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The City in the Middle: Fragile Stability and Future Opportunities in Libya's Sirte

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Since 4 April, Libya has been witnessing its third civil conflict in eight years. The conflict was sparked when the General Command of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF),² a diverse coalition headquartered in eastern Libya, launched a military operation to wrest control of the capital from actors loosely affiliated to the internationally-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA).³ While fighting has continued in and around Tripoli, with neither side able to gain a decisive victory, there have been concerns that the conflict over the capital could precipitate violence in other areas across the country.

The coastal city of Sirte⁴ appeared particularly exposed, with its proximity to forces allied to the two main warring camps indicating it could become a new frontline. In addition to its strategic location in the centre of Libya's northern coast, Sirte has a particular symbolism in Libya's recent history. Having been the stronghold of the Qadhadhfa tribe and of the Jamahiriyya regime between 1969 and 2011, it then

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2. The LAAF is an alliance of armed military and civilian groups led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. It was established at Al-Rajma, east of Benghazi, in May 2014, upon the announcement of Operation Dignity, a military operation targeting a coalition of forces including Ansar Al-Sharia, the Islamic State organisation and armed revolutionary groups in Benghazi, Derna and the Oil Crescent. The LAAF announced that it controlled the entire eastern region of Libya in mid 2018.

3. The GNA was established following the signing of the Libyan Political Agreement in December 2015. The GNA, which is made up of a Presidency Council and several ministers, moved to Tripoli in late March 2016.

4. This paper differentiates between Sirte region and Sirte city. Sirte region is the biggest in central Libya. It consists of 19 agricultural villages, and has a total population of 162,000. Sirte city, in the middle of Libya's northern coastline, is the capital of this region and has 106,352 inhabitants, according to 2014 data from Sirte Civil Registry.



became the capital of the Islamic State (IS) organisation's "Tripoli Province" between January 2015 and November 2016, when IS followers were eventually dislodged following six months of intense fighting with GNA-affiliated forces part of Operation Al-Bonyan al-Marsous. In less than a decade, the city has experienced two major wars⁵ that have been particularly destructive for its infrastructure,⁶ but also deeply affected its political cohesion and social fabric. Fears were therefore high that the new war for the control of Tripoli could extend to Sirte, as controlling the city offers strategic benefits to both of the warring coalitions. There were also serious risks that the new war could trigger confrontation between local actors in Sirte, whereby certain groups could attempt to take advantage of their links with one or the other of the warring coalitions in an effort to change the local balance of power. In this way, the relative stability that the city had enjoyed since the end of 2016 appeared fragile.

However, despite the military build-up that has taken place in and around the city since March 2019,⁷ and the September 2019 airstrikes by unidentified aircraft supporting the LAAF General Command targeting military sites, the Great Man Made River Project, the airport and Gardabiya airbase,⁸ local actors have been able to maintain relative stability in the city. Based on a thorough analysis of the specificities of Sirte city,

5. After Tripoli fell to opposition forces in 2011, Muammar Gaddafi announced Sirte as Libya's new capital. Pro-Gaddafi forces fought hard to defend it, and during the ensuing battle, which was the decisive conflict of the 2011 civil war, much of the city was destroyed. In 2016, Sirte was the site of six months of intense fighting between IS forces and Al-Bonyan Al-Marsous forces, which resulted in IS's defeat and the destruction of around 35% of the city's infrastructure.

6. *Wikālat 'akhbār lībīyā 24* [Libya 24 News Agency], "'amīd baladīyat sirt li-'akhbār lībīyā 24: al-mujtama' al-dawlīy 'arḥam binā min 'abnā' jildatinā, al-juz' al-thanī min al-milaff al-istiqaṣā'ī al-ṭarīq 'ilā sirt.. al-madīna al-maghḏūb 'alayhā [Mayor of Sirte Municipal Council to Libya 24 News: the international community is more merciful to us than our people, the second part of the survey dossier The Way to Sirte.. The Exasperating City]", 28 October 2018, <https://akhbarlibya24.net/2018/10/26/اعمتت-سرت-سي-دليل-بدي-مع/ع-م-ج-م-ل-ا-ي-ب-ي-ل-ر-ا-ب-خ-أ/>

7. Sirte Protection Force's official Facebook page, 10 March 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/Securing.Sirte/photos/a.481672142185166/826393041046406/?type=3&theater>

8. *Qanāt al-manār* [Al-manar Channel], "*quwwāt 'al-wifāq' al-lībīya: ṭa'irāt musayyara 'ajnabīya qaṣafat muwāqī nā fī sirt* [Libyan GNA forces: foreign drones struck our positions in Sirte]", 15 September 2019, <http://almanar.com.lb/5710960>

this paper attempts to understand the factors that have contributed to preserving stability in a context of increased polarization and violence at the national level. It argues that Sirte could constitute a unique forum to encourage processes of post-conflict reconciliation and economic reconstruction.

Sirte, A Strategic City Between Fault-lines

The current war opposing the LAAF and the GNA-aligned forces has highlighted once again the strategic value of the city of Sirte. This importance is not new: it was clear in the past, including in times of peace. However, Sirte has become increasingly important since 2014, when the Libyan state first became divided into two rival political and military coalitions, each with its own set of institutions. The city's strategic location, its symbolism as a stronghold of the Gaddafi regime, as well as the complexity of its social fabric, have placed Sirte between the fault-lines of the conflict.

IS's decision to take Sirte as the capital of its Tripoli Province in 2015 again confirmed the city's symbolic and strategic value.⁹ The GNA and the General Command started to compete over which of them would liberate the city from IS control, and thus reap the political benefit from this. This became particularly evident when both coalitions announced "zero hour" in early 2016.¹⁰ However, the General Command forces did not take any actual steps towards fighting IS in Sirte.¹¹ Misratan brigades started fighting against IS upon the latter's attempts to advance westwards towards Misrata, beginning the battle even before the GNA Presidency Council announced its decision to launch operation Al-Bonyan Al-Marsous. The subsequent GNA decision granted legitimacy to the Misratan-led fight, and resulted

9. *Al-'islāmīyūn* [The Islamists], "'ahammīyat (sirt) al-lībīya fī istrāṭījīyat tanzīm al-dawla al-'islāmīya [The importance of Libya's Sirte in the Islamic State organisation's strategy]", 30 October 2015, <http://islamion.com/news/أهمية-سرت-في-استراتيجية-الدولة-الإسلامية>

10. *Al-quds al-'arabīy* [Al-Quds Al-Arabi], "*sibāq 'tahrīr sirt' yuhaddid al-juhūd al-'askarīya dīd tanzīm al-dawla al-'islāmīya fī lībīyā* [The race to "liberate Sirte" threatens military efforts against the Islamic State organisation in Libya]", 12 May 2016, <https://www.alquds.co.uk/أقصى-عسكري-علا-دوح-ال-ددهي-سرت-ري-رحت-ق-اب-س/>

11. Elumami, Ahmed, "Western Libyan forces prepare attack on Islamic State stronghold", Reuters, 12 May 2016, af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKCN0Y3009



in it receiving international support in the form of US air support. In December 2016, despite the relatively high number of casualties,¹² the Al-Bonyan Al-Marsous forces achieved an important victory in Sirte and declared its full liberation.¹³

From then on, these forces have played a key role in the provision of security at the city level, with the majority of Al-Bonyan Al-Marsous brigades being incorporated into the newly created Sirte Protection Force, the GNA-appointed military body in the city. At the same time, the Sirte Municipal Council, elected in December 2016 and working under the authority of the GNA, is in charge of administering local affairs, overseeing most institutions, investment contracts and the provision of key services, as well as coordinating the work of local and international organisations carrying out stabilisation programmes in the city.

As the war started in Tripoli in April 2019, the people of Sirte found themselves once again between the fault-lines. While forces allied to the GNA are responsible for security within the city, General Command forces are stationed on its southern and eastern borders, with only 25 km separating the two. The strategic military importance of Sirte is clear to both of the warring coalitions: whoever controls the city also controls and can run reconnaissance on the main roads leading to eastern and western Libya. The city is also considered to be the gateway to the country's south, particularly the city of Jufra, the General Command's most important logistical base to advance towards western and southern Libya. Indeed, the General Command confirmed that it targeted GNA-aligned forces that were attempting to advance towards Jufra in September 2019,¹⁴ this confirming the site's significance to both parties.

12. The number of casualties in the operation reached over 730 deaths and 6,000 wounded, according to a statement of the GNA Minister of Health. See: *bawwābat al-wasat* [Al-Wasat Portal], “*bi-al-‘arqām.. al-ḥaṣīla al-nihā ‘īya li-ḍaḥāyā ‘al-bunyān al-marṣūṣ*” *fī sirt* [In numbers.. the final tally of victims from Al-Bonyan Al-Marsous in Sirte]”, 18 December 2016, <http://alwasat.ly/news/libya/119475>.

13. *Frāns 24* [France 24], “*Libiyā: fāyiz al-serrāj ya ‘lan rasmīyan taḥrīr madīnat sirt min al-jihādīyīn* [Libya: Fayeẓ al-Serraj officially announces the liberation of Sirte from jihadis]”, 18 December 2016, <https://www.france24.com/ar/20161218-كراعم-تس-ةموكح-ايبي-ل-ةل-ودل-ام-يظنت-يمس-ةرطيسي>

14. Statement of the General Command spokesperson, Col. Ahmed Mismari on his official Facebook page, “*bayān bi-khuṣūṣ*

Sirte's importance to the warring parties is further increased by its proximity to some of Libya's main oil terminals and oilfields. Having control over the city thus facilitates access to these, which represent a large proportion of Libya's oil infrastructure. It therefore facilitates control over much of the country's most significant source of income and foreign currency, which constitutes an important political trump card in the conflict.¹⁵ Moreover, controlling Sirte enables access to the numerous important facilities built there under Gaddafi, such as the airport, airbase, port and the largest administrative complex in Libya (the Ouagadougou Conference Centre).

In addition to its strategic and military importance, Sirte's unique social structure has also contributed to placing it on the fault-lines. This uniqueness stems from the city's tribal and demographic diversity, with local families and tribes having links to Libya's various different regions and cities. This has made Sirte a key node in Libya's extended social network.

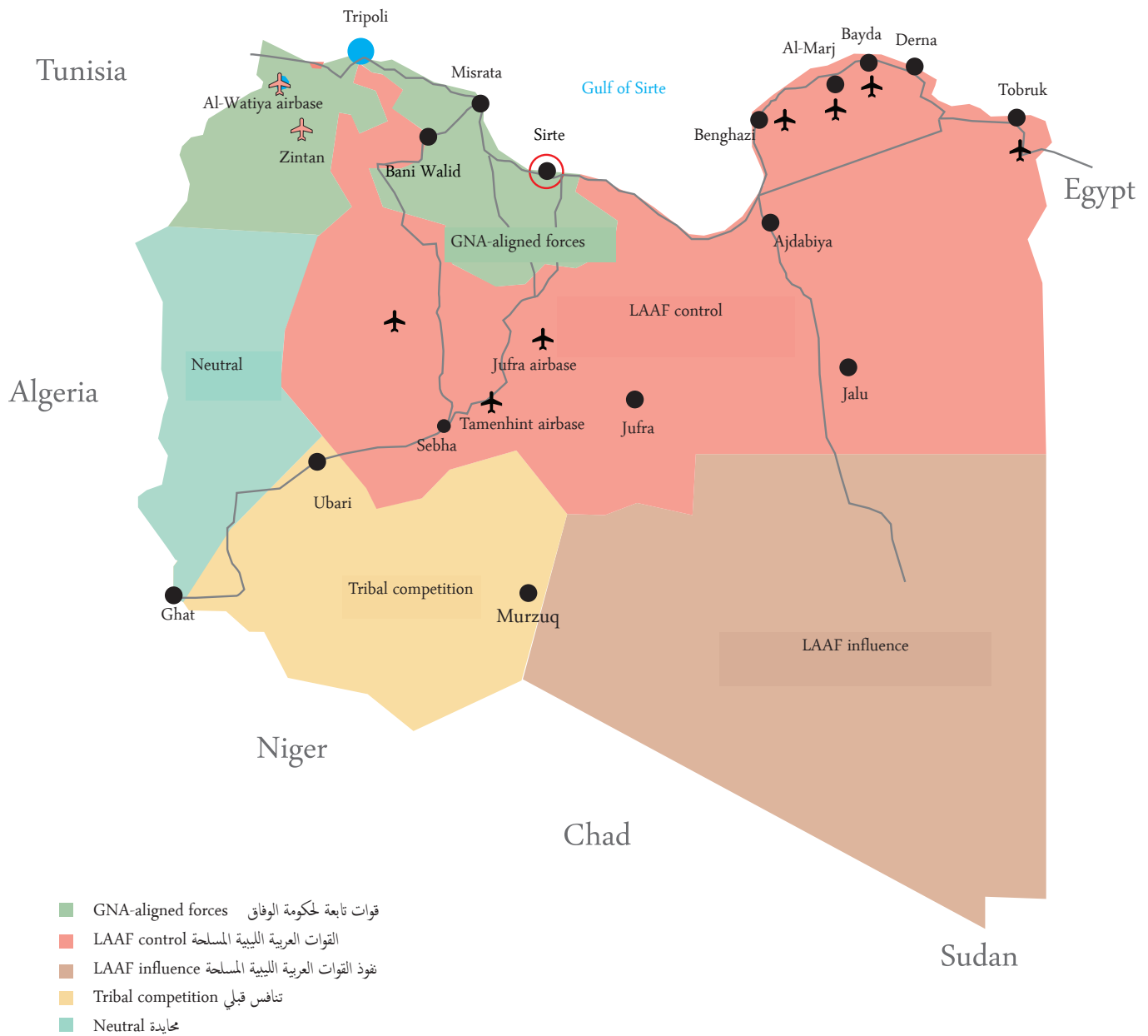
The Firjan tribe, for example, in terms of origins is linked to the north-western Tarhouna tribe, but also has close connections to the tribes in the east due to its significant expansion in that region. Similarly, the Warfalla tribe, considered one of the largest tribes in the central region, is the most widely spread across Libya. The main part of the Qadhadhfa tribe is concentrated in southern Libya, and it has a strong historical relationship with the Warfalla. The origins of the other major tribes in the city – the Maadan and the Swawa (historically part of the Maadan), as well as the Hamamla and many of the city's families (especially the residents of First Neighbourhood) – trace back to Misrata. The rest of the tribes and families in the city have origins or tribal links from across Libya. This unique diversity means that the various social groups in Sirte remain in continuous communication with most of the different groups that make up Libyan society. It also means that both of the warring camps have a social base

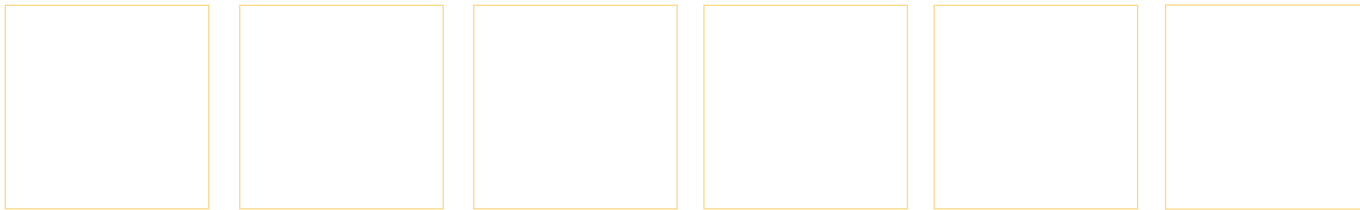
muḥāwalat al-milīshīyāt al-‘irḥābīya al-hujūm ‘alā al-jufra [Statement regarding terrorist militias' attempt to attack Jufra]”, 13 September 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/LNAspox/videos/1442795562524797/>.

15. To know more about the use of oil facilities as a political card, see International Crisis Group, “After the Showdown in Libya's Oil Crescent”, 9 August 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/189-after-showdown-libyas-oil-crescent>



Figure (1) illustrates areas of control and the boundaries between the General Command and the GNA until November 2019





inside the city: the Firjan tribe, to which the commander of the LAAF Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar belongs,¹⁶ and Misratan families¹⁷ in the city, who are openly allied to the GNA.¹⁸

However, Sirte is not only located between the fault-lines of the current war. While both the GNA and the General Command enjoy social support in the city, loyalty to the former regime remains the prevailing political orientation in Sirte. This makes the city something of an exceptional case within Libya in terms of the complexity of political and tribal affiliations within it. Two of the city's largest tribes, the Warfalla and the Qadhadhfa, are loyal to the former regime, though each is internally divided. The different camps within these tribes are motivated by political and social considerations: the pro-LAAF camp within the Qadhadhfa see a General Command victory as the only way for Saif al-Islam Gaddafi to return to power, while the pro-LAAF Warfalla are more focused on getting revenge on Misrata for supporting the infamous Decision No. 7 of 2012 to attack the city of Bani Walid, the main seat of the Warfalla tribe.¹⁹ The anti-LAAF element within both tribes are concerned that a General Command victory would result in Haftar's Firjan tribe dominating the city's resources and institutions. Similarly, they believe that the LAAF aims to establish military rule,

which in their view could lead to another civil war in the near future.²⁰

How Can the Fragile Stability in Post-IS Sirte Be Explained?

Despite the diversity of political and military allegiances inside the city, Sirte's fragile stability since December 2016 has been maintained, even after the war started in Tripoli and several events signalled that the theatre of military operations may be extending beyond the capital.²¹ Several factors can account for stability at the city level. One of these is the relative military balance resulting from the presence of Sirte Protection Force and the significant influence of Misratan brigades within it, which is paralleled by the presence of smaller Salafi brigades.²² The weakness of Sirte's tribal leadership since 2011 has also played a key role in shaping this fragile equilibrium, with the two major traumas that the city experienced in 2011 and in 2016 contributing to the reluctance of most local actors to get involved in the broader, national level political and military struggles.

Sirte Protection Force and the Dominance of Misratan Brigades Over the Local Security Landscape

The Sirte Protection Force, which is allied to the GNA, is considered the most prominent military force in the central region. It consists of a number of brigades, primarily from Misrata, from which the Force's main source of power comes. Most of these brigades took part in the Al-Bonyan Al-Marsous Operation, and then

16. Officers from the Firjan tribe, whether former officers from the Gaddafi regime or officers that have more recently graduated from the LAAF military colleges, play an important role in reinforcing the LAAF ranks. These include Brigadier General Al-Mabruk Al-Mugrid Al-Firjani, head of the LAAF Al-Bukhariya Martyrs Brigade, one of Haftar's most prominent military leaders in the central region who played a key role in controlling Ras Lanuf oil terminal, and Major General Salem Deryag al-Firjani, the head of the Greater Sirte Operations Room (based to the east of Sirte city), considered one of the tribe's most prominent military leaders.

17. Misrata emerged as a political, economic and military centre of power following the fall of the Gaddafi regime. Since 2011, it has come to represent an important party in the Libyan equation, striving to maintain the unity of its military forces to strengthen its political and economic weight.

18. Field interviews with prominent political and social leaders from the Misratan families of Sirte, April 2019.

19. On 25 September 2012, the General National Congress, under pressure from Misratan militias, published Decision No. 7, ordering Bani Walid to be taken over. These armed groups led the attack, along with their allies from Gharyan, Zawiya, Tripoli and Messalata. Gross violations occurred during this attack, embittering social relations between Misratans and Warfalla in cities across Libya.

20. Field interviews with 20 young people, social and political figures from the Qadhadhfa and Warfalla tribes in Sirte, April 2019.

21. *Wikālāt* RT + [RT + Agencies], "*libiyā... quwwat himāyat sirt tu'lin 'al-nafīr wa-l-tuwāri'*" *fī al-madina ma' zahf jaysh hīftar* [Libya.. Sirte Protection Force announces "state of emergency and high alert" in the city following advances from Haftar's army"], 10 March 2019, https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1006230-تيامح-قوق-ارتفح-ش-ي-ج-فح-ز-قن-يدمل-ا-ي-ر اوطل-او-ري-فنل-استرس

22. Salafism in Libya refers to a religious movement that first appeared in the country in the early 1990s. It is best known for its doctrine of absolute loyalty to the ruler, Salafis in Libya rely on *fatwas* from Salafi sheikhs based in Saudi Arabia. Salafis strongly believe that their version of Islam is the closest to true Islam, and that all other religious groups have erred in their understanding of religion. Libyan Salafis today are divided, with "Madkhalis", so-called because of their loyalty to Sheikh Rabi' al-Madkhali, being the most prominent group.



stayed in Sirte to secure it.²³ This led to the GNA in March 2017 officially appointing them responsible for security in the city by establishing the Sirte Protection Force.²⁴ Misratan brigades are in charge of securing the city's key infrastructure, including Ibn Sina Hospital,²⁵ the university, the airport, the port and the steam-electric power station.

For Misratan brigade leaders, being present at strategic locations and overseeing the functioning of key infrastructure means that they can benefit from any development contracts, important projects, including in the field of reconstruction, or reparations. Concluding contracts with the heads of these institutions also enables these brigades to maintain their activities in the city as they provide them with alternative forms of income.²⁶ This has become particularly important in the context where these brigades left Tripoli and Tripolitanian brigades took control over institutions there,²⁷ and since the GNA has stopped paying salaries to non-military²⁸ brigade members.²⁹

The fact that Misratan brigades have secured some of the city's key strategic sites against potential theft or abuse

by criminals has made their presence important for local residents. Misratan brigades have also paid particular attention to cultivating their relations with Sirte's local society, as a way of acknowledging the grievances the people of Sirte feel towards them for the 2011 war.³⁰ In this way, Sirte Protection Force chose to station most of the Misratan brigades and units in particular locations far from the old residential areas of the city, thus creating a secure belt around the city without risking direct friction with the locals. Most of the units of the Mahjoub Brigade, for example, are based in the industrial zone west of the city, while others are based in the south and east of the city, near the General Command forces and where IS is now concentrating its activities.³¹ Similarly, inhabitants from the city have limited their direct interactions with the Misratan brigades to avoid being caught in a confrontation that would necessarily be to their disadvantage, given the unequal balance of forces. As a result, local society does not have significant influence on these brigades. However, some Misratan brigade leaders – such as Abdul Wahid al-Zaraa, commander of the Sirte Protection Force's Al-Nasr Brigade, a force made up primarily of civilians from Misratan origins – have adopted a different approach: instead of striving to maintain a safe distance between their members and Sirte's inhabitants, they are actively working to develop good relations with local society. Abdul Wahid al-Zaraa has been reaching out to influential social figures in the city and integrated himself into the Salafi alliances that exert influence over the Municipal Council. Among the benefits of such a strategy is that he has been able to obtain a stake in contracts and investments on similar terms to an influential notable or businessman from the city.³²

23. The Misratan brigades' continuing presence in the city, and indeed their unwillingness to cede it lightly to the LAAF, has been an important, symbolic matter for the people of Misrata, especially given the many lives they lost liberating it from IS in 2016.

24. *Wikālat al-'anādūl* [Anadolu Agency], “*al-wifāq al-lībīya tushakkil quwwa 'askariya li-ḥimāyat sirt* [The Libyan GNA creates a military force to protect Sirte]”, *Qanāt al-jazīra al-'ikhbārīya* [Al-Jazeera Arabic Channel], 25 March 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2017/3/25/الوفاق-ليبيا-تؤسس-قوة-عسكرية-لحماية-سرت>

25. Interviews with three employees at Ibn Sina Hospital and a field visit there, December 2018.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Al-manaṣṣa al-lībīya* [Libyan Platform], “*ghassān salāma: milīshīyāt ṭarābalus dakhalat al-wizārāt.. taghawwalū 'alā al-ḥukūma wa-l-mu'assasāt wa-l-maṣārif wa-khaṭafū al-nās* [Ghassan Salame: Tripoli's militias have entered the ministries.. they have seized control over the government, institutions and banks, and have kidnapped people]”, 14 October 2018, <https://elmanaassa.com/news/view/20470>

28. Those that do not have a military ID number.

29. *ṭwān lībīyā* [Ewan Libya], “*quwwat ḥimāyat wa-ta'mīn sirt tuṭālīb bi-ṣarf mustahaqqātihā* [Sirte Protection and Security Force demand the payment of their dues]”, 4 March 2019, <http://ewan-libya.ly/news/news.aspx?id=298948>

30. Human Rights Watch, «Death of a Dictator, Bloody Vengeance in Sirte», 16 October, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2012/10/16/death-dictator/bloody-vengeance-sirte>

31. A security source close to Sirte Protection Force confirmed the observations of surveillance units in the south of the city regarding suspicious movements in the south of the Oil Crescent, with indications of links to IS. For more information, see: Al-Sharif, Abdullah, “*hujūm ḥīfar 'alā ṭarābalus yu'īd 'dā'ish*” *mujaddidan 'ilā al-janūb al-lībīy* [Haftar's attack on Tripoli allows IS to return to southern Libya]”, *al-'arabīy al-jadīd* [The New Arab], 5 May 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2019/5/5/سبب-إبارة-طرابلس-عبرت-فتح-موج-ه>

32. Author's observations based on several interviews with officials in Sirte.



Another important element that can explain the city's relative stability to date is the capacity of Misratan leaders to avoid and manage conflict between their brigades, despite differences of political opinion and internal power contests. When a member of one of the Misratan brigades killed a member of the Uqba ibn Nafi' unit of the 166th Brigade, made up of members of the Swawa tribe from Sirte and Misrata, the latter responded directly by killing the injured culprit, intercepting the ambulance taking him to Misrata at Sirte's western gate on 1 January 2019.³³ However, the conflict was controlled within a few hours and armed clashes were prevented through direct communication with the conflicting parties, and without any other force being allowed to intervene.³⁴ Misratan leaders are aware that supporters of the General Command in Sirte could attempt to instrumentalise any armed conflict between Misratan groups to garner negative attention towards them in the media. Moreover, it is clear that these brigades, who led Libyan efforts to fight IS in Sirte, are trying to present the city as an example of stability, especially now that the General Command has accused them of engaging in terrorism.³⁵

The Salafi 604th Infantry Brigade, A Rising Force With Complex Ties to Local Society

In addition to the Misratan brigades, Sirte Protection Force also includes the Salafi-leaning 604th Infantry Brigade (known by their opponents as Madkhalis), the second most important brigade in the city after the Misratan brigades. The brigade was founded after the August 2015 assassination of Sheikh Khalid bin Rajeb Al-Firjani, one of Sirte's most prominent Salafi preachers, and the subsequent, failed attempt of Sirte's Salafis to rise up against IS. They were then forced to leave the city and decided to establish their own military body,³⁶ under

the leadership of Sheikh Ayman al-Zawi³⁷ and with the Al-Heisha reserve to the east of Sirte as their base.

The 604th Brigade is primarily made up of people from Sirte, and is part of Sirte Protection Force. On paper at least, it is therefore loyal to the GNA. Yet the majority of Sirte Protection Force's commanders do not trust it.³⁸ This is to a large extent the result of its most prominent commanders belonging to the Firjan tribe, which supports the General Command. Nevertheless, there have almost never been armed clashes between the 604th and the rest of Sirte Protection Force.³⁹ As Salafist forces do not have the capacity to challenge the Misratan brigades in Sirte, they rely on allies among the Misratan brigades in the city to play the role of mediators and avoid armed confrontation.⁴⁰ The Al-Nasr Brigade led by Abdul Wahid al-Zaraa, in particular, has been playing such role.⁴¹ For instance, it intervened when a member of the 604th Infantry Brigade in August 2019 opened fire on members of the Sirte Security Directorate, which is supported by the Sirte Protection Force. This resulted in a military show of strength in the Third Neighbourhood, before Abdul Wahid Al-Zaraa intervened and brought an end to the incident using social means: communicating with the parties and bringing them together for the purposes of dialogue rather than allowing military escalation.

The 604th Brigade at first did take advantage of Firjani tribal support, as the Brigade's leadership came from this tribe. However, the brigade rapidly consolidated and

33. Interview with a field commander of the 166th Brigade, April 2019.

34. Telephone interview with a member of the 166th Brigade, October 2018.

35. Interview with a commander of Sirte Protection Force, 2019.

36. Wehrey, Frederic, "Quiet no more? "Madkhali" Salafists in Libya are active in the battle against Islamic State, and in factional conflicts", Carnegie Middle East Center, 13 October 2016, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64846>

37. Sheikh Ayman al-Zawi was subsequently killed in clashes with IS during the Al-Bonyan Al-Marsous operation. Al-Zawi was succeeded by Sheikh Abdulhamid bin Rajeb Al-Firjani as a way to honour the memory of his brother who was assassinated.

38. *Al-markaz al-waṭanī li-da'm al-istiqrār* [National Decision Support Centre], "'āmīr 'amalīyat al-bunyan al-marṣūṣ yuḥadhdhir "bi-shakl ghayr mubāshir" min katība salafīya bi-madīnat sirt al-lībiya [Commander of Operation al-Bonyan Al-Marsous issues "indirect" warning about Salafi brigade in the Libyan city of Sirte]", 14 May 2017, http://npdc.ly/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6751:2017-05-14-08-18-23&catid=8:2015-01-29-10-08-27

39. Wehrey, Frederic, "Quiet no more? "Madkhali" Salafists in Libya are active in the battle against Islamic State, and in factional conflicts", Carnegie Middle East Center, 13 October 2016, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64846>

40. Interview with one of the investigating officers of the Sirte Security Directorate, interview with witnesses from the Third Neighbourhood, August 2019.

41. Interview with one of the leaders of the Sirte Martyrs' Brigade, interview with one of the leaders of 166th Brigade, March 2019.



expanded its influence by establishing a complex network of alliances with prominent individuals like the mayor of Sirte, as well as influential political and military actors inside and outside the city.

The brigade's overseeing of security arrangements for the mayor's office has become its most significant source of power in the city. The mayor had no alternative but to submit to such protection. This was especially the case following his 2016 kidnapping by an armed group in Tripoli, and given his continued fear of Misratan brigades' dominance or of their interfering in the work of the Municipal Council.⁴² This has allowed the 604th Brigade to gain influence over Sirte's Municipal Council and the decision-making processes within it. At times, this has created tensions and disputes between its members, adversely affecting the mayor's work.⁴³ For example, in mid-2018, Sirte's mayor attempted to dismiss the director of the Sirte Higher Institute of Science and Technology because he rejected the 604th Brigade and the Central Security Force⁴⁴ taking control over the institute's main site and suspending its studies.

Some of the 604th Brigade's leaders have also exploited their close relationship with influential Salafi leaders and certain security/military brigades in Tripoli like the Special Deterrence Force (Rada) to gain some influence over the GNA Presidential Council, or to blackmail or threaten officials in Sirte with being accused of corruption

or terrorism. In all likelihood, the large number of legal and financial abuses by the city's poorly qualified officials have provided a fertile environment for this, enabling the brigade's leaders to control institutions without needing to control their highest management levels.⁴⁵

Salafis' increased influence in Sirte's political sphere has been paralleled by an expansion of their influence over local society. This has included increased involvement in education, traditional mosque-based religious schools, the local Awqaf office, and some local media outlets. Their influence has also extended to the seizure of the headquarters of the second largest higher education institution in the city, Sirte Higher Institute of Science and Technology, and a primary school building in the densely populated Third Neighbourhood.⁴⁶ Local residents of this neighbourhood, who are primarily from the Firjan tribe, have grown uneasy at the brigade's presence in this residential area, especially following the explosion of a munitions store in July 2019, which endangered civilians' lives and damaged property.⁴⁷ A number of incidents, including forced arrests, torture and murder attributed to the Salafis,⁴⁸ have also contributed to increased security concerns among local residents regarding the presence and practices of Salafi groups, which some liken to those of IS.⁴⁹

The escalating war in Tripoli, and the targeting of Sirte by unknown planes supporting the LAAF, has put Salafist brigades in the city in a difficult position. Their Firjani

42. Interview with the mayor of the Municipal Council of Sirte, August 2019.

43. *Bawwābat 'ifrīqīyā al-'ikhbārīya* [Afrigate News], "*lajna ijtimā'īya li-ḥall al-khilāfāt bayna 'a'dā' al-majlis al-baladīy sirt* [Social committee to solve disputes between the members of Sirte Municipal Council]", 13 October 2018, <https://www.afrigatenews.net/article/سلسل جمل اء اض ع ا ن ب ب ت ا ف ا ل خ ل ا ل ح ل ة ة ي ع ا م ت ج ا ة ن ج ل / ا ت ر س - ي د ل ب ل ا>

44. The Central Security force is a recently created security body that represents the security wing of the Salafi current in Sirte. Although most of its members are non-Salafis, its leader and founder is one of the most prominent Salafis from the 604th Brigade. The expansion of Salafi influence in Sirte through this body will also enable Sirte's Salafis to access certain funds from the GNA in light of the latter's policy to prioritise supporting groups affiliated to its Ministry of Interior over military brigades, to whom it has suspended financial support. The Special Deterrence Force (Rada) oversaw the training and equipping of the Central Security force and the 604th Brigade. The Central Security force is currently responsible for providing security at the largest administrative complex in the city, the Ouagadougou Conference Centre, where the Municipal Council and most of the services sector in the city has offices.

45. Interviews with officials in Sirte, 2017.

46. Wehrey, Frederic and Emad Badi, "A Place of Distinctive Despair: After the removal of the Islamic State, Sirte faces multiple reconstruction and security challenges", Carnegie Middle East Center, 8 August 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/76997>

47. Field visit to the Third Neighbourhood and interviews with some of its residents, July 2019.

48. Interview with the family of Abussalam Ali Al-Mitri al-Firjani, who died in Tunisia after being tortured while being detained at the 604th Brigade Headquarters. See also: *Bawwābat 'ifrīqīyā al-'ikhbārīya* [Afrigate News], "*sirt.. al-ḥāla al-sihhīya li-sijīn tak-shif faḍā'at* [sic] *mumārisāt al-ta'dhīb bi-l-madīna* [Sirte.. Prisoner's state of health reveals atrocities of torture taking place in the city]", 6 June 2019, <https://www.afrigatenews.net/article/ق ل ا ح ل ا ت ر س / ة ن ي د م ل ا ب ب ي ذ ع ت ل ا ت ا س ر ا م م ة ع ا ض ف ف ش ك ت ن ي ج س ل ة ي ح ص ل ا>

49. Wehrey, Frederic and Emad Badi, "A Place of Distinctive Despair: After the removal of the Islamic State, Sirte faces multiple reconstruction and security challenges", Carnegie Middle East Center, 8 August 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/76997>



leaders are caught between tribal loyalty to Haftar's General Command and their own military affiliation to Sirte Protection Force. Thus, in the current context, the leader and deputy leader of the 604th Brigade have remained silent regarding their political position. This has mirrored the positioning of the Firjani tribe in the city which, despite the strength of its tribal links to Haftar, has preferred to stick to diplomacy and even with the escalation of the war in Tripoli has not made any move against pro-GNA forces in Sirte. The tribe knows that in the current context they would be the losers in any conflict in Sirte, and that any move on their part is subject to the LAAF first advancing towards the city. In contrast, other non-Firjani Salafi leaders, most notably Mahmoud Sharr al-Tariq al-Warfalli, have publicly expressed their rejection of the General Command's attack on Tripoli. They have explained their reasoning by pointing to the General Command's use of Russian mercenaries from the Wagner group as well as its alliance with the Kani Brigades in Tarhouna⁵⁰ and Adel Da'ab Bgharyan's Brigade in Gharyan, both of which are linked to the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group,⁵¹ which the Salafis consider their enemy.⁵² This division has resulted in

Salafist groups recalculating their positions in Sirte city and remaining neutral in the current conflict, although a small number of individuals have instead taken personal stances and joined the war on whichever side to which they are loyal, according to Sheikh Anwar Faraj Souissi, an anti-LAAF Misratan Salafi.⁵³

Weak Social Leadership, Politics of Trauma and Survival

The fall of Sirte in 2011 and its sacking by revolutionary forces, as well as the city's subsequent marginalisation, have had a major and lasting impact on the city's social fabric and created a leadership vacuum at the city level. This impact was particularly grave for the city's most prominent tribes, the Qadhadhfa and Warfalla, with most influential figures in their ranks having died, gone into exile or remaining absent from the local scene due to their loyalty to the former regime, as well as their continued reticence towards engaging with the post-2011 state. While creating major challenges in terms of local governance, the weakness of Sirte's social leadership has also contributed to the relative stability that has prevailed in the city after the fall of IS.

Although attempts have been made to renew the tribal leadership, the new leaders in the city have so far not been able to unify and exert significant influence over Sirte's tribes in a context of increasing political and military polarisation at the country level. Moreover, the frequent violations to which the city was subject in the past have increased tribal leaders' fears for themselves, their kinsmen and their property. This has impacted the willingness and capability of Sirte's tribes to thus far actively contest the post-2016 balance of power. Nevertheless, some tribal leaders have been attempting, along with other tribal leaders from Sirte, to play a mediation role in disputes between different social groups or armed brigades. Notables from the Warfalla, Firjan and Qadhadhfa, for example, worked together to make peace between the Maadan and Hamamla tribes after a Maadani killed a young man from the Hamamla in October 2018. The killer was handed over to the Sirte Security Directorate and social reconciliation was achieved between the two tribes.

50. The Kani Brigades are also known in military circles as the 9th Brigade and the 7th Brigade. They are quasi-military groups known as the Kaniyat because the family of Mohammed Al-Kani controls them, although some argue that the real power behind the group is former GNC rapporteur and former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group member Ahmed al-Saadi. The majority of the Kaniyat's members come from the Tarhouna tribe. According to the 2016 annual report of the Victims' Organisation for Human Rights, the Kaniyat were responsible for the killing of 218 civilians and displacement of 300 families from Tarhouna in 2014 and 2016. (For more information: Ghabbara, Abdulbaset, "*tarhūna.. jarā'im tata'ddad wa-l-fā'il wāḥid* [Tarhouna.. crimes are proliferating and there is one single culprit]", *bawwābat 'ifrīqīyā al-'ikhbārīya* [Afrigate News], 28 August 2017, <https://www.afrigatenews.net/article/ل-عافل-او-ددعتت-مى-ار-ج-ةن-ودرت/> (دحو))

51. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group is a Salafi-jihadi militant organisation. It was founded by a group of young Libyans who had returned to Libya after fighting in the Afghan-Soviet war. It was responsible for a spate of militant operations in the 1990s targeting different civilian and security sites, aiming to topple the Gaddafi regime. However, the former regime cracked down on the group and arrested a large part of its members. In 2009, as part of an initiative led by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the group's leaders undertook revisions of their ideology and apologised to the state, resulting in many being released from prison.

52. Discussion with one of the main leaders of the brigade, January 2019.

53. Post on the official Facebook page of Salafi Sheikh Anwar Souissi.



Key figures from the Qadhadhfa and Warfalla in Sirte have not openly sided with one or other of the warring parties in Tripoli, although figures from these tribes elsewhere have done so. For example, there is no evidence that influential or well-known high-ranking officers from Qadhadhfa-Sirte or Warfalla-Sirte have joined the LAAF so far. It appears that while tribal leaders from outside the city have a clear influence on their respective tribal constituencies inside Sirte, their decisions do not prevail over the interests and future of the tribe within Sirte. Indeed, most social groups in Sirte rather consider different political and military stances, considering the potential consequences they might have on their tribal group within the city. As such, the decisions taken by Sirte's tribes vacillate between following the decisions of their tribal counterparts outside the city and refusing to implement them when considering that these could negatively affect the position of the tribe in the city. For example, as noted above, the Firjan tribe has not made any move against GNA-allied forces in Sirte despite the tribe's support for the General Command in its fight against the GNA in Tripoli. On the contrary, the Firjani tribal leaders in Sirte have continued to maintain social relations with the GNA and its military representatives in the city, the Sirte Protection Force.

Opportunities to Strengthen Peace and Stability

In conclusion, the fact that the different forces in Sirte, both tribal and military, are relatively well-balanced is an important factor that helps account for the stability the city has witnessed since 2016. The strategies pursued by the main actors in the city, even where this has meant taking different decisions to their allies or wider tribes, have helped to prevent conflict occurring. Among the most important of these are decisions to station brigades outside of the city centre, to not engage with the war in Tripoli, to not actively contest the dominance of Misratan brigades over the security landscape, and to limit internal conflict through relying on social relationships. In a context where major actors in Libya are accused of pursuing a "zero-sum game," it is clear that the main actors in Sirte are weighing up the benefits of their position in the city and the costs of further conflict there in deciding their strategies. The strategic importance of the city and the traumas that it has undergone in recent years arguably inform this calculation.

With an end to the war in Tripoli seemingly not in sight, Libyan and international policymakers should consider the positive experience of Sirte as a space of cooperation despite political, tribal and military competition in designing stabilisation policies. The strategic position of Sirte between Libya's various fault-lines means that it could potentially play an important role as a forum for encouraging peacebuilding and reconciliation through creating opportunities for mutual benefit through cooperation. This could complement a political settlement to the current conflict, which will be neither effective nor successful unless it focuses on three important axes: military disengagement, re-engagement, and launching specific economic development programmes. Sirte, and the central region of which it is part, could play a role in all three axes, with moderate actors acceptable to most conflict parties in Libya.

The military and security infrastructure in the central region (Sirte-Jufra) mean that it could play an important role in military disengagement and re-engagement. Al-Gardabiya airbase in Sirte, under GNA control, and the refurbished military bases in Jufra controlled by the LAAF in particular could have a pivotal role in laying the foundations for a lasting peace, supporting the creation of a neutral zone between the warring parties, and supporting military re-engagement based on international guarantees. The presence of these facilities has resulted in making this zone a dividing line between the two sides and an important base for controlling oil fields and terminals.

The social network of Sirte's inhabitants and the success of its tribes in avoiding conflict represent an important opportunity for reconciliation in Libya. Sirte consists of a mix of tribes that have managed to live in relative peace despite their political differences, and that could arguably invest in their relationships with the conflict parties to maintain and further develop stability in the city. Sirte's geography, as well as its political and social diversity, are the most important elements that should be exploited and invested in to encourage social re-engagement in Libya and to build a solid foundation for peace in the region.

A special economic zone could also be implemented in Sirte to encourage cooperation and support peacebuilding efforts. This could encourage the transformation of Sirte into a free trade zone which could constitute a link between the three different regions of Libya, and



between Libya and the rest of the world. The airport and the seaport represent the key infrastructure that could facilitate different types of trade, as well as the smooth arrival of local and international partners. Moreover, the Ouagadougou Conference Centre, the largest of its kind in Libya, provides an appropriate space for holding trade fairs, political dialogue, or dialogue around national reconciliation and reconstruction. Other important sites and facilities in the city include two complexes of presidential palaces, one on the sea and the other called the Hospitality Palaces, as well as the touristic Mehari hotel on the Gulf of Sirte, which could provide a rich investment opportunity to local and foreign investors alike. In this context, the GNA has recently issued decisions that could facilitate and support investment from an administrative perspective, most notably creating the Body for Reconstruction and Development in Sirte City,⁵⁴ and enabling Sirte and other Municipalities to propose and create free zones and investment joint stock companies with local and foreign capital.⁵⁵ If well implemented, such a free trade zone could contribute towards making the benefits of stability, albeit fragile, outweigh the rewards of conflict.

54. Decision of the Presidency Council of the GNA to establish the Body for Reconstruction and Development in Sirte City, October 2018.

55. Decision No. 4 of the GNA Ministry of Local Governance, enabling municipalities to suggest and create free zones and joint stock companies with foreign and local capital, August 2019.



Annex A – Tribes in Sirte Region

Tribe	Area of influence (Sirte region)	Origins	Wider presence
Firjan	Third Neighbourhood (Sirte city), Wadi al-Gharbiyat, al-Qubayba	Tarhouna	Eastern Libya
Warfalla	Second Neighbourhood (Sirte city), Al-Shaabiya (Sirte city), Wadi Zamzam, Abunajim, Wadi Bih, Wadi Jarif	Bani Walid	Western, eastern and southern Libya
Qadhadhfa	Al-Naga Neighbourhood (Sirte city), Al-Shaabiya (Sirte city), Al-Dolar Neighbourhood (Sirte city), Abuhadi, Wadi al-Hiniwa, Wadi Jarif	Gharyan (though relations are completely severed)	Sebha
Maadan	Coastal region from Al-Arbaain and Sultan to the suburbs of Sirte city	Misrata	Misrata and Benghazi
Swawa	Swawa region of Sirte city (the north eastern edge)	Misrata	Misrata
Hamamla	Al-Zaafran (Sirte city)	Misrata	Misrata
Misratan families	First Neighbourhood (Sirte city)	Misrata	Western and eastern Libya
Magharaba	Nofaliya region	Eastern tribes	Eastern Libya
Hasun	Um Al-Khanfas – Bin Jawwad	Bin Jawwad	N/A
Awlad Wafi	Bin Jawwad - Nofaliya	Bin Jawwad	N/A

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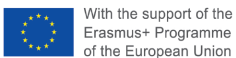
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