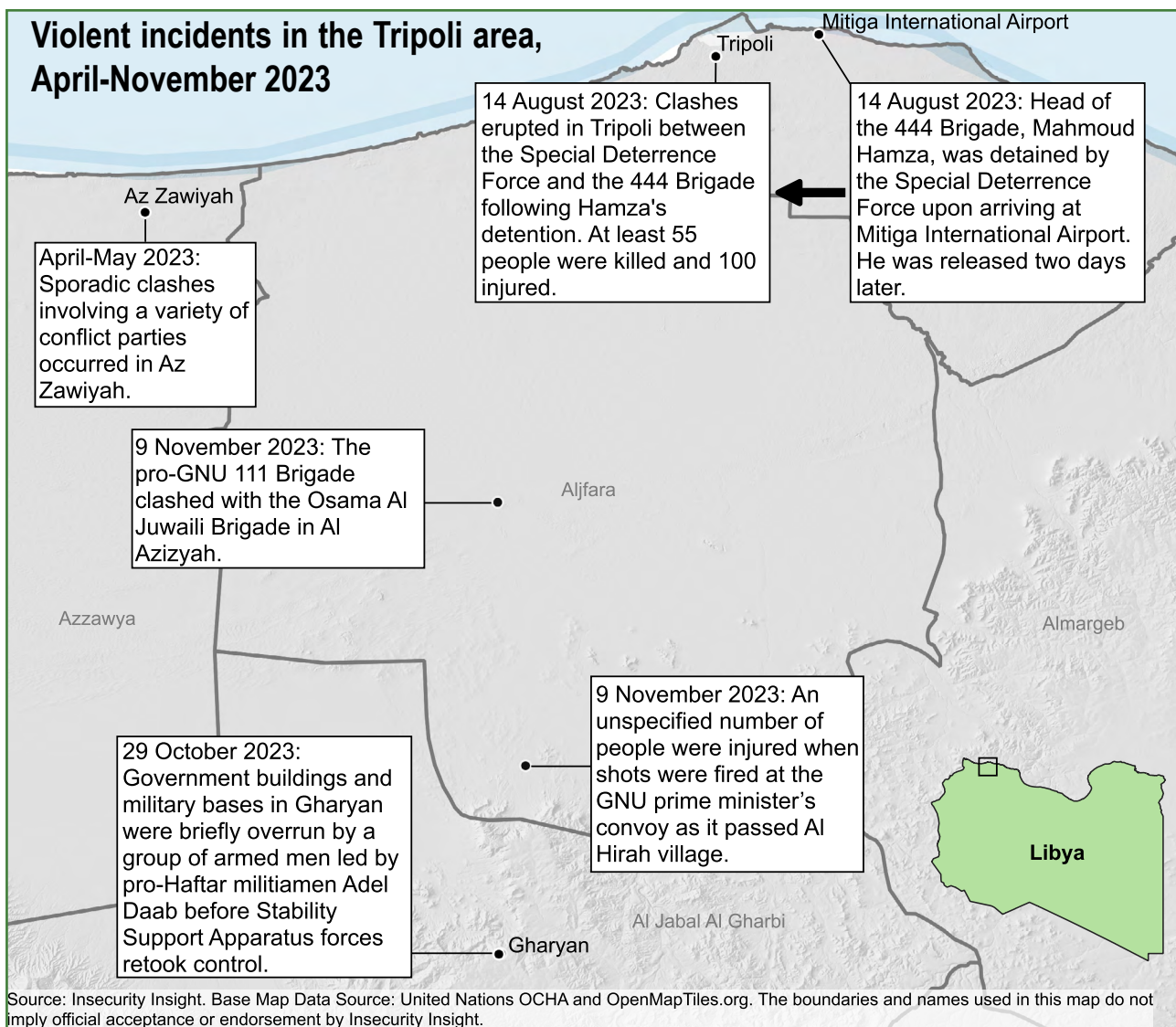# Western Libya Situation Report

December 2023

To support the response to the floods in Libya in September 2023, Insecurity Insight is monitoring and analysing social media and conflict events affecting food security, health care, protection and conflict related sexual violence.

Introduction

Since an international coalition ousted former leader Muammar Gaddafi's regime in 2011, Libya has been in a state of persistent political instability. Contested parliamentary elections in 2014 saw the country effectively split into two areas with competing governments – the Tripoli-based High State Council (HSC) in the western part of the country and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) in the eastern part.[1] This document covers the area under the control of the Tripoli-based HSC, led by interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dabaiba. This government is internationally recognised and controls most of western Libya.

Violent incidents in the Tripoli area, April-November 2023

Mitiga International Airport

Tripoli

14 August 2023: Clashes erupted in Tripoli between the Special Deterrence Force and the 444 Brigade following Hamza's detention. At least 55 people were killed and 100 injured.

14 August 2023: Head of the 444 Brigade, Mahmoud Hamza, was detained by the Special Deterrence Force upon arriving at Mitiga International Airport. He was released two days later.

Az Zawiyah

April-May 2023: Sporadic clashes involving a variety of conflict parties occurred in Az Zawiyah.

9 November 2023: The pro-GNU 111 Brigade clashed with the Osama Al Juwaili Brigade in Al Azizyah.

Aljfara

Azzawya

Almargeb

29 October 2023: Government buildings and military bases in Gharyan were briefly overrun by a group of armed men led by pro-Haftar militiamen Adel Daab before Stability Support Apparatus forces retook control.

9 November 2023: An unspecified number of people were injured when shots were fired at the GNU prime minister's convoy as it passed Al Hirah village.

Libya

Al Jabal Al Gharbi

Gharyan

Source: Insecurity Insight. Base Map Data Source: United Nations OCHA and OpenMapTiles.org. The boundaries and names used in this map do not imply official acceptance or endorsement by Insecurity Insight.

Violence in Tripoli city and district

On 14 August 2023 clashes erupted in Tripoli between fighters of the Special Deterrence Forces (SDF) and the 444 Brigade. These clashes reportedly resulted in the deaths of at least 55 people and injuries to a further 100. They followed the detention earlier the same day of 444 Brigade commander Mahmoud Hamza upon his arrival at Mitiga International Airport approximately 8 kilometres east of Tripoli by members of the SDF, which controls the airport.

Subscribe

Key armed groups

Special Deterrent Force (SDF)/RADA: The SDF is also known as the State of Libya Al Radaa for Countering Terrorism and Organised Crime, which is commonly known as RADA, and is a radical Islamist special operations military police unit established in Tripoli to address various criminal activities. The SDF/RADA primarily focuses on combating high-profile kidnappings, murders, drug- and alcohol-related activities, illegal migrant smuggling, weapons and explosives smuggling, and terrorist activities and plots. The formation of this special unit was prompted by the lack of political power and police presence in Tripoli.

The SDF/RADA consists of approximately 1,500 members, making it the third largest militia in Tripoli. About 90% of its force comprises legitimate police officers, with 70% of them having served in the Libyan police force before 2011.

The SDF's/RADA's main areas of operation in Tripoli are Soug Al Jouma and Ain Zara in the western regions, while their headquarters are located at Mitiga International Airport. The SDF/RADA operates as an independent department under the Ministry of the Interior. The unit operates not only in Tripoli, but also in cities outside the capital, including Sabratha, Az Zawiyah, Benghazi, Sirte, Derna and Zwarah. The group follows Islamic Sharia principles while adhering to post-Gaddafi-era laws that were reformed under controversial circumstances by the Islamic Supreme Court of Tripoli.

The **444 Brigade** is a Libyan military unit affiliated with the interim Government of National Accord (GNA) formed in 2016 (a predecessor of the GNU) as part of the GNA's efforts to combat militant groups and secure the capital, Tripoli, and its surroundings. The 444 Brigade played a significant role in fighting against forces opposing the GNA, including militias associated with the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army (LNA).

The Stability Support Apparatus/Stability Support Authority (SSA) was created by Presidential Council decision No. 38 of 2021, with Abdel Ghani Belkacem al-Kikli appointed as the head of the unit in January 2021.[2] However, al-Kikli is known to have previously been a powerful militia leader under whose **command** his former militia personnel committed serious and well-documented human rights violations. The SSA is used by the government to enforce security in Tripoli, but also, according to Interior Ministry officials, to "intercept refugees and migrants at sea" and take "them to detention centres under SSA control". However, the Interior Ministry has no oversight of the SSA's actions, because it is controlled by the Prime Minister's Office. There have been several recent reports of SSA personnel human rights violations targeting refugees and migrants.

The unit has been recorded as clashing previously with other militias, including over a **dispute** with an HoR-affiliated militia on 23 April 2023. The SSA engaged in small arms fire with the First Support (Esnad) Battalion led by Muhammed Bahroun (also known as "al-Far", the "Mouse") and affiliated to the Security Directorate of Az Zawiyah. There is no report of what the dispute was over, but the clashes ended with one First Support Battalion member being killed and two others injured, while four civilians were also killed. A truce was declared on 25 April, which held, leading to civilians being evacuated from the area. Since this reported episode in April, there have been no further clashes involving the SSA and other militias (although see August clashes in Tripoli in Map 1). However, it remains a powerful force in the HSC-controlled areas, and the fact that it has a well-produced website points to both outside funding and an international element in producing the site.

Both groups reportedly used small arms and heavier weapons. Another armed faction, the Stability Support Apparatus (SSA), which forms part of the state and is also known as the Stability Support Authority, also had fighters and vehicles in the area it controls, but they were allegedly not involved in the clashes, which continued into the following evening. On 15 August the clashes ceased after members of a city social council announced that an agreement had been reached for the SDF to hand Hamza over to the SSA and for fighters to return to their bases.

These clashes occurred after security conditions in the Tripoli area had generally improved in 2022 and into 2023. The clashes in August have been described as the worst outbreak of fighting since the October 2020 ceasefire. Both the SDF and the 444 Brigade are nominally aligned with the Tripoli-based government, but compete for control over strategic locations in the capital, including Libya's only functioning airport (Mitiga). There had also been clashes on 28 May 2023 that occurred in the areas around Mitiga airport, on the Al Shouk road, and in the areas of Ayn Zarah and Farnaj, parts of Tripoli through which major arterial roads pass and where key city infrastructure is located. The clashes occurred between factions that control key infrastructure in the city and surrounding region. The SDF controls Mitiga airport, which other militia groups would be interested in controlling due to its likely lucrative value.

In some cases, clashes in Tripoli have directly affected the provision of key civilian services, including health care. During the clashes in April-May 2023, ambulances were reportedly damaged during the gun battles between the 444 Brigade and the SDF. Previously, in August 2022, clashes in Tripoli resulted in health facilities being damaged on at least five occasions, while two ambulances were also damaged by shelling. The clashes in 2022 occurred between two rival militias, one affiliated with Prime Minister Dabaiba and based in western Libya and the other with Fathi Bashagha, who was selected as prime minister designate by the Tobruk-based HoR in February 2022, an appointment that was revoked in May 2023.

Gharyan

On 29 October **clashes** broke out in the mountain town of Gharyan, 80 kilometres south of Tripoli, between forces aligned with the Tripoli-based HSC, including the local branch of the SSA, and those supporting a pro-Haftar militia leader, Adel Daab, who had returned to Gharyan following a four-year absence (Khalifa Haftar is the commander of the Tobruk-based LNA, which is the military arm of the HoR). The town is strategically important because it is on one of the main supply routes – the southern route – into Tripoli. In this instance, the HSC-aligned units were able to cause the militia leader and group to retreat towards LNA-controlled al-Shuwayrif, although seven people were killed in the fighting. Also, during the clashes, the SSA militia unit was supported by Turkish drone attacks, indicating that Ankara continues to offer support to HSC-aligned militia units. The clashes that occurred were more likely a move towards enlarging the territory that the militia controls – but it highlights that most conflict is centred around rogue militia units' attempts to increase their power base rather than being the result of actual strategic moves by either the HSC or HoR.

Joint Operation Forces

The **Joint Operation Forces** militia unit is based in Misrata and has engaged in anti-Islamic State[3] and **anti-human trafficking operations**. Amnesty International has repeatedly **documented** the Joint Operation Forces' involvement in enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary detention. As of October 2023 it was said to be under the command of Abdul-Khaliq al-Daikh and to have formed an alliance with armed men led by pro-Haftar militiaman Adel Daab. Together, the two groups briefly overran government buildings and a military base in Gharyan on 29 October 2023.

Az Zawiyah

There have also been sporadic clashes in Az Zawiyah – especially between the end of April and May – but these have tended to involved a variety of conflict actors, possibly including criminal groups struggling for power.

Zawiyah Communal Militia

The **Zawiyah Communal** Militia, also known as the Zawiyah Brigade, is a militia group based in Az Zawiyah, a city in north-west Libya. Militias such as these often emerge from local communities and play various roles, including providing security, asserting control over territories, and sometimes participating in broader regional conflicts or aligning with different factions in Libya's complex political landscape.

Conclusions

This section provides an assessment of possible events that aid agencies should anticipate and plan for, allowing them to respond with conflict-sensitive plans to ensure the safety of staff and maintain aid access and the protection of the humanitarian space.

Security measures often respond to events and are initiated after they occur. Proactively anticipating foreseeable events allows aid agencies to prepare ways to mitigate the impact of instability on aid operations before events that threaten aid operations occur. To achieve this, exposure and vulnerability need to be reduced and communities' coping capacity increased. Conflict sensitivity requires that organisations understand the environment in which they are operating, understand how aid programmes interact with the context, and use strategies that avoid negative impacts on the organisation, support community relations, and build on the positive effects of aid activities.

Instability, the risk of clashes or security operations can affect aid agencies. Sporadic fighting between militias in Tripoli is highly likely over the next year. The likelihood of clashes between rival militias in western Libya cities, including Gharyan, Khoms and Zuwara, will remain high over the next 6-12 months.

- Further instability is likely to originate from the activities of militias nominally aligned with the Tripoli-based government, but who compete for control over strategic locations in the capital.

- Conflict in western Libya in the past five months has tended to focus on clashes between the 444 Brigade and the SDF, but the SSA also remains a major militia group that may be involved in future clashes.

- Direct impacts on aid agencies resulting from political instability in Libya are most likely to involve agencies being forced to restrict their travel and areas of activities. Contests for control of Libya's only functioning airport, Mitiga, may also affect travel.

- Individual staff, offices or programme activities may find themselves unexpectedly in the vicinity of clashes that suddenly erupt, and staff may at that point be at higher risk of injury or arrest.

- Dissatisfaction with aid responses could raise political tensions.

Recommendations for aid agencies: Anticipate and prepare for potential clashes

- Be aware of zones in Libya controlled by different militias and of political tensions in Tripoli, and anticipate further clashes and instability.

- If your agency is renting office space or working with local partners with offices in Tripoli, verify that these offices are not located in the vicinity of key infrastructure under the control of a particular faction and of such importance that it may become the target of future clashes in ways that may affect the functioning of the office.

- Carry out due diligence on local partners to ensure that they are not aligned with a particular faction in ways that could make them a target should tensions escalate.

- Develop guidance for staff for how to stay safe if they find themselves in the proximity of clashes, taking into account the possibility of communication blackouts.

- Support local partners to enable the secure running of programmes and aid operations in volatile contexts on the basis of mutually agreed support.

- For programming, be aware that when clashes occur, community meetings, outreach programmes to vulnerable populations, education programmes and other activities will likely be forced to pause. Plan contingency measures to limit harms to communities that may result from the temporary suspensions of programmes.

- Consider your organisation's readiness to act quickly and effectively should new clashes occur.

1 The Tripoli- and Tobruk-based governments are also respectively referred to as the Government of National Unity (GNU) and Government of National Stability (GNS).
2 This group runs a professionally produced website in English: About SSA - Stability Support Apparatus.
3 This refers to the non-state armed group known as Islamic State.

Related content

- **Eastern Libya** Situation Report
- **Social Media and Aid** in the Context of the Libyan Flooding Disaster
- Attitudes on Social Media to **International and Local Aid**
- Reactions on Social Media to the **First Aid Efforts in the Aftermath of Storm Daniel**

UK aid
from the British people

h——h
H2H Network
Humanitarian
Action Support

Insecurity
Insight