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Rule by the Libyan Arab Armed Forces has disrupted the fragile balance in Sirte

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The city of Sirte has seen a period of fragile stability since December 2016. Despite the successes of local actors in maintaining this balance,¹ on 4 April 2019 it was undermined by the Libyan Armed Arab Forces' (LAAF) assault on Tripoli, the centre of the Government of National Accord (GNA). Since then, the city has become more important to both parties in the conflict.

On 6 January 2020 following a surprise attack, the LAAF succeeded in taking control of Sirte. Although the city had previously been subjected to airstrikes by unidentified parties in support of the LAAF General Command in September 2019, the GNA did not take any precautions to repel the broad ground offensive as it primarily focused on defending Tripoli. The LAAF was quick to try and consolidate its control over the city, whose location and socio-political specificities made it a very important strategic gain.²

The strategic importance of Sirte changed from January to June 2020 as the balance of power tipped between Libya's two main warring coalitions.³ The collapse of the LAAF forces in western Libya – as a result of the withdrawal of the Russian Wagner Group forces – led to the withdrawal of all LAAF forces from the region and them gathering in the Sirte and al-Jufra region.⁴ Sirte gradually became the main frontline in the domestic and international conflict, and a focal point in military and political negotiations.⁵

1. Al-Hawari, Omar, 'The City in the Middle: Fragile Stability and Future Opportunities in Libya's Sirte,' Policy Brief, Middle East Directions, European University Institute, December 2019, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/65610>
2. Al-Hawari, Omar, 'How Sirte Became a Hotbed of the Libyan Conflict,' Policy Brief, Middle East Directions, European University Institute, January 2021, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/69879>
3. Idem.
4. The Turkish-backed GNA forces marched towards the city to regain it as the gateway to control of the Oil Crescent and the main source of most Libyan exports. However, the GNA forces failed to regain control of Sirte due to an intervention by an unidentified air force, which forced its retreat to al-Hisha, and the emergence of an Egyptian-Russian determination to prevent the advance.
5. GNA holds on to Sirte and Turkey requires Haftar to withdraw for a truce, Al-Arabiya, January 2020, <https://bit.ly/3vvtQ3g>



Through affiliated security agencies, the LAAF used force to rule the city. Both GNA-affiliated fighters who might have remained in the city and supporters of the former regime allied to the LAAF represented potential threats. To counter this, the local groups affiliated with the LAAF launched violent security campaigns and exploited them to exact revenge on their opponents. This affected the relationships between local tribes. It also resulted in increased tensions between LAAF-affiliated armed groups, shedding light on their diverging goals and loyalties.

The LAAF also made attempts to manipulate the city's social characteristics to its advantage. The multiple battles and intense fighting that have taken place in Sirte over the past decade have seriously damaged its social fabric, making local actors increasingly dependent on political allegiances to gain influence. While the Firjan tribe is loyal to the LAAF, Sirte is also considered a major stronghold of supporters of the former regime from the Qadhadhfa, Warfalla and Ma'daan tribes, which have gradually become key elements in the LAAF's control over the city. However, the way they have exercised power has largely contributed to deepening rifts within the local community.

The eastern-based Interim Government also imposed its political control over the city by dismissing the Elected Municipal Council and establishing a Steering Committee including members of all the major tribes, who were appointed without clear criteria. Its policies have significantly contributed to a consolidation of tribalism and to increasing divisions in Sirte. Consequently, tribal and political power struggles led to a serious deterioration of the living and service conditions in the city.

This paper aims to analyse the main factors that have contributed to destabilising the fragile balance in Sirte under the rule of the LAAF. It focuses on the counter-productive effects of the use of security agencies and of the manipulation of tribal and political loyalties to impose LAAF control over the city. It also highlights the fragility of the LAAF alliances in the city and its neighbourhood and suggests how new security arrangements could contribute to restoring stability and support peacebuilding efforts.

Military Rule and Insecurity

On 7 January 2020, the Ministry of the Interior of the Interim Government rapidly allocated the majority of its resources to tightening security control over Sirte. On the one hand, the hasty and disorganised withdrawal of GNA forces left most of its supporters beleaguered in Sirte. On the other, there were mounting fears of a possible rebellion by former regime supporters who derived their power from their LAAF-aligned military leaders. This represented a real threat to the LAAF forces, which continued to advance westwards to the village of al-Hisha. With the Sirte Security Directorate⁶ lacking the ability or loyalty to face up to these threats, the Ministry of the Interior dispatched most of its Criminal Investigation Units from Benghazi and the Internal Security Forces to the city of Sirte⁷ to launch extensive security campaigns.

Using the Security Apparatus to Settle Political and Tribal Scores

The policies of the Internal Security and Criminal Investigation Units led to further schisms among Sirte's social components. The Ministry of the Interior adopted a security policy similar to that of the former regime, using security personnel from outside the city to avoid social mediation efforts that could fend off arrests. The policy affected the attitudes of residents, who mistrust the former regime's violent tactics of using hybrid security apparatuses.

The methods they used – breaking into homes, searching the contents of people's cell phones, arresting the family members of fugitives and using torture in prisons – were unfamiliar to the community in Sirte, which has historically had low levels of crime. The Sirte tribes' social charter also forbids breaking into homes and public and private properties.

The residents expressed their discontent toward the raids in the media and through the coordinators of the Council of Tribal Elders, prompting one tribal dignitary from Misrata in April 2020 to request safe passage for families with roots in Misrata to leave Sirte. The city subsequently

6. The Sirte Security Directorate is considered the only government apparatus that has not been infiltrated by armed groups or involved in political conflicts.
7. Decision No. 23 of 2020 by the Ministry of the Interior of the Interim Government regarding assigning the Criminal Investigation Units of Benghazi, with all their equipment, to Sirte.



witnessed the displacement of a large number of families with Misratan roots to western Libya.

Most of the raids and arrests conducted by LAAF-affiliated forces have been based on false information and reports aimed at settling political scores and vendettas. Apparatuses such as the Internal Security and the Criminal Investigation Units, which appear to be controlled by supporters of the former regime, were used to target their rivals. A significant number of young men in Sirte, some no older than seventeen, have spent more than six months in Benghazi prisons. According to testimonies from former inmates, interrogations only began months after imprisonment, and inmates were subjected to humiliation and torture prior to their release.⁸ Tribes may have various attitudes in the future, but they will all invariably hold LAAF-aligned components responsible. In particular, the city may witness individual acts of revenge targeting those involved in the storming of homes.

Concentration of Armed Groups, Lack of Control and Insecurity

Militarily, the shift in the strategic importance of Sirte between January and June 2020 further impacted the fragile stability in the city. After the withdrawal of the Wagner Group forces supporting the LAAF from southern Tripoli and the subsequent collapse of LAAF forces in western Libya, the GNA changed its strategy. It moved away from a defensive posture in Tripoli to attacking Sirte.

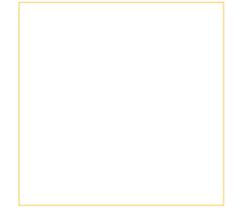
The LAAF forces and their supporters focused on defending the city. In June, Sirte became a concentration point for fighters, adding to the militarised character of the city. In addition to the Wagner Group forces, which oversee the securing of the front lines, the most prominent local brigades are also fortified within the city. These

include the 106th Brigade,⁹ the 110th Brigade,¹⁰ the 166th Brigade,¹¹ the 604th Infantry Brigade and the Tariq ibn Ziyad Brigade,¹² together with certain companies of the 9th Brigade from the city of Tarhuna.¹³ The presence of the armed groups, most of which appear to be undisciplined, along with their continual recruitment from among Sirte's youth, has significantly undermined security and stability in the city.

Deteriorating economic conditions combined with the military stalemate have led to the outbreak of internal conflict among the LAAF brigades. The lack of a unifying goal bringing these different units together and of financial liquidity have prompted some of these armed groups to find alternative sources of income. These include armed robbery and control over the fuel trade in the city, reselling subsidised fuel to citizens on the black market at double the price. On 28 November 2020, the tensions among these groups reached the point of armed

8. Miscellaneous interviews with several formed detainees who were released after more than four months of arbitrary detention, August 2020.

9. The 106th Brigade Group was established in 2016 following a decision by Field Marshal Haftar in the city of Benghazi. It includes several brigades, most of them from the eastern regions. Major General Salem Raheel was recently assigned to lead this brigade group after certain activists launched a campaign of criticism of the placing of Saddam Khalifa Haftar in command of the brigade with the rank of major, despite no evidence of his having received military training at any academy.
10. The 110th Light Infantry Brigade was established by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in decision No. 401 of December 2017, to be stationed in the Oil Crescent region and headed by Colonel Gaddafi Ali al-Sedai al-Firjani. Most members of this Brigade hail from Sirte's Firjan tribe.
11. The 166th Brigade of the LAAF consists of volunteers and soldiers from the eastern regions. It was stationed in the Abu Hadi area south of Sirte until its recent deployment inside the city following clashes between the Qadhadhfa tribe and forces allied with the LAAF.
12. The 646th Infantry Brigade, dubbed the Tariq ibn Ziyad Combat Brigade, was established following a decision by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and is headed by Omar Marja al-Megarhi. Most of the Brigade's fighters belong to the al-Megarha tribe from southern Libya. It is considered one of the LAAF's strongest military formations.
13. The 9th Brigade (Tarhuna) was previously known as the 7th Brigade, and is commonly known as the Kaniyat militia with reference to the Kani family, which controls it. It was established in the city of Tarhuna with the support of some Islamic leaders in the former Libyan National Congress. The Brigade later became affiliated with the GNA, but the latter announced its dissolution in May 2018 after it attempted to militarily seize control of the city of Tripoli, and after proof emerged of its responsibility for many assassinations in the city of Tarhuna.



clashes between one of the eastern Libyan brigades and a group affiliated with the 9th Brigade (Tarhuna) in the Gharbiyyat region of Sirte, resulting in severe damage to homes and facilities.

The lack of central control over the armed groups prompted the tribes to act according to their social rules, with each tribe bearing responsibility for its own members. However, these temporary measures do not produce guaranteed results.¹⁴ With the absence of a fair judiciary, these social measures and stopgap solutions may even contribute to a future escalation of violence.

The securitisation of governance in Sirte has also impeded participation by local actors in political negotiations and reconciliation initiatives. The spread of fear among the population has rendered any initiative or statement aimed at averting conflict susceptible to accusations of treason, potentially causing its organisers to be arrested by the brigades in control of the city. For example, Salem al-Saghir Sanan al-Gaddafi, head of the Sirte Reconciliation Committee, was arrested on 11 August 2020 due to his public appearance alongside certain supporters of the former regime from his tribe in an attempt to bring about reconciliation between the communities of eastern and western Libya.

Political Division and Administrative Weakness

At the political and administrative levels, the seizure of Sirte by LAAF forces in January 2020 immediately translated into the replacement of the Elected Municipal Council¹⁵ by a new local authority appointed by the Interim Government. As early as 7 January, this new ‘Steering Committee’ assumed control of the city. Including seven members from the city’s main tribes,¹⁶ it reflected how the LAAF and the Interim Government

attempted to manipulate tribal loyalties to ensure their control. The rivalries and tensions between the Steering Committee and its elected predecessor also illustrated the impact of political divisions at the local level, notably in terms of governance capacities and service delivery.

The Influence of Tribal Dynamics on Local Authorities

Since the LAAF took control of Sirte, the Elected Municipal Council has no longer possessed any authority on the ground inside the city, as its members have followed the political affiliations of their tribes. They have shown no sign of political activity since their overthrow, although they do not conceal their enduring hostility to the Steering Committee, which they consider to have usurped the legitimate local authority. Some of them retired to their homes and chose to remain silent, while others relocated to western Libya, in opposition to the General Command.

The Steering Committee of the Interim Government, which was appointed without clear criteria, came to control the levers of local government. The swift decisions made by the Interim Government – dismissing officials and replacing them with loyalists in order to tighten administrative control – appear to lack any standard of competence, and primarily used tribal affiliation and loyalty as their selection criteria. Therefore, the removal of the Elected Municipal Council could hardly be conducive to peace, as positions in the city of Sirte would become dependent on the extent of people’s bias and involvement in the conflict.

Decisions by the Interim Government’s Ministry of Local Authority have significantly contributed to a consolidation of tribalism and a deepening of schisms in Sirte. As expected, the Steering Committee chose a leader from the upper echelons of tribal power, Salem Amer al-Firjani, as its head. This was in line with the most opportunistic tactics usually used by tribes to maximise their benefits. The leader will hold enough power to become a threat to government ministers, who usually comply with the requests and needs of his tribe.

14. For instance, in October 2020 a provocation by the Warfalla tribe in residential neighbourhood No. 2 caused a bloody clash in which a young man from the Qadhahfa tribe and a member of an armed group were killed, while two on the other side were injured. Before tribal elders managed to control the situation and reconcile the two tribes, the security services had been entirely absent.

15. The Sirte Municipal Council was elected in December 2016 and was aligned with the GNA.

16. Council of Ministers Decision No. 2 of 2020 nominating members of the Steering Committee of the Municipality of Sirte, Libyan Interim Government, 7 January 2020.



Political Divisions Hinder the Work of Local Authorities

However, the new municipal Steering Committee also faces many legal, administrative and social obstacles. The Elected Municipal Council – which was dissolved following the takeover by the LAAF – has played a significant role in obstructing its work. In late January 2020, the mayor, Mukhtar al-Madaani, filed a lawsuit at the al-Bayda Court accusing the new Steering Committee of storming his office and having no official record of the transfer of power in accordance with the provisions of Libyan law.¹⁷ The lawsuit resulted in delays in the disbursement of any budgetary funds to the Committee by the Interim Government, which demanded such legal records as a condition. Despite pressure imposed on the former mayor, culminating in his arrest on 22 January 2020 by Benghazi Criminal Investigations,¹⁸ after his release he refused to attend the handover ceremony, which took place without his presence.¹⁹

Although the members of the Elected Municipal Council no longer possess authority in the city at the present time, it is impossible to ignore their social and political weight, which enabled them to win the past municipal election. The Municipal Council has also maintained contacts with political actors in both the GNA and the Interim Government. This may contribute to limiting support for the Steering Committee, which lacks electoral legitimacy. For members of the Municipal Council, obstructing the work of the new city institutions means hindering their capacity to provide services to the city's residents. This is the best means of mobilising the streets against it.

In addition to these administrative and legal challenges, internal conflict within the Firjan tribe is another important factor obstructing the work of the Steering Committee. The clans and families of this tribe have been engaged in an undisclosed yet noticeable internal struggle over the chairmanship of the Steering Committee. This conflict has prompted each clan to use its political influence over the Interim Government to obstruct the

work of the Committee.²⁰ Each clan has a representative in parliament, an officer or an official affiliated with the LAAF, who is able to obstruct the work of city institutions in Sirte without the need to be present. This is probably due to the administrative loopholes in the implementation of Law 59 of 2012²¹ regarding the jurisdiction of municipal councils, as the municipalities remain hostage to the central administration, allowing the Ministry to choose the chairs of service institutions in the city and disburse their operational budgets.

The Impact of Political Divisions on the Provision of Services

Tribal and political conflicts over local government have contributed to a deterioration of living and service conditions in the municipality of Sirte. However, the general public considers the level of services and security to be the most important criterion with which to evaluate local authorities. The average citizens care little about the strategic objectives of the LAAF aimed at controlling Tripoli: they need parties to provide them with security and vital services, tasks at which the LAAF bodies in Sirte have failed in comparison to conditions prior to January 2020.

Some actors in Sirte believe the centralisation of the Interim Government is primarily to blame for this deterioration of economic, social and security conditions. Most services are available in the villages of the eastern region, while they remain absent from the city of Sirte. To the people of Sirte, fuel and vital medical services such as childhood vaccinations and development projects have all become empty promises and ink on paper. Support from Misrata for the city of Sirte with medical vaccinations in mid-November 2020 further exacerbated popular ire towards the Interim Government.

One important reason for this failure is that the Steering Committee has not been recognised by the GNA, while it has also faced many obstacles and challenges from the Interim Government in the eastern region. In October

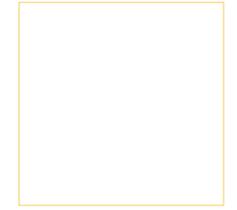
17. Phone conversation with the mayor of Sirte, October 2020.

18. Mayor of Sirte Kidnapped by Armed Haftar Militants, 22 January 2020, <https://ar.libyaobserver.ly/article/7026>

19. 'Today, Record of Transfer of Power of Sirte Municipality Signed,' al-Wasat News Portal, 22 March 2020, <http://alwasat.ly/news/libya/275192>

20. Miscellaneous interviews between January and November 2020 with active figures from the al-Firjan tribe.

21. Law 59 and its executive regulations indicate the need for the ministry to nominate the local authority before issuing any decision to select heads of service institutions within the municipality. However, the ministry does apply this sometimes and maintains that it has the central authority to select loyalists.



2020, the chairman of the Steering Committee described the city as “devastated,” saying the Committee had not received any support or budgetary funds since it assumed the reins of the local authority in January 2020.²² This same Committee had previously made a statement considered controversial about the Benghazi Criminal Investigation Units preventing fuel tankers from reaching the city,²³ creating more suffering, with the residents now yearning for the centrality of the GNA.

The low levels of security in Sirte also significantly impacted trade and commerce during the period between June and December 2020. The arrival of armed groups such as the 9th Brigade (‘Kaniyat militia’), the 166th Infantry Brigade²⁴ and other ill-disciplined groups has also disrupted the work of the security services and made them unable to protect citizens. Armed robberies of shops have become commonplace in Sirte in the light of the security services’ collusion with or inability to confront armed groups. This has recently led to the closure of most gold and currency markets in the city, due to fears of having their stores targeted.

The closure of the road linking Sirte with western Libya²⁵ due to the military conflict has also exacerbated the suffering of young people. The young population in Sirte depends primarily on trade with Tripoli and Misrata, and the closure of this road has doubled transport costs through the long and unsafe roads to the south. This has caused disruption to businesses, contributing to a surge in the number of unemployed in Sirte. Some young men have opted to board emigration boats to Europe, in what is considered a recent phenomenon in the city.^{26 27}

22. ‘Head of “Steering”: Sirte is a Devastated City,’ October 2020, <https://www.libyaakhbar.com/libya-news/1345398.html>

23. Official Facebook page of the Municipal Council of Sirte.

24. The 166th Infantry Brigade is a brigade affiliated with the Libyan Arab Armed Forces. Its main headquarters are in Benghazi. However, it has several branches, including ones in Sirte, Derna and Ajdabiya. The brigade is considered newly established and is led by Field Marshal Haftar's son-in-law and personal secretary, Ayoub al-Firjani, after being promoted to the rank of major.

25. This was among the most prominent issues discussed during the JMC 5+5 and has been presented as a priority by the new National Unity Government formed by Abdelhamid Dbeiba in March 2021.

26. In August 2020, at least two young people were reported to have migrated to the coast of Italy after being imprisoned more than once by Salafist groups for their media and acting activities.

27. Abdelhamid Dbeiba was elected to the position of Prime Minister

The fragility of LAAF alliances: Salafists, Former Regime Supporters and Mercenaries

Living conditions seriously deteriorated in Sirte over the course of 2020, contributing to destabilising local society. However, the threat to the city’s stability has also been a result of the alliances through which the LAAF established control over the city and the neighbouring region. The fragility of these alliances has increasingly come to the fore, and raises questions regarding their durability especially if, the political and military context would undergo significant changes.

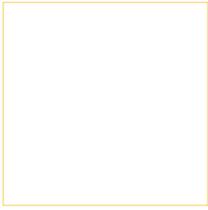
The Salafist Threat

The Salafist movement is considered the most prominent local ally of the LAAF. However, the movement’s social penetration and strategy represent a threat to societal stability in Sirte. The movement now has a military wing, the 604th Infantry Brigade, which announced its rallying of the LAAF on 9 January 2020 after the fall of the city. Moreover, the Central Security Agency in Sirte – considered the Salafist wing of the GNA-affiliated Ministry of the Interior prior to its defection – has been working to recruit more members from the city. Their current numbers are considered to exceed 500. The presence of two military and security wings guarantees the group wider influence, while it also receives financial support from both the Ministries of Defence and of the Interior. It also benefits from another source of revenue, the smuggling of scrap.

For the general public in Sirte, Salafists have become synonymous with torture and tyranny. The movement has exploited the security services which it controls to attack the places of worship of other religious groups. For instance, the group was accused of destroying al-Zawiya al-Issawiya, the most prominent historical landmark in the city associated with Sufism.²⁸ They have

in early February 2021 by the 74 Libyan participants in the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) mediated by the United Nations Support Mission to Libya (UNSMIL). His tasks include the formation of an Interim National Unity Government to oversee the preparations for parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled on 24 December 2021.

28. Muhammad al-Amin, ‘What is Happening in Sirte? Have the Infiltrators Shown Their Teeth?’ Iwan Libya, 6 February 2020, <https://bit.ly/3vvtQ3g>



also conducted arbitrary arrests, and some prisoners have died under torture in the movement's prisons. This has prompted the population to call the Salafists a variety of names, including 'the new ISIS' and 'the 604th Kidney Failure Brigade,' referring to their method of torturing people by beating them in the kidneys. They also face charges of killing civilians. The most recent case, in October 2020, was that of Salem al-Aswad, who was accused of witchcraft before some of his close acquaintances demonstrated his innocence.

It is highly unlikely that the security and military agencies under Salafist control will be held accountable for the deaths of prisoners in the future. The judiciary's absence and inability to do so has resulted in the leaders of tribes resorting to temporary social solutions to ease the tensions between the families involved. This increases the likelihood of the families of victims seeking revenge and therefore a future risk of perpetuating violence.²⁹

Moreover, the LAAF alliance with Salafist groups in Sirte, as in eastern Libya, is one based on tribal loyalty and control more than on religious factors. The Salafist groups have so far displayed great flexibility in changing their views and alliances in return for gaining power. Changes in Libya's overall political and military context may trigger new shifts on their part.

Former Regime Supporters and Overlapping Interests with the LAAF

As the second most prominent allies of the LAAF, supporters of the former regime have also contributed to undermining the fragile stability in Sirte. As some members of tribes affiliated with the former regime returned to the security services with broad powers, their new positions allowed them to exact revenge against pro-February 2011 revolution supporters by carrying out numerous arrests and raids. Moreover, the Sirte Criminal Investigation Agency,³⁰ which was recently created and

headed by Abdul Jabbar al-Gaddafi, along with the Internal Security in Sirte, has overseen many arrests that clearly contributed to a wave of local anger and further worsening perceptions of the LAAF among the local population.

Signs of tension between the LAAF and supporters of the former regime surfaced during summer 2020, as international efforts aimed at ending the war intensified. The desire of each side to use the other to achieve its strategic interests underlined the fragility of the alliance. After its withdrawal from southern Tripoli in July 2020, the LAAF reaped no benefits from its alliance with supporters of the former regime. The behaviour of some of them had created a negative image for the LAAF and weakened its social base support. In addition, it was also noted that most of these supporters had rescinded their support for the LAAF and returned to their political homesteads, with the apparent aim of bringing Saif al-Islam Gaddafi to power.

In mid-August 2020, Sirte witnessed an armed escalation between the Qadhadhfa tribe and the LAAF following marches in support of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, which prompted the General Command to raid the homes of certain tribesmen, killing one in residential neighbourhood No. 3. The tribe officially ordered its members to defect from LAAF factions,³¹ and it was noted that former regime supporters in Egypt also withdrew their support for the LAAF. Moreover, after their alliance with the LAAF, some supporters of the former regime finally ended up joining the GNA-affiliated forces.³²

The Negative Impact of the Presence of Foreign Mercenaries

Over the course of 2020, the LAAF came to significantly depend on foreign mercenaries, such as the Wagner Group and the so-called 'Janjaweed' Sudanese forces.³³ However, the latter's appearance in Sirte may contribute to a drop in

in the city.

29. For example, the case of Salem al-Aswad's murder under torture created a sharp dispute within the Qadhadhfa tribe after information leaked about the involvement of some of the victim's relatives in his torture. The Warfalla and Firjan tribes have previously had disputes for similar reasons.
30. According to the administrative structure, this is a department affiliated with Sirte's Security Directorate (Ministry of the Interior). However, more personnel were recruited for the department after the takeover by the Libyan Arab Armed Forces, and they received two months of training in order to manage the security operations

31. Statement by the Social Council of the Qadhadhfa Tribes regarding the withdrawal of all their members from Haftar's militia, 27 August 2020, <https://bit.ly/3tsanyC>
32. Field interviews showed polarisation among supporters of the former regime into supporters of GNA and others of the LAAF, August 2020.
33. The Libyan name given to mercenaries among the Sudanese and Chadian opposition. Most of them are affiliated with the 128th Infantry Brigade of the LAAF.



social support for the LAAF. The tribes of the city and its sprawling suburbs do not believe in international alliances and deem the presence of any foreign forces on their land a source of shame. Furthermore, religious beliefs and Libyan nationalist principles play an important role in inhibiting any tribal dealings with or assistance to these forces, which they consider to be occupying their land.

The hostile policies of mercenaries have contributed to tensions in the city. When it was proven that Wagner Group mercenaries were responsible for the bombing of Wadi Jarf on 7 June – with a view to clearing it of its civilian population – leading to the deaths of several civilians and the displacement of hundreds of families, the public reconsidered the reality of the LAAF’s control over these foreign powers.³⁴ Despite the fact that a number of civilians headed to the LAAF’s Sirte Military Operations Command to protest, the latter seemed unable to halt this bombing, which continued for two days until the families evacuated the village and fled to the city of Sirte.³⁵

For this reason, the local community has hopes for the military talks led by the 5+5 Libyan Joint Military Commission (JMC), which was created in February 2020 and later tasked with negotiating the details of a monitoring mechanism to strengthen the ceasefire concluded in summer 2020.³⁶ One of the declared objectives of the 5+5 JMC is to evacuate Libyan armed groups and foreign mercenaries to make the city a demilitarised zone. There is relative optimism in the city that these efforts may lead to a phase of stability and avoid a new war that would pose a threat to its 170,000 inhabitants.

Conclusion

LAAF policies in Sirte have significantly contributed to undermining the fragile stability in the city, which has witnessed a remarkable deterioration in security, administrative and economic terms since the LAAF’s takeover in January 2020. Among the factors that have adversely impacted services and security in the city are an escalation of rivalries, an intensification of the conflict between families jostling over control of fragile city institutions, a spread of foreign and local forces not fully controlled by the LAAF and the closure of the road connecting east and west Libya.³⁷

The key security role entrusted to the Criminal Investigation and Homeland Security units of Benghazi and the Internal Security Agency has deepened divisions within local communities and has had a very negative impact on citizens’ perceptions of the LAAF. The militarisation of governance has also impeded any reconciliation initiatives at the local level.

Political divisions at the national level have had a direct negative impact on local governance and the provision of basic services by local authorities. The Steering Committee appointed by the Interim Government lacks minimum standards of competence and depends mainly on tribal and political loyalties. Increased insecurity and the closure of the coastal road linking Sirte with Tripoli and Libya’s western region also had a major impact on trade and entrepreneurship in the city.

The social and political support bases of the LAAF in Sirte, consisting mainly of the Firjan tribe and certain supporters of the former regime, have been key for the LAAF to establish its control and contain the threat posed by GNA supporters inside the city.

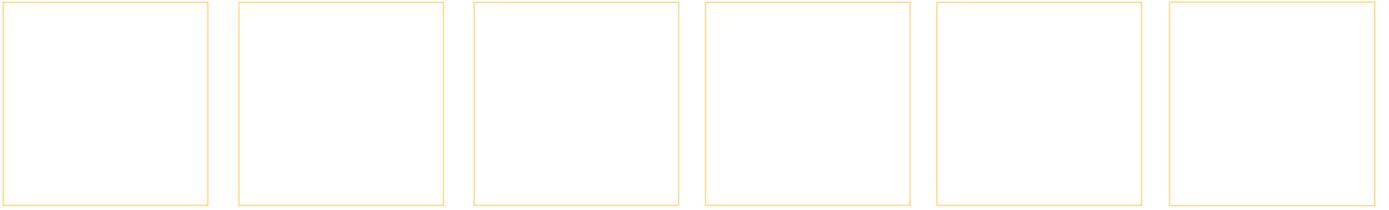
However, the coalition of forces that the LAAF has relied on appears heterogenous and fragile. The influence of Salafist armed groups has grown significantly, contributing to tarnishing the image of the institution among local communities as Salafists became synonymous with extremism, tyranny and violence. The supporters of the former regime have grown increasingly dissatisfied with political decisions in the context of renewed diplomatic

34. Field interviews with displaced families from the village of Jarf, 12 July 2020.

35. In-person interview with dignitaries from the village of Jarf, who expressed their dissatisfaction with the Sirte Operations Command for its inability to ensure safe passage for them to exit or enter their homes due to the targeting of the village by Wagner Group artillery, July 2020.

36. Al-Hawari, Omar, ‘How Sirte Became a Hotbed of the Libyan Conflict,’ Policy Brief, Middle East Directions, European University Institute, January 2021, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/69879>

37. ‘Head of “Steering”: Sirte is a Devastated City,’ Libya Akhbar, October 2020, <https://www.libyaakhbar.com/libya-news/1345398.html>



initiatives. The behaviour of the foreign mercenaries from Russia's Wagner and the Sudanese so-called 'Janjaweed' forces has contributed to heightening tensions with local communities. However, they have also played a key role in the capacity of the LAAF to maintain control over Sirte and the region. This raises serious questions about the evolution of the situation on the ground in the case that diplomatic and military talks lead to a withdrawal of the foreign mercenaries.

The 5+5 JMC talks are continuing regarding evacuation of Sirte and the surrounding areas by foreign mercenaries, opening of the road linking the east with the west and the establishment of a demilitarised zone, so far without significant results. Given the local and national dynamics, the best way to support the establishment of a demilitarised zone in Sirte and the neighbouring areas would be to implement policies that can create a balance between security, social and religious factors.

Among the mechanisms that could be utilised to improve security are the creation of joint security forces consisting of members from security directorates from cities that are geographically and tribally distant from the conflict in Sirte. This could prove an important factor for the impartial enforcement of law and to maintain distance between the security forces and local actors.

While the suggested security mechanisms would contribute to achieving a kind of social-security balance, they may not be sufficient, as a power struggle among local tribes is to be expected. However, the organisation of municipal elections according to a new electoral system could contribute to making tribal competition less intense. The possibility of a new electoral system for municipal councils based on lists is expected to discourage tribal parties and ensure that no single tribe dominates the municipal council, therefore contributing to social and cultural diversity.

As for the religious dimension, it requires policies in the security and social realms that would address the influence that Salafist groups have gained over the city in the past nine years through their control over weapons and political power. This can be done through the establishment of joint security forces, as mentioned earlier. Members of the security directorates from the cities of Tripoli, al-Bayda and Zuwara, for example, or from the Nafusa Mountains, which are not linked to the

major tribes of Sirte or to the Salafist movement, could be mobilised.

Policies aimed at balancing the security, social and religious elements in parallel with support for new municipal elections would certainly provide a solid base for the city's potential role as a zone for disengagement and a restoration of security, societal and perhaps economic links too. Despite what the city of Sirte has experienced over the past decade, social ties and a commitment to peaceful coexistence remain very strong in the city. Such policies may therefore contribute to creating opportunities for administrative and economic reforms that will facilitate the transformation of the city from a conflict area to a destination for work, investment and sustainable development.

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