

CrisesAlert 1: Challenging the assumptions of the Libyan conflict

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Clingendael Report



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Clingendael CrisesAlerts Libya

Unpacking conflict trends, theaters and assumptions forms the basis of the Clingendael

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CrisesAlert 1: Challenging the assumptions of the Libyan conflict

The Libyan conflict is one to watch. Most significantly, the presence, rise, defeat and reemergence of Islamic State has allowed various Islamist groups to gain a foothold. Furthermore, Libya has become the most prominent migration hub, connecting routes from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and serving as the main conduit for human smuggling. To top it all, recent Russian involvement has fueled concerns in European capitals about a 'second Syria scenario'.

In this context, European, national and regional players are pressing for negotiations. Since the beginning of 2017 there has been increased diplomatic activity with a view to modifying the failed Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) signed in 2015.¹ The hope is that opponents – the LNA and its allies – and the proponents – the GNA and its allies – of the agreement will find mutual ground. The various initiatives are based on two fundamental premises about the battlefield. First, that the more active LNA does not seem to be in a position to be effective nationwide and to establish military control. Second, that some observers believe the conflict is escalating and that it is time for action.² The purpose of this first CrisesAlert is to assess these assumptions. We draw three conclusions:

1. Libya is suffering from **four interlinked crises**: an overall conflict, a separate conflict in Tripoli, a communal conflict in the south-east and a jihadist conflict spread across the country. While these theaters are interlinked, they have separate drivers and dominant actors.

1 Key disagreements are maintaining control over military matters and the need for an anti-Islamist agenda. See Libyan Herald (2017a). Details emerge of reported Serraj-Hafter agreement. <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/05/02/details-emerge-of-reported-serraj-hafter-agreement/>

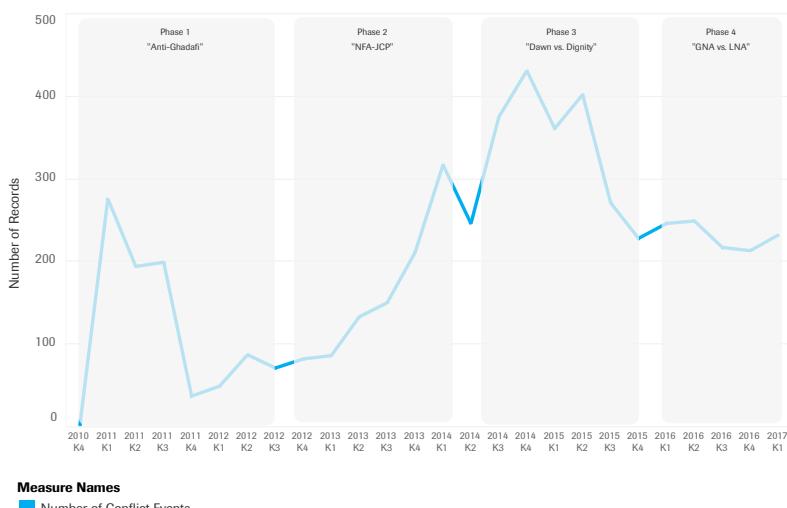
2 Carlson (2017). The Libyan mess will get worse if outside powers don't cooperate. War on the Rocks, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/the-libyan-mess-will-get-worse-if-outside-powers-don-t-cooperate/>; Al Jazeera (2017). Can Russia resolve the conflict in Libya? <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/03/russia-resolve-conflict-libya-170316094138550.html>; The Guardian (2017). Why Libya is still a global terror threat. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/25/libya-global-terror-threat-manchester-attack-gaddafi>

2. The Libyan conflict is **not escalating**. Libya's multiple interlinked conflicts vary, but the overall picture is one of declining levels of violence (for nearly two years in fact).
3. The conflict is likely changing shape due to an **increasingly favorable military position for the LNA**. The LNA is outperforming the GNA; the GNA's internal support is steadily weakening and the LNA is increasingly able to project military forces outside of the east.

Unpacking conflict trends, theaters and assumptions

The conflict in Libya has undergone various transformations (figure 1). The six-year conflict can be divided roughly into four conflict phases. Phase 1 was the anti-Gaddafi uprising and its aftermath (January 2011-August 2012). Phase 2 was a secular (traditional) vs. Islamist (revolutionary) divide between forces associated with the two political parties, the National Forces Alliance and the Justice and Construction Party (September 2012–February 2014). Phase 3 was the Dawn-Dignity divide between the new, internationally recognized parliament in Tobruk (HoR, 'Dignity') and the old parliament with Islamist sympathies and links to the old regime in Tripoli (GNC-'Dawn', May 2014–December 2015).

Figure 1 Conflict phases in Libya



Today's 'fourth phase' has as its primary fault line a disagreement over the Libyan Political Agreement signed in 2015 (January 2016-).³ The unity Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayez al-Sarraj in the west supports the agreement while the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by General Khalifa Haftar in the east opposes it. The most striking conclusion of this broad-stroke characterization of the Libyan conflict phases is that Phase 4 is among the least violent phases of the conflict, with the first quarter of 2017 being the least violent since the end of 2013. *Violence in Libya has been decreasing for almost two years.*

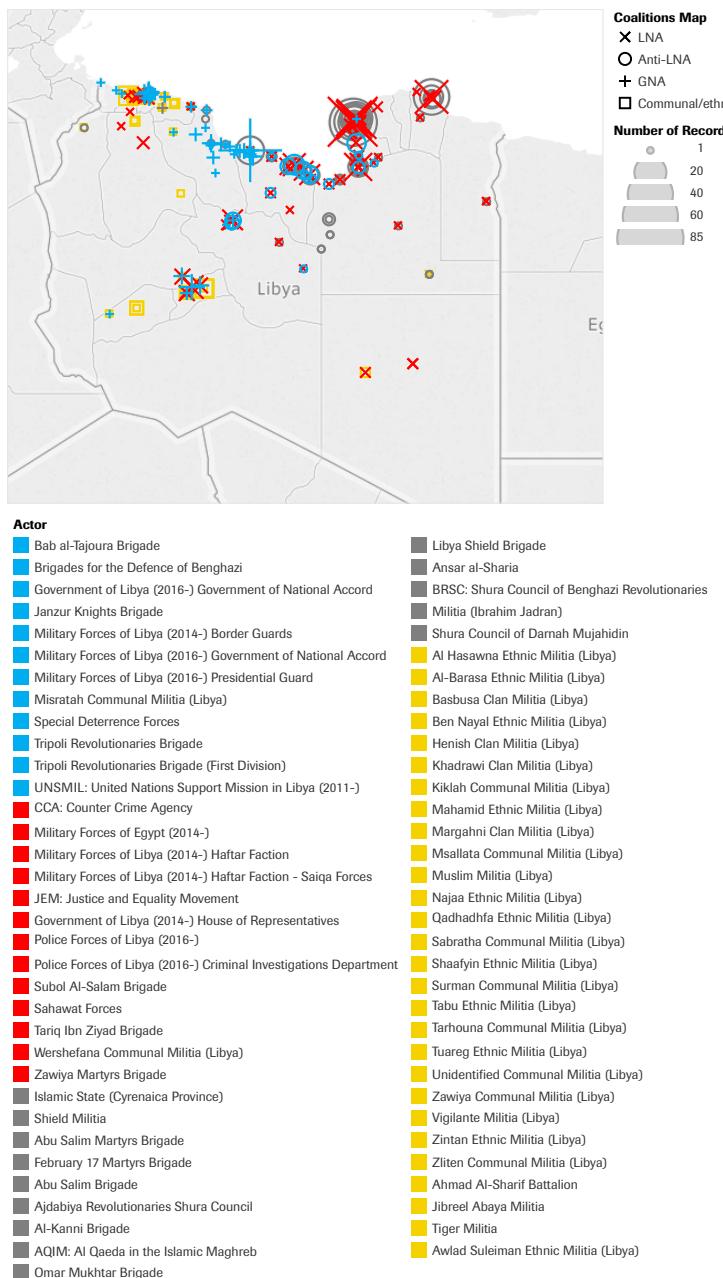
Yet, if there is anything we have learned from years of conflict analysis it is that today's conflicts are complex and almost never about one single problem. Libya is no exception and for this reason Clingendael characterized the conflict in 2015 as comprising 'multiple interlinked crises'.⁴ There are at least four different conflicts in Libya, each displaying different dynamics, and some are not related (or are only slightly related) to LNA-GNA problems.

Theater 1: LNA vs. GNA (January 2016-present)

The key conflict theater is between Haftar's LNA and al-Sarraj's GNA. Both rely on a large number of disparate militias. Haftar opposes the 2015 agreement for at least four reasons: a) clause 8 stipulating GNA rule over the Libyan National Army; b) the perceived strong links between the GNA and Islamist groups active in the east; c) the alleged support of 'the West' for the GNA; d) demands for decentralized management rather than centralized Tripoli rule.⁵ The GNA – a product of the LPA – has major problems. Disagreement over funding is hampering governance and support is feeble.

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- 3 International Crisis Group (2016). The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset.
- 4 El Kamouni-Janssen (2015). Addressing Libya's multiple crises. When violent politics, extremism and crime meet. Clingendael Institute.
- 5 International Crisis Group (2016). The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset.; Collombier (2017). Once and for All a New Compromise in Libya? ISPI, <http://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/once-and-all-new-compromise-libya-16285>.

Figure 2 Central Cleavage LNA vs. GNA

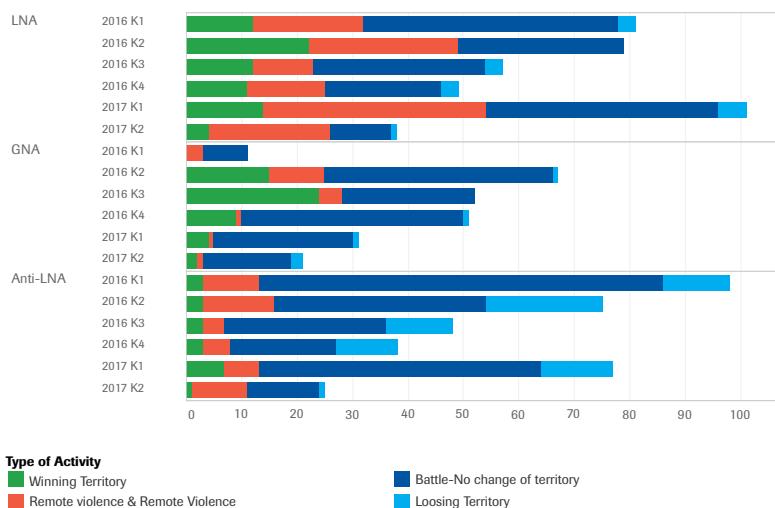


The ongoing negotiation process is hampered primarily by the web of militias supporting the actors because each militia supports either GNA or LNA for reasons not addressed in a political agreement. The GNA's military backbone is made up of militias in the city of Misrata, but the Misratan militias are split.⁶ In particular the public meetings between Serraj and Haftar in May have reignited an internal Misratan conflict: hardline groups (the Military Council) have confronted GNA groups (Misrata City Council and mayor) over their support for Serraj.⁷ Amid internal disagreement, it is unlikely that Serraj will be able to agree on major changes to the Skhirat agreement demanded by the LNA.⁸ The data show 13 active militias that are tacitly or explicitly supporting and allying with the GNA (see figure 2 and [data](#)).

Haftar faces fewer internal problems but still needs to demonstrate that he has supportive militias. In the east, Haftar relies on co-opted tribes and each tribe has different reasons for providing support.⁹ The Jalo, Awjela and Marada support Haftar because he opposes their local rival Ibrahim Jadran.¹⁰ Al-Maghbarha aim for control of the oil crescent.¹¹ The Bara'asa demand senior positions (e.g. they forced Haftar to reinstate one of their colonels). The data show 15 active militias that are tacitly or explicitly supporting and allying with the LNA (see figure 2).

The dominant narrative concerning the LNA-GNA conflict is that it is more or less stalemated. Many observers consequently claim that while the LNA is more active, it "does not seem to be in a position to [be] effective nationwide". Relying on our mapping of allies to both the GNA and LNA, however, we reach less optimistic conclusions. We find that the the conflict dynamics in Libya have changed since the beginning of 2017: the GNAs performance is deteriorating while the LNA is growing more successful (figure 3).¹²

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- 6 Toaldo (2017). A quick guide to Libya's main players. ECFR, http://www.ecfr.eu/mena/mapping_libya_conflict.
 - 7 Libyan Herald (2017b). Misrata militants and Khalifa Ghwell scorn Haftor-Serraj summit. <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/05/05/misrata-militants-and-khalifa-ghwell-scorn-hafter-serraj-summit/>
 - 8 Toaldo (2017). A new recipe for Libyan civil war. Middle East Eye, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/new-recipe-libyan-civil-war-2130825567>.
 - 9 Wehrey & Lacher (2017). Libya after IS. Carnegie Endowment, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/02/22/libya-after-isis-pub-68096>.
 - 10 International Crisis Group (2016). The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset, 17.
 - 11 Libyan Herald (2017c). Sidra elders' leader abducted: report, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/03/26/sidra-elders-leader-abducted-report/>.
 - 12 Lefèvre (2017). "The Pitfalls of Russia's Growing Influence in Libya." *The Journal of North African Studies* 22, no. 3, 332.

Figure 3 Successrates

GNA-aligned forces have found it hard to project military force outside of strongholds in the west.¹³ Haftar's forces instead took the 'oil crescent' in September 2016 and until recently had only limited success in projecting military power beyond the controlled eastern territories (see figure 3 - GNA).

The long term, however, favors the LNA and its allies. First, since the beginning of 2016 the eastern coalition has been more than four times as active as the western coalition. Second, there are clear differences in military performance. Data from January 2016 to May 2017 for each allied actor – gathered by Clingendael – show the LNA and its allies outperforming both the GNA and its allies (and even anti-LNA forces that are not always supportive of the GNA, see figure 3 - LNA & Anti-LNA). The LNA and its allies have managed to take more territory while hardly losing any territory. The GNA and its allies (and anti-LNA forces) have been losing territory while scarcely being able to win any battles (battle success was limited to Tripoli). This situation is unsustainable and deteriorating steadily for the GNA. Time clearly favors the LNA. A third indication that the tide is shifting is that the LNA is changing military tactics. Since March 2017 the

¹³ In fact the GNA attempts to split Haftar's support in the east by dislodging some of his commanding friends has failed. Ibrahim Jadran and Mahdi al-Barghati defection to the GNA did not result in changes on the battlefield.

LNA has increasingly relied on airpower, fueling speculation that it is receiving military intelligence from one of its backers.¹⁴

Theater 2: Conflict in Tripoli (January 2016-present)

A second conflict theater is Tripoli city. Since the start of the conflict in 2011 fighting in Tripoli has been characterized by private militias – often set up at the whim of individual power brokers. By 2016, at least 30 militias were active in Tripoli city (over 50 in the wider Tripoli area).¹⁵ Violent clashes have risen in Tripoli.

Table 1 Number of events per coalition

	GNA support	Anti GNA	Mixed Support	?
2016 K1	6	7	2	23
2016 K2	7	4	4	20
2016 K3	7		7	9
2016 K4	11	10	13	15
2017 K1	10	22	11	32
2017 K2	1	11	3	4

Increased violent activity in Tripoli has two root causes. First, when the GNA took office in Tripoli (March 2016) co-opted pro-GNA militias clashed with militias supporting the rival General National Salvation (GNS) ‘government’.¹⁶ This conflict is ongoing. Table 1 highlights the militias’ support for either the GNA or GNS. The conclusion is that militias supportive of the GNA were more active in 2016, but that GNA rule in Tripoli – judged by the numbers – is increasingly being challenged, with two effects. On the one hand, troubles in Tripoli are exacerbating the already weak military performance of the GNA outside Tripoli. On the other hand, they are limiting Al-Sarraj’s room for maneuver in

14 The usage of airpower has increased regardless of military activity in the south. Varvelli, 2017. Time for action: EU and a new political initiative in Libya. ISPI, <http://www.ispionline.it/pubblicazione/time-action-eu-and-new-political-initiative-libya-16287>.

15 The numbers derive from ACLED and almost certainly underestimate the activity of these militias given ACLEDs non-recording of abductions, patrols and territorial control. Moody (2017). Political Developments in Libya. ACLED, <http://www.crisis.acleddata.com/political-developments-in-libya/>.

16 The GNS comprises former GNC members with Islamist leanings headed by Khalifa al-Ghawil (a Misratan) who opposes the LPA agreement.

negotiations with the LNA, as concessions could trigger a direct military backlash in Tripoli.¹⁷

A second reason for increased violence in Tripoli relates to human smuggling, oil trade and abduction.¹⁸ All militias are actively involved in abduction in and around Tripoli (293, 189 and 68 cases were recorded in January, March and April 2017 respectively).¹⁹ Other militias are involved in disrupting oil and fuel pipelines.²⁰ Finally, as migrant embarkation points have been established in Tripoli, there has been an influx of militias aiming to reap profits from smuggling and anti-smuggling militias hoping to receive EU funding to counter smuggling.²¹ The conflict between these militias cuts across the LNA-GNA organizing cleavage and exists independently of it.

Theater 3: Conflict in the South (January 2016-present)

A third (local) conflict is taking place in the south-western regions of Libya.²² Like the conflict in Tripoli, the LNA-GNA conflict had no real impact on the south-west. For years it was of a tribal/ethnic nature and involved the Tebu (one of the early resistance forces against Gaddafi) and Tuareg tribes in city flashpoints such as Sabha, Ubari and Ghat.²³ While underlying drivers such as unequal citizenship rights (a product of Gaddafi's policy to manipulate control over both groups) and a lack of public goods continue to generate

17 ANSAmed (2017). Libya: tension in Tripoli against Sarraj-Haftar agreement. http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/analysis/2017/05/12/libya-tension-in-tripoli-against-sarraj-haftar-agreement_d8b232a8-7304-454c-8ff1-0a7a3bab3b97.html

18 These activities have various aims: legitimizing militias, raising money to further political aims or livelihood protection, see Molenaar, 2017. Only God can stop the smugglers. Clingendael, https://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/only_god_can_stop_the_smugglers.pdf.

19 Libyan Express (2017). Amnesty International: Militia abductions in Libya include university professor as latest victim. <http://www.libyanexpress.com/amnesty-international-militia-abductions-in-libya-include-university-professor-as-latest-victim/> Human Rights Watch (2017). Libya: Enforced Disappearance of Tripoli Activist. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/07/libya-enforced-disappearance-tripoli-activist>

20 Moody (2017). Political Developments in Libya. ACLED, <http://www.crisis.acleddata.com/political-developments-in-libya/>.

21 Micallef (2017). The Human Conveyor Belt: trends in human trafficking and smuggling in post-revolution Libya. The global initiatives against transnational organized crime, 17.

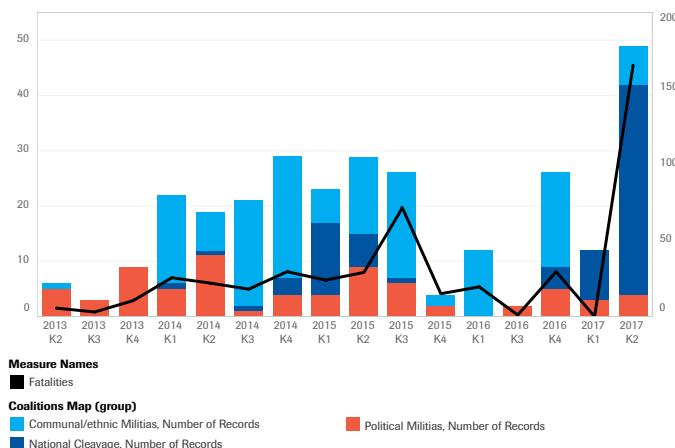
22 The south-west is defined as sub-districts of Sabha, Wadi al Hayat, Ghat, Murzuq and Wadi Ash Shati.

23 Neither Tebu nor the Tuareg are truly united; Arab tribes vie for their own interests and security outfits of the old regime, informal security actors and (often untrained) revolutionary groups engage in violence.

violence, the conflict in the south has increasingly turned into violent competition over economic profit from smuggling, illegal trade and oil rent-seeking.²⁴

Since the end of 2016, however, there have been indications that the conflict in the south-west is escalating. Violent events in the first quarter of 2017 were double those of the most active previous quarters. The greatest danger to Libya today is that the south-west conflict has been reorganizing along national lines since the end of last year. The pattern of activity is markedly different from previous years. Since 2014 both GNA and LNA have funneled arms and salaries to Tebu and Tuareg militias respectively, effectively sponsoring a low-activity proxy conflict.²⁵ However, as figure 4 shows, violence in the south-west is spreading nationwide: the bidding is mainly being carried out by national actors rather than the local militias who have been victims and bystanders.²⁶

Figure 4 Conflict in the South (2013 – present)



24 Wehrey (2017). Insecurity and governance challenges in Southern Libya. Carnegie Endowment, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/30/insecurity-and-governance-challenges-in-southern-libya-pub-68451>.
Murray (2017). Southern Libya Destabilized. Small Arms Survey, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/T-Briefing-Papers/SAS-SANA-BP-Ubari.pdf>.

25 Wehrey (2017). Insecurity and governance challenges in Southern Libya, 13.
26 The LNA carried out airstrikes on Misratan Third Force controlled Temehint and Brak al-Shati airbase and Benghazi Defence Brigade (BDB) controlled Kharrouba airbase and Daoki camp. The ensuing fighting has drawn in LNA ground forces and other groups (e.g. GNC affiliated Southern Libya Shield Force). Clear evidence of continued violence are mass executions on May 18 by GNA supportive Misratan Third Force and BDB militias on LNA controlled Brak-El-Shati airbase. Human Rights Watch (2017). Libya: Mass Executions Alleged at Military Base. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/21/libya-mass-executions-alleged-military-base>

The nationalization of the south-west conflict may have three consequences. First, it may well be the beginning of a new set of war dynamics, as it is the first time the LNA has managed to sustain itself successfully and strike forcefully outside its traditional power base in the east.²⁷ Success in the south-west may convince elements in Haftar's entourage that "there is only a military solution", undercutting the premises of the ongoing negotiations; Haftar is unable to unite the country militarily. Second, nationalization of the south-west conflict in itself risks altering the local power balance and igniting a very different local/ethnic conflict that will start to spread across the LNA-GNA divide.²⁸ Tebu commanders for example – nominally allied with the LNA and involved in the recent fighting on behalf of the LNA – are spreading rumors of supposedly Tuareg links with the LNA and rumors that the LNA are threatening fellow Tebu in other parts of the country.²⁹

Theater 4: IS, Al Sharia and the Shura Councils (January 2016-present)

Alongside the central cleavage, the Tripoli conflict and the conflict in the south-west – each with different drivers – is a conflict between Salafi Islamist groups and a coalition of anti-Islamist forces. It is in this conflict theater that IS managed to secure a hold by exploiting disorder and widely felt grievances.

In the course of 2016 a coalition of GNA-backed militias – the Bunyan al-Marsous (BAM) forces – aided by US, UK and French airstrikes have largely defeated IS. The LNA simultaneously closed in on the Islamist groups Ansar-Al-Sharia and the Benghazi Shura Councils. These separate fronts have led to a marked *decrease* in the activity of most jihadi groups (figure 5). Today, only the Benghazi Shura Council remains active, but not outside Benghazi. Hence the data – beyond the mere platitude that the IS has been dislodged – suggest that the activity of radical Islam in Libya has been largely contained. While there are still threats (see the CrisesAlert "European security interests at stake") and the danger may have only been eliminated temporarily, the declining levels of

27 The LNA has hit the oil crescent, the oil terminals around Sirte (December 2014–February 2015) and the south before, but this time is acting in a more sustained effort and is not using proxy-force to do the bidding.

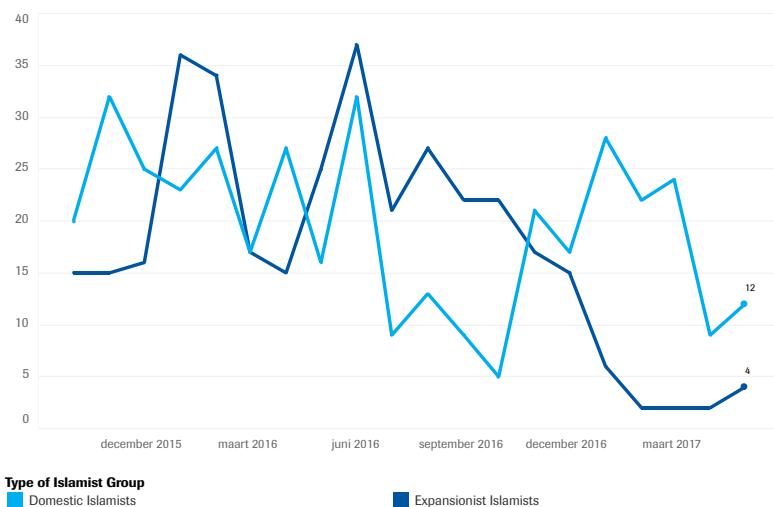
28 The balance appeared to be settling in after an Italian sponsored local peace deal by the end of 2016 with the Hassawna tribe serving as 'peacekeepers'. Libyan Herald (2017d). Tebu, Tuareg and Awlad Suleiman make peace in Rome.

<https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/03/30/tebu-tuareg-and-awlad-suleiman-make-peace-in-rome/>

29 Libyan Herald (2017e). Tebu anger at deadly airstrike on Sebha security room and jail. <https://www.libyaherald.com/2017/04/25/tebu-anger-at-deadly-airstrike-on-sebha-security-room-and-jail/>; Eyes on Libya (2017). May 2, 2017: the anti-Isis coalition. <http://eyeonisisinlibya.com/the-anti-isis-coalition/24-apr-may-1-haftar-aggravates-allies-in-sebha-continues-targeting-airbases-in-the-south/>.

Islamist activity support the conclusion that this theater is one of Barack Obama's forgotten policy successes.

Figure 5 Islamist activity



Situation awareness: assumptions unraveled

Good conflict analysis of the situation in Libya starts with situation awareness. An important way to comprehend conflicts is relying on fine-grained personalized knowledge and experience of the conflict. It tells us that the conflict in Libya is complex and is in fact composed of multiple interlinked crises that are often unrelated to one another. In Libya we have observed at least four separate conflict theaters since January 2016: the main one between the LNA and the GNA over a peace agreement (among other things); a city conflict in Tripoli between the GNS and the GNA over control and a conflict in Tripoli between a host of local militias over access to economic resources; an ethnic/communal conflict in the south-west over smuggling routes, decade-long grievances and marginalization; and an 'internationalized conflict' between Salafi jihadist organizations and a disparate coalition of national and international actors.

But our analysis also draws on data from the Libyan conflict and using this information we are able to unravel two assumptions. First, it is not true that the conflict in Libya is escalating. Except for the conflict in the south, violence levels in Libya have been stable or declining (especially since the jihadist conflict appears to be largely contained for now). The current 'fourth' phase of the conflict is not particularly violent in terms of

Libya's recent history. Second, a prime assumption behind the ongoing negotiating processes is that the LNA – the Libyan National Army in the east ruled by Haftar – is strong but not able to force a military solution. Our analysis challenges this assumption on three counts. To start with, the LNA and its allies are outperforming the GNA and its allies. The LNA is increasingly able to gain territory and project (air) power, whereas the GNA's ability to do both is decreasing. This is shifting the military balance in favor of the LNA. In addition, the GNA is increasingly being challenged in Tripoli city by opposing forces, leaving the GNA fearing for its physical presence in Libya. Finally, the communal Tebu-Tuareg conflict in the south-west has been undergoing a major nationalization with active fighting between LNA and GNA troops rather than communal militias. It marks the first time that the LNA has been able to project military force in a new conflict zone. If successful it is likely to give the LNA the impression of military prowess and challenge the underlying assumption behind the diplomatic initiatives. The LNA may start to become convinced that a military solution may be possible after all. This will give Haftar a *de facto* veto.