and Social Research Council, as well as additional field and desk research conducted for the Small Arms Survey in March and April 2012.
- 2 In Libya, *kata'ib* (singular, *katiba*) was the designation for the military units in the Qaddafi army headed by a colonel. During the fighting, the anti-Qaddafi forces appropriated the term to describe any group of insurgents, irrespective of group size. In English-language reporting of the war, it is most commonly translated as 'brigade(s)'.
- 3 Estimates of strength and holdings in this *Research Note* relate to the situation as of March 2012 and are calculated based on author interviews with military commanders across the country. They include brigade members serving under the National Shield (see below) but exclude National Army soldiers and their weapons as these are, by definition, state-controlled.
- 4 Unpublished registration records of the Misratan Union of Revolutionaries as of 15 November 2011 list a total of 236 brigades. Of these, 61 did not register the number of brigade members. The total number of fighters was estimated by multiplying incomplete brigade registrations by the average number of brigade members in the remaining 175 brigades.

- 5 Unpublished records of brigade registration from the Misratan Union of Revolutionaries as of 18 December 2011.
- 6 The range is based on author interviews with senior commanders conducted during March 2012.
- 7 Confidential human rights documentation identifying specific unregulated brigades.
- 8 The facile dichotomy between pro- and anti-Qaddafi supporters employed by many journalists and analysts belies the complexity and varied relationship many communities have to the previous government; see ICG (forthcoming).
- 9 Author interviews with two senior military leaders responsible for the establishment of the Central Shield contingency, Misrata, 18 and 19 March 2012.
- 10 Author interviews with senior Misratan military officials suggest that there are six to nine unregulated brigades operating in Misrata. These figures were compared to the unpublished registration records of registered brigades with the Misratan Union of Revolutionaries as of 15 November 2011. It should be noted that unregulated brigades were registered with the Misratan Military Council during the war and are included in the 236 total.
- 11 The terms 'small arms' and 'light weapons' in this report refer to the definitions and list of materiel outlined in the Report of the UN Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms (UNGA, 1997).
- 12 Based on estimates revealed during author interviews with senior officials of the Misratan Union of Revolutionaries and revolutionary brigades, Misratan brigades had slightly less than one small arm per member in June 2011, or 30,000 units. By September 2011, one month after the fall of Tripoli, Misratan military leaders could no longer provide accurate estimates, suggesting the total might have increased two to three times the June 2011 figure. This *Research Note* uses the more conservative estimate of 30,000.
- 13 Author interviews, Misrata, March 2012.

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For more information on armed actors, please visit: www.smallarmssurvey.org/armed-actors.html.

About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey is an independent research project located at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. It serves as the principal international source of public information on all aspects of small arms and armed violence and as a resource for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and activists.

The Security Assessment in North Africa is a multi-year project of the Small Arms Survey that supports those engaged in building a more secure environment in North Africa and the Sahel-Saharan region. It produces timely, evidence-based research and analysis on the availability and circulation of small arms, the dynamics of emerging armed groups, and related insecurity.

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