

Report

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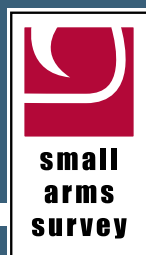
A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ZAWIYA

Armed Groups and Society in a
Western Libyan City

Wolfram Lacher



Security Assessment
in North Africa



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Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the
Netherlands



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About the author and acknowledgements

Wolfram Lacher is a senior associate at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin. His research focuses on conflict dynamics in Libya and the Sahel, and relies on frequent fieldwork. His work has been published in *Survival*, *Mediterranean Politics*, *Foreign Affairs*, and the *Washington Post*, among other publications. He is the author of *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict* (I.B. Tauris, 2020), and co-editor of *Violence and Social Transformation in Libya* (Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2023). He studied Arabic and African languages and history, conflict, and development studies, and holds a PhD in political science from Humboldt University in Berlin.

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About the SANA project

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

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

DCIM	Department for Combatting Illegal Migration
EU	European Union
GECOL	General Electricity Company of Libya
GIS	General Intelligence Service
GNA	Government of National Accord
GNC	General National Congress
GNU	Government of National Unity
HoR	House of Representatives
IS	Islamic State
LAAF	Libyan Arab Armed Forces
LPDF	Libyan Political Dialogue Forum
LROR	Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room
LYD	Libyan dinar
NOC	National Oil Corporation
PFG	Petroleum Facilities Guard
SSA	Stability Support Apparatus
USD	US dollar

Executive summary

Armed groups from Zawiya, a coastal city that lies 47 km west of the capital, Tripoli, have come to play an increasingly important role in Libya's power struggles. Conflict among these groups has been endemic, but has generally been limited to intermittent clashes, rather than escalating into sustained, all-out confrontation. While national-level politics has exacerbated these rivalries, they are fundamentally driven by competition over access to state funding and the city's vast illicit economy: fuel, drugs, and migrant smuggling. This Report offers a political economy analysis of Zawiya's armed groups. By outlining the developments that shaped the nature of these groups and the city's current security landscape, it shows how Zawiya's armed groups gradually came to take on a particularly abusive and predatory character, compared to many other western Libyan militias. The Report disaggregates these groups' diverging business models and relationships with their social bases. This analysis also provides answers to the question of why clashes between the city's rival factions have been frequent but generally short-lived, and have stopped short of all-out war.

This Report is primarily based on interviews conducted by the author during multiple visits to Zawiya in November 2022 as well as in February, June, and December 2023. Interlocutors included commanders and members of Zawiya's armed groups, and security officials, as well as academics, politicians, professionals, and other local residents.

Key findings

- Zawiya's armed groups initially benefited from widespread local support for the revolutionary cause. Revolutionary leaders enjoyed a high standing in the years immediately after Muammar Qaddafi's fall. A crisis in leadership and the city's temporary political marginalization, however, prompted the rise of militias that were deeply involved in criminal activities, and came to be widely despised by the population.
- The 2019–20 Tripoli war allowed Zawiyan armed groups to regain influence in Tripoli and across the western coastal region. Zawiyan militia leaders became major players in regional and national power struggles. They exploited the rivalry between competing governments to their advantage, but in doing so also drew the city into a worsening security crisis.
- The four main forces in Zawiya today differ fundamentally from each other in their make-up, economic model, and relations with local society. While three are deeply involved in the illicit economy, the fourth—Brigade 52—relies entirely on state funding, and has gained a reputation for disciplined security provision.
- Since 2015, Zawiya has witnessed endemic violence, but never an all-out war between its main forces. Two aspects explain this restraint. First, since each faction fears the dominance of any single actor, alliances among the city's armed groups constantly shift, maintaining a balance of power. Second, movement along the roads from Tripoli to the Tunisian border is central to Zawiyan groups' ability to benefit from illicit activities, encouraging them to cooperate.
- Like other Libyan armed groups, Zawiya's factions are seeking to refashion themselves as more legitimate, respectable entities, but their predatory activities remain central to their *raison d'être*. Their leaders now play a dominant role across Zawiya's politics, the economy, and the administration; they are also key protagonists in the Libyan state's capture by those wielding armed force.
- Popular mobilization against armed groups' abusive and predatory behaviour in the first half of 2023 posed a temporary challenge to these groups, but their ability to play competing government officials in Tripoli against each other helped them in warding off such pressure. Zawiya's militia leaders appear set to dominate the city's political order in the long term, unless sustained civilian mobilization limits their power.

“The coastal city of Zawiya has assumed growing importance as a theatre for Libya’s power struggles.”

Introduction

The coastal city of Zawiyah has assumed growing importance as a theatre for Libya's power struggles. The city's strategic location as the gateway to the capital, Tripoli, 47 km to Zawiyah's east, emerged most clearly on 4 April 2019, when Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) launched a large-scale offensive to capture Tripoli, and gain overall power. Haftar had attempted to strike deals with armed group leaders in Zawiyah and apparently expected them to allow his forces to enter the capital. But late on 4 April, Zawiyah forces captured more than 100 of Haftar's soldiers at Bridge 27, between Zawiyah and the Tripoli suburb of Janzur, thwarting the LAAF's attempt to reach Tripoli (Wehrey, 2021).

In the ensuing civil war, Zawiyah armed groups were a key component of the forces fighting Haftar. After the war ended in mid-2020, giving way to political struggles, they successfully converted their military power into political influence. During the tug of war between the rival governments of Abdelhamid Dabeiba and Fathi Bashagha, in the first half of 2022, the balance of loyalties among Zawiyah's armed groups was yet again central to the outcome: Dabeiba prevailed.

In addition to the political and military weight of its forces, Zawiyah is also important economically. It hosts a major oil refinery and export terminal. Through the refinery's petroleum products and particularly through the fuel imported and distributed from the refinery at heavily subsidized prices, Zawiyah has emerged as a fuel smuggling hub. At the same time, local armed groups have used the city's shores to make money both from irregular migration towards Europe, and from the interception and incarceration of migrants. Fuel, migrant, and drug smuggling have all combined to raise the stakes involved in the control of roads linking Zawiyah to its wider surroundings, including the Tunisian and Algerian borders.

Despite its significance, however, Zawiyah has been largely neglected by researchers to date. No in-depth studies exist on its armed groups and their evolution.¹ This lacuna is all the more striking given that the city has been the theatre of recurrent clashes between its armed groups that have caused dozens of civilian deaths. This Report is a primer on Zawiyah's armed groups and the political economy that sustains them.

Libyan armed groups have, over the past decade, gradually consolidated into powerful state-sanctioned units that are likely to define the country's security sector for the foreseeable future (Lacher, 2023c). Yet these groups vary widely in their aims and interests, finance models, and relations with local communities. Subsuming them under the blanket category of 'the militias', as is commonly done, suggests a uniformity that fails to capture their considerable differences. Understanding armed groups therefore requires analysing both the national-level dynamics and the local conditions that shaped them. This Report undertakes such an analysis for Zawiyah. It should be read in conjunction with similar studies of armed groups in other local contexts, including a Briefing Paper on the Abu Salim district of Tripoli (Hakan, forthcoming).²

While there are also significant differences among Zawiya’s armed groups, most are particularly problematic compared with many other western Libyan militias in that they are politically opportunistic, deeply involved in criminal activities, indifferent to the human suffering they cause with those activities and with their recurrent armed clashes, and widely hated by the civilian population. This was not always the case: in the years immediately after 2011, armed groups in the city had revolutionary legitimacy and a relatively unified leadership that enjoyed considerable social standing. To understand how armed groups in Zawiya took on the character they exhibit today, it is necessary to identify the turning points that defined their evolution.

This Report proceeds in three steps. First, it shows how national-level and local developments combined to influence the trajectory of armed groups in Zawiya. Second, it



The Zawiya oil refinery, an important source for black market fuel in Libya.

Source: Reuters/Ismail Zitouny, 2022

focuses on the evolution of these groups' financing strategies to demonstrate how criminal activities became central to the political economy of armed groups in the city. Third, it analyses how armed groups' relations with civilians have evolved. It concludes with an overall assessment that draws out the implications of the analysis for future conflict dynamics.

This Report is primarily based on interviews conducted by the author during multiple visits to Zawiya in November 2022 as well as in February, June, and December 2023. It also draws on interviews conducted during a previous visit to the city in November 2018, as well as the author's broader research based on two dozen visits to Libya between 2011 and 2022. Interlocutors included commanders and members of Zawiya's armed groups, and security officials, as well as academics, politicians, professionals, and other local residents. ●

“Social relations formed through common membership in the armed groups and criminal networks that formed after 2011 created new loyalties that often supersede community ties.”

1. The making of Zawiya's political economy

Zawiya has a population of around 350,000, making it Libya's fourth-largest city (BSC, 2021). Towards the east, its outskirts adjoin the peri-urban sprawl of the Warshafana area, which separates Zawiya from Tripoli; its western districts merge seamlessly with the neighbouring city of Sorman, thereby forming a single metropolitan area with Sorman, Sabratha, and Ajeliat. Zawiya's southern fringes are bordered by the arid, sparsely populated expanse of the Jafara plain, through which a road from Zawiya leads towards the Nafusa mountains. The most vital artery crossing Zawiya, however, is the coastal road from Tripoli to the Tunisian border. Finally, although its centre faces away from the sea, Zawiya is a coastal city with several small ports, including that of the refinery.

As an urban centre, Zawiya is a recent creation. Until the early 20th century, the area hosted a cluster of villages along with a few Ottoman administrative and military buildings. Its name derives from the *zawaya* (singular: *zawiya*) that had been established in the area since the 15th century, and that offered religious instruction to the region's agropastoral population—the only education available until the Ottoman administration established a rudimentary primary school in 1902. During the Italian colonial era (1911–43), Zawiya developed into a small town (Al-Tweir, 2005; Bulugma, 1960). Urbanization began in earnest following independence and the shift towards an oil economy. Zawiya's population grew from 19,500 in 1964 to 53,000 in 1980 (Elbasha, 2020); by 2006, it had reached 290,000 (BSC, 2006). The establishment of the refinery in 1974 and of the university in 1988 were milestones in Zawiya's transformation into a major centre of Libya's oil-based economy (Al-Tweir, 2005).

Zawiya's origination from a cluster of different communities remains recognizable in its urban fabric. Many areas of the city are predominantly inhabited by members of particular tribes or extended families, and therefore seen as these communities' preserve. This even goes for parts of the city's centre, where a neighbourhood such as that of Awlad Jarbu' is associated with the eponymous tribe. Similarly, Awlad Sagr mostly settled in the city's southern and western districts; the south-eastern district of Abu Surra is the preserve of the Awlad Buhmeira tribe; parts of the Harsha district are considered the territory of the Gammuda; and so on. Other components of local society include the *Karaghla* (Koloughlis)—families who trace their origins back to Ottoman officers and soldiers stationed in the area (Bulugma, 1960).

These social categories have undergone politicization since 2011, as local politicians and militia leaders have frequently invoked them in their struggles. Yet they form only one basis for collective action among several. Close family ties tend to be a far better—though by no means foolproof—predictor of common political and economic interests than tribal identity or even membership of extended families. Most importantly, social relations formed through common membership in the armed groups and criminal networks that formed after 2011 created new loyalties that often supersede community ties.

The revolutionary era (2011–14)

Zawiya emerged from the 2011 civil war as a key stronghold of the revolutionary forces. This development would define the city for much of the following decade. Zawiya's new political and military leadership originated in the revolutionary struggle, and in the early years after 2011 it remained relatively united due to this common revolutionary outlook.

The city found itself in the revolutionary camp largely in reaction to the indiscriminate response of the Qaddafi regime to the protests that spread across Libya from 15 February 2011 onwards. In Zawiya, the first protests erupted on 19 February. Authorities initially refrained from openly using violence, allowing protesters to stage a sit-in at the mosque in Martyrs' Square, the city's central square (UNHRC, 2012, p. 55). On 24 February, regime forces attempted to take back control of the square by firing on protesters, killing ten and destroying the mosque's minaret (AP, 2011; LANA, 2013). The outrage triggered by the killings caused protests to swell further, and led protesters to seize weapons (UNHRC, 2012, p. 55). Regime forces attempted to violently suppress the demonstrators, but rapidly lost control of the city (HRW, 2011; Michael, 2011a). On 28 February, government forces began a major offensive to recapture the city using heavy weapons and indiscriminate shelling, killing dozens (BBC News, 2011a; Michael, 2011b; UNHRC, 2012, pp. 151–52). By 9 March, they had fought their way into Martyrs' Square, where rebels were holed up in the mosque and buildings surrounding the square. Having subdued the resistance following heavy fighting, regime forces later razed the mosque to the ground and conducted waves of arrests (Neely, 2011; UNHRC, 2012, pp. 93, 152).

Many rebels from Zawiya fled to the Nafusa mountains; others formed clandestine cells inside the city or smuggled weapons to those cells by boat from Benghazi. In the mountains, Zawiya revolutionaries mostly fought with those from Zintan, alongside fighters from Sabratha and other coastal cities. The strong ties that formed among revolutionaries from Sabratha, Zawiya, Zintan, and elsewhere would provide a basis for trust between them even during and after the 2014–15 civil war, when they fought on opposing sides.³ In June 2011, rebels based in the mountains infiltrated the city and, together with cells based in Zawiya, attempted to wrest it from regime control, but failed (Dickinson, 2015). They eventually succeeded when rebel forces descended from the mountains in August. Zawiya fell to rebel control on 20 August after a week of heavy fighting (BBC News, 2011b; Garcia-Navarro, 2011). The battle for Tripoli began that day, and ended with the rebel takeover several days later. Fighters from Zawiyan rebel forces then joined the offensive against some of the regime's last holdovers in Bani Walid, which came to an end in October (Zawiya Media Center, 2011).

With the fall of the regime, Zawiyan field commanders began setting up their own armed groups in the city. Many young men began joining these groups, attracted by the

glamour of the victorious revolutionaries, the power emanating from carrying arms, and the state salaries that soon started to flow to the armed groups. From an estimated 2,000 Zawiyan men who fought during the 2011 revolution, the headcount of the city's armed groups rose to 14,000 in 2012, when the Warriors Affairs Commission registered self-declared revolutionaries across Libya.⁴ Among the most prominent early armed groups were the Zawiya Martyrs Battalion, led by Mohamed al-Kilani; the Company for Capture and the Redress of Grievances (Sariyat al-Qabdh w Radd al-Madhalim), led by Mustafa al-Treiki; the Faruq Battalion, led first by Mahmoud Ben Rajab and later by Mohamed Hussein al-Khadrawi; a group led by Munir Ajina in the city centre; a group led by Othman al-Leheb in southern Zawiya; a group led by Jamal al-Ghaeb and another called the Kufra Battalion, both based in the western district of Mutrid; the Nasr Battalion that controlled Zawiya's refinery, led by Mohamed Kashlaf ('al-Qsab'); and a group in the Abu Surra area, led by Khaled Buzriba.⁵

In the immediate post-revolutionary period, however, all Zawiyan groups submitted to a collective leadership: the Zawiya Military Council, headed by Shaaban Hadiya, who together with Kilani had led Zawiyan revolutionary fighters in Zintan. Hadiya and Kilani were widely respected and exerted moral authority over Zawiya's armed groups.⁶ Both were religious figures: Kilani was an imam in Zawiya and a self-described Salafi (Al-Naba TV, 2014), while Hadiya had studied under the Salafi scholar Muqbil al-Wadi'i in Yemen.⁷ Similarly, Treiki's and Ben Rajab's groups were reputed for their religiously devout leadership and resolute crime fighting—even though their members also included many less than pious young men.⁸ Later, adverse media reporting would wrongly portray these figures and their groups as extremists, or even claim that they had ties to jihadists.⁹ In reality, their outlook matched the widespread appeal of piety in the post-revolutionary period, and the general conservatism of Libyan society.

Zawiyan forces soon became a key component of the revolutionary camp in the emerging political landscape. As early as November 2011, they clashed with groups from neighbouring Warshafana over control of the military base at Bridge 27, a strategic location on the road to Tripoli. Both sides held dozens of residents of the opposing community hostage (BBC News, 2011c; UNHRC, 2012, p. 100). These clashes would be the first of several successive conflicts between groups from Zawiya and Warshafana, with the former stigmatizing the latter as bandits and loyalists of the former regime.

Under the leadership of Kilani, armed groups from Zawiya joined with former revolutionary battalions from other western Libyan cities to form the Western Shield—one of several units of the Libya Shield Forces—in early 2012. The unit deployed to interpose itself in local conflicts, including between groups from Zintan and the Mashashiya in Mizdah and al-Shqeiqa, as well as between Zintani and Zuwaran groups at the Mellitah oil and gas complex. For the former revolutionary battalions, the Shield was a temporary replacement for the defunct Libyan army that allowed them to defend the revolutionary order in the state's name. It was also a conduit for state salaries

and operating budgets, as well as a reflection of the rapidly intensifying competition between the former revolutionary factions over access to state resources (Lacher and Cole, 2014, pp. 39–50).

In keeping with the revolutionary spirit of the moment, two prominent field commanders were among the four representatives elected as individual candidates in Zawiya in the July 2012 elections to the General National Congress (GNC): Kilani came first, and Treiki fourth (HNEC, 2012). Both rapidly became leading representatives of the hard-line revolutionary camp in the GNC. In September 2012, they helped push through the GNC's authorization of a military operation in Bani Walid—a community that was stigmatized as pro-Qaddafi—to capture suspected criminals; Kilani even joined the fighting himself (Lacher, 2013). In early 2013, they were staunch supporters of the Political Isolation Law that would exclude former regime officials from public office.

Shortly after the law was passed, Kilani was instrumental in obtaining official status and a budget for the Libya Revolutionaries Operations Room (LROR), a body that brought together a number of hard-line revolutionary commanders. In October 2013, Hadiya was appointed head of the LROR with Kilani's backing.¹⁰ Only days afterwards, Prime Minister Ali Zeidan was briefly abducted by armed men. Following his release, he accused Kilani and Treiki of being behind the incident, though both denied the charges (Reuters, 2013). Such developments gradually hardened the divide between the self-declared revolutionary camp and its opponents, which in western Libya were led by armed groups from Zintan. Even within Zawiya, however, the formation of the LROR was controversial. Some of the more powerful Zawiyan forces refused to join the body, including Ben Rajab's and Leheb's groups—whether because they opposed the LROR's tactic of besieging ministries to extract concessions, or because they retained close ties to Zintani revolutionaries.¹¹ Following Zeidan's abduction, the GNC transferred the LROR's chain of command from the GNC presidency to the chief of staff, thereby much reducing the LROR's access to funding and initiating the body's decline.¹²

Meanwhile, armed groups from Zawiya participated in the gradual escalation of conflicts that increasingly coalesced into a nationwide power struggle. In August 2013 and again in February 2014, they engaged in fierce fighting with groups from Warshafana, triggered by repeated abductions carried out by Warshafana-based criminal gangs (AFP, 2013; Stocker, 2014). That conflict, combined with the LROR's close ties with Zawiya's hard-line revolutionary parliamentarians, drove the city's armed groups to join the escalating civil war. In July 2014, Zawiya's LROR factions joined groups from Misrata and Tripoli in what soon became known as Operation Libya Dawn: they attacked Zintani-led militias in Tripoli, who were by then allied with Haftar (Lacher, 2020, p. 37). The remainder of Zawiya's forces entered the war in early August, after Zintani-backed groups from Warshafana attacked Zawiyan positions on the coastal road and seized the military base at Bridge 27 long enough to raze its walls (Al-Obeidi, 2014a; El Yaakoubi, 2014). The attackers included a shadowy militia of former regime



Mohamed al-Kilani (bottom right) and Mustafa al-Treiki (bottom left) mediate between armed groups from Zuwara and Zintan at a March 2013 meeting over control of Mellitah oil and gas complex. Posted October 2013.

Source: Zuwara Media Center/Facebook



loyalists, which called itself the Army of Tribes and appeared to vindicate Libya Dawn's claim that it was fighting against a counter-revolutionary conspiracy (Al-Aswad, 2014; Al-Obeidi, 2014b). More broadly, given the enduring commitment in Zawiya to the 2011 revolution, Haftar's obvious ambitions to re-establish dictatorship provoked powerful opposition in the city.

Libya Dawn triggered large-scale mobilization in Zawiya, including that of men in their late teens and early twenties who had been too young to fight in 2011.¹³ Young field commanders entering the war established their own armed groups that would persist after the conflict de-escalated. The war thereby fuelled a process of generational change, violent socialization, and organizational fragmentation that was exacerbated by the death of established leaders—the first, and most significant, being that of Kilani in September 2014 (Ash, 2014).¹⁴ Kilani was killed during Libya Dawn's offensive in the Warshafana area, which eventually displaced much of that region's civilian population. According to one formerly fervent revolutionary, Zawiya's armed groups then turned to burning homes in the Warshafana area, 'which Mohamed al-Kilani would have never allowed, had he been alive'.¹⁵ More generally, many local observers today trace the origins of what they see as Zawiya's leadership crisis and the increasing ruthlessness of its armed groups to the disappearance of this unifying figure.

Isolation and fragmentation (2015–18)

The 2014–15 civil war had momentous consequences for politics, the economy, and security in Zawiya. With the coastal road cut off by hostile forces, the city was isolated from Tripoli. Among Zawiyan armed groups, a hard-line stance towards Libya Dawn's adversaries prevailed longer than in Misrata and Tripoli, causing Zawiya's political marginalization in the Government of National Accord (GNA), which took office in Tripoli in March 2016. Meanwhile, the disappearance of a unifying leadership and purpose led to the eruption of violent internal conflicts whose legacies continue to haunt Zawiya.

As a stalemate took root between Libya Dawn and its Zintani-led adversaries from early 2015 onwards, Misratan forces—who formed the largest component of Libya Dawn—began ceasefire negotiations with leaders from Zintan and Warshafana. In parallel, Misratan political figures became central to the UN-led process that eventually led to the conclusion of the Libyan Political Agreement in December 2015, and the formation of the GNA. Zawiyan armed groups, by contrast, were adverse to a ceasefire that would see Warshafana factions allied with Haftar return to their community's territory, on Zawiya's eastern borders—which occurred in mid-April 2015 (Afrigate-news, 2015; Al Jazeera, 2015a). They were also divided: two field commanders from Zintan and Misrata who negotiated with Zawiyan counterparts both stressed that the

groups could not credibly commit to ceasefires owing to their internal divisions, and that identifying key figures who could speak for Zawiya's armed groups was a challenge.¹⁶ According to the Misratan commander, groups from Zawiya thrice violated a ceasefire that Misratans had negotiated for Libya Dawn with Warshafana leaders.

Zawiyian groups almost certainly adopted a less conciliatory stance, compared to Misratan factions, because the presence of armed groups in Warshafana would pose a direct threat to them. This fear was borne out by subsequent developments. In May 2015, groups from Warshafana yet again captured the checkpoint at Bridge 27 (Monte Carlo al-Dawliya, 2015). From then onwards, Warshafana-based armed groups frequently carried out abductions and robberies along the stretch of road between Zawiya and the Tripoli suburb of Janzur, which repeatedly provoked clashes and temporary closures of the road by Zawiyian factions or Fursan Janzur—their allies in the now defunct Libya Dawn coalition.¹⁷

Zawiya's isolation deepened in October 2015, when a military helicopter carrying field commanders and officers from Zawiya and other western cities was shot down as it passed over the Maya area of Warshafana on its way from Tripoli to Zawiya (Al Jazeera, 2015b). Eighteen people were killed, including Kilani's son Abderrahim, the leader of the Zawiya Martyrs Battalion Suhaib al-Rumamah, and several prominent military officers (MoD, 2015).

The incident triggered not only renewed clashes with groups in Warshafana, but also more importantly the almost year-long closure of the coastal road by Zawiyian leaders, with further temporary closures continuing until March 2017.¹⁸ It also greatly strengthened those rejecting reconciliation in Zawiya at a time when other western Libyan factions were increasingly reaching out to their former adversaries. It became far more difficult for Zawiya residents to get to Tripoli, and vice versa. Zawiyian armed groups, meanwhile, had no weight in the Tripoli military balance, even as the city's militias positioned themselves in favour of or against the nascent unity government.

The formation of the GNA therefore left Zawiya marginalized. Libya's fourth-largest city had no representative in either the GNA's nine-member Presidency Council, or its 18-member ministerial line-up.¹⁹ This was a striking omission in a context where the proportional representation of communities was considered a key criterion for government formation.

Moreover, political divisions in the city deepened as Zawiyian figures began striking arrangements with the GNA. Khaled al-Meshri, a GNC member for Zawiya, backed the GNA—in line with the stance of the Justice and Construction Party, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated party to which he belonged. Through Meshri, several Zawiyian commanders—including Mohamed Hussein al-Khadrawi of the Central Support Apparatus and Ben Rajab, who by then led the Hamdi Ben Rajab Battalion—opted to support the GNA and ensure their forces retained official status and salaries from the

state.²⁰ Hadiya, who staunchly opposed the GNA along with other hardliners, left Zawiya for Turkey and only returned in 2023.²¹ His departure created yet another gap in the leadership of the city's armed groups, adding to the void left by the deaths of Kilani and the helicopter passengers. Another prominent figure, Treiki, played a much reduced public role since he had suffered major injuries in a car accident while returning from the frontline in March 2015 (Akhbar Libya 24, 2015). Later, Ben Rajab and Khadrawi themselves temporarily lost their leadership positions along with a third prominent former revolutionary, Hassan Za'et: in June 2017, Saudi authorities arrested the three men and surrendered them to Haftar, who would only release them in March 2019.²²

Consequently, after the 2014–15 civil war, Zawiya was an embattled, isolated city, whose armed groups were suffering from a leadership crisis and a loss of purpose. In this context, fuel and migration smuggling took on an entirely new dimension in the city: armed groups that funded themselves through these activities rapidly gained in power—an aspect examined in detail below. The eruption of serious violent conflict within the city itself also occurred in this context.²³ In September 2015, Ibrahim al-Hnesh allegedly killed Hamza al-Khadrawi in a dispute linked to Hnesh's hashish business, triggering clashes between armed groups in Zawiya's city centre that would rage intermittently for the next two years. While this conflict was made up of a series of short-lived armed confrontations, interlocutors in Zawiya generally refer to it as the 'Khadrawi–Hnesh war', and consistently estimate the overall toll of the conflict at around 180–90 people.²⁴ Several traced the origins of the ongoing conflicts in the city back to the clashes between Khadrawi and Hnesh.

The Khadrawi–Hnesh war was symptomatic of both a generational change among Zawiya's armed groups and the erosion of moral authority among the older generation of revolutionaries. According to a person who was close to him, Hnesh had 'stayed at home' during the revolution, despite being 20 years old and several of his cousins being revolutionary fighters. Over the following years, he emerged as a hashish trader and formed a gang, which he led into battle in the 2014–15 civil war, reportedly building up his firepower with backing from Hadiya.²⁵ Hamza al-Khadrawi was from an extended family that included several prominent revolutionaries. He, too, had fought in the 2014–15 war—in the ranks of the Martyr Haitham al-Khadrawi Battalion headed by his brother Akram, who would lead the fight against Hnesh over the following years. Both families were from Zawiya's city centre, and their association with different tribes added a social dimension to the conflict: the Khadrawis were Awlad Jarbu', whereas Hnesh was a Bel'azi. The fact that extended families on both sides refused to surrender members who were accused of killings was a major complicating factor.²⁶

In February 2016, Zawiyan armed groups briefly regained unity when they joined the short campaign against the non-state armed group Islamic State (IS) in neighbouring Sabratha (Ajwa, 2016). But just a month later, the clashes between Hnesh and Khadrawi



Mohamed Bahroun (left) and his close associate Firas al-Slugi (centre), ca. 2018. Source: unknown/Facebook

resumed with greater violence, and indiscriminate shelling by the warring parties caused residents to flee the area (Al-Wasat, 2016b; Libya's Channel, 2016). At that point, Treiki and other prominent former revolutionaries convinced both Hnesh and Akram al-Khadrawi to hand themselves in to the protective custody of the Special Deterrence Force in Tripoli, in order to stop the fighting.²⁷ Several months later, however, both were free again, and repeated bouts of fighting erupted between July and October 2016 (UNSC, 2016b). This time, the parties involved broadened, as Leheb's Sila' Battalion—known to most Zawiyan interlocutors as 'the Awlad Sagr'—joined Khadrawi's side.²⁸ Meanwhile, Hnesh gained support from Kashlaf of the Nasr Battalion, as well as from his close allies, the Buzriba brothers.²⁹ Another local ceasefire reached in late October brought a fragile calm to the area until clashes broke out again the following April (Ali, 2016; Libya's Channel, 2017b).

Finally, in June 2017, Hnesh was killed in renewed heavy fighting (Ben Said, 2017), which effectively ended the Hnesh–Khadrawi war. But by then the war had provoked a deep rift between Zawiya's armed groups, set a precedent with its indifference to civilian casualties from the fighting, and spawned yearnings for revenge that would continue to inspire killings over the following years. It had also reshaped Zawiya's security landscape. A new force emerged out of the factions that fought for Hnesh and, after the latter's death, Mohamed Bahroun—a young fighter known as 'al-Far' ('the mouse')—became its leader. Shortly afterwards, he acquired an official capacity as an officer in Zawiya's police directorate.³⁰

Bahroun's group was no longer associated with any particular local constituency, but represented a hodgepodge of young fighters involved in drug and fuel smuggling.³¹ Bahroun, moreover, had been implicated by a former IS member in a taped confession published by the Special Deterrence Force in March 2016. The Special Deterrence Force claimed that Bahroun had helped several IS members escape Sabratha the previous month, and hosted them in Hnesh's positions in central Zawiya, where they were later captured by Khadrawi's men (Special Deterrence Force, 2016). Bahroun denied the allegations and continued to operate under Zawiya's police directorate, even after the attorney general issued an arrest warrant for him (UNSC, 2021, pp. 77–81). Much later, after Bahroun had gained political influence, the attorney general annulled the arrest warrant.³²

The period between 2015 and 2018 also saw the rise of the Buzriba brothers as a major military force in Zawiya. Their Abu Surra Martyrs Battalion grew in strength thanks to their deep involvement in the illicit economy. Interlocutors in Zawiya consistently described the brothers as the patrons of both Kashlaf ('al-Qsab'), whose Nasr Battalion controlled the refinery, and the coastguard officer Abderrahman Milad ('al-Bija'), who was intercepting growing numbers of migrants departing from the shores of Zawiya and western Libyan cities in order to surrender them to the Nasr detention centre in the refinery (Micallef and Reitano, 2017, pp. 9–13; UNSC, 2018, pp. 41–42). Kashlaf and Milad were both members of the Awlad Buhmeira tribe, in

which the Buzribas had long been a politically powerful family. By the time the coastal road between Tripoli and Zawiya permanently reopened, in March 2017, this network had reached arrangements on fuel and migrant smuggling with armed groups in Warshafana and Zintan.³³ In addition, the Buzriba network's backing for Hnesh included cooperation on fuel smuggling; the question of who controlled the refinery was therefore also at stake in the Hnesh–Khadrawi war (Ali, 2016; Porsia, 2017; UNSC, 2017, p. 103). Kashlaf would retain control of the refinery despite being publicly accused of responsibility for fuel smuggling by the head of the National Oil Corporation (NOC), Mustafa Sanalla, and targeted by UN Security Council sanctions, together with Milad, in June 2018 (Al-Wasat, 2017a; Lederer, 2018).

It was a sign of how divided Zawiya had become that some local factions were even reaching out to Haftar's forces, which were steadily expanding their territory during this period. In the western district of Mutrid, a Salafist-tinged militia emerged whose leanings towards Haftar gradually became more apparent over the years. It was formed by Muhanned Sweisi and Hatem al-Ghaeb, who had both led armed groups in the area and transformed them into the Western Region Criminal Investigations Department in 2016, with backing from the Special Deterrence Force in Tripoli.³⁴ By March 2017, that unit had firmly established control over Mutrid and neighbouring Sorman, and by October the next city to the west, Sabratha, had fallen under the control of forces that retained official ties to Tripoli but made little secret of their de facto loyalty to Haftar (Micallef and Reitano, 2017). These groups took control of Sabratha during a brief war; fighters on the losing side fled to Zawiya, where they were hosted by the Buzribas and became a source of latent tensions with Sabratha.³⁵

Meanwhile, in southern Zawiya, a fuel smuggler and kidnapper from the Awlad Sagr called Ali Kardamin joined Haftar's coalition as early as 2017; in June of that year, he attacked a UN convoy and briefly abducted several UN staff.³⁶ Kardamin later fought with Haftar's forces in the Tripoli war and was killed shortly after it ended. In the city centre, Abderrauf Bukhder, a prominent former revolutionary, joined Haftar's forces in 2018, causing his Oqba bin Nafe' Battalion to split.³⁷ Most significantly, in the south-eastern Abu Surra area, the Buzriba family opened channels to Haftar in the autumn of 2018, reportedly trying to ensure their interests would be protected if they backed Haftar's move into western Libya.³⁸ When that offensive finally began in April 2019, it therefore appeared inevitable that Zawiya would suffer deep divides. Instead, the 2019–20 civil war produced a remarkable reversal of the city's fortunes.

Resurgence, consolidation, and rivalry (2019–22)

On 4 April, the main armed groups in Zawiya mobilized immediately to oppose Haftar's Tripoli offensive—with the exception of the Criminal Investigations Department in the western district of Mutrid, whose leaders, Sweisi and Ghaeb, aligned with Haftar.³⁹

Consequently, a significant proportion of Zawiyan forces remained in the city to prevent an attack via Mutrid from Sabratha and Sorman, which were controlled by Haftar's forces. The main Zawiyan forces, however, also deployed fighters on the Ain Zara, Wadi al-Rabi', and Airport Road fronts in Tripoli, as well as in the Warshafana area. These forces even included those of the Buzriba brothers, who had quickly decided to renege on their tentative understanding with Haftar (Harchaoui, 2022). Zawiyan groups represented the third-largest contingent of fighters in the forces fighting Haftar, after those of Misrata and Tripoli itself (Lacher, 2019).

For Zawiyan armed groups, the Tripoli war provided a moment of new-found unity and a regained sense of purpose. While this, of course, excluded the dominant militia in Mutrid, confrontations within the city were nevertheless avoided. In January 2020, Sweisi and Ghaeb deployed some vehicles eastwards towards the Harsha area, but immediately withdrew to Mutrid after Zawiya's anti-Haftar forces mobilized.⁴⁰ More broadly, the resistance against Haftar's attempt to seize power by force enjoyed widespread public support in Zawiya—a position that owed much to the city's revolutionary spirit.

The military weight of the city's forces also rapidly translated into increasing political influence. Meshri, who was by then president of the GNC's successor institution, the High Council of State, became a key intermediary in channelling Turkish military support to GNA forces.⁴¹ In April 2019, Ali Buzriba—the political leader of the Buzriba family, and a boycotting member of the House of Representatives (HoR) since the 2014 elections—supported the establishment of a rival HoR assembly in Tripoli with substantial funds.⁴² For almost two years, a greater number of HoR members would meet in Tripoli than in eastern Libya, where the rump HoR supported Haftar's offensive. And in October 2019, Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj appointed Salaheddin al-Namrush from Zawiya as deputy defence minister—the minister's post itself being vacant (Ean Libya, 2019b). Zawiyan representatives thereby began to exert greater influence over the allocation of state funds and external support, which helped to strengthen their city's forces.

Zawiyan forces played a key role in Haftar's eventual defeat, once Turkey began intervening in earnest from late 2019 onwards to back the GNA.⁴³ In April 2020, they led the lightning takeover of Sabratha and Sorman; the following month, their second attempt to capture the Wutiya airbase on the Tunisian border eventually succeeded (AFP, 2020; al-Ghitani, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2020b). That offensive also made use of Syrian mercenaries, whom Turkey had deployed with selected Libyan commanders, including Ben Rajab (Badi and Al-Jabassini, 2023). In a striking illustration of how the war boosted Zawiya's armed groups, Bahroun captured a Russian-made, UAE-supplied Pantsir air defence system at the Wutiya airbase and paraded it through the streets of Zawiya (Al-Atrush, 2021).

When Haftar's LAAF withdrew from western Libya in June 2020, Zawiyan forces therefore found themselves in a stronger position than ever. Key Zawiyan commanders—

most importantly Ben Rajab and Bahroun—now had positions at Tripoli International Airport, along the Airport Road, in the 7 April military base, and in Janzur. These positions would allow them to influence the Tripoli military balance throughout the following years.⁴⁴ Moreover, Zawiyan forces now had freedom of movement to and from Tripoli, as well as Sabratha, Sorman, and Ajeilat, having driven out Haftar loyalists both from these cities and from Zawiya's Mutrid district. As soon as the Tripoli war was over, several Zawiyan commanders also turned to building more disciplined, official-looking forces—with GNA and Turkish support—including Brigade 52; despite being headed by a career military officer from Zawiya, the brigade had Ben Rajab's backing and recruited from the fighters who had been under his command in the Tripoli war. Ben Rajab would later take the brigade's leadership himself.⁴⁵ Another prominent Zawiyan commander, Mohamed Ben Yousef, led a newly formed force that attacked fuel smugglers across the region from Zawiya to the Tunisian border, over a period of two months, before ending its campaign when salary payments stopped.⁴⁶

As a reflection of Zawiya's new military weight, the UN included a representative of the city's armed groups in its 75-member Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), which began convening in November 2020. The designation of the representative, Muadh al-Manfukh, was agreed on by key Zawiyan commanders.⁴⁷

These same commanders would soon, however, both take advantage of, and be drawn into, the power struggles unfolding in Tripoli. This would be the defining dynamic of the next three years, and would both drive a consolidation of military power in the hands of four key Zawiyan commanders and intensify rivalries between them, in constantly changing alliances. The four main forces in these struggles were those of Bahroun, Ben Rajab, the Buzriba brothers, and Leheb. Numerous smaller groups were also involved, but generally sought the support of the larger players.

In the second half of 2020 and in early 2021, GNA Interior Minister Bashagha sought to position himself to become prime minister of a new unity government to be formed under the aegis of the UN. In August 2020, Bashagha tried to exploit protests against his political rivals, including Prime Minister Serraj. The latter responded by making several appointments to top positions as counterweights to Bashagha—including promoting Namrush to acting minister of defence (Al Jazeera, 2020a). Bashagha's efforts to strengthen his law-and-order profile also played out in Zawiya. Among his primary targets for this purpose were the Nawasi Battalion and Abdelghani al-Kikli's group in Tripoli, as well as the Buzriba network in Zawiya—particularly Milad, who had gained both national and international notoriety due to his UN sanctions listing. Bashagha's enmity towards the Buzribas earned him Mahmoud Ben Rajab's backing.⁴⁸ Tensions between Bashagha and the Buzriba network rose when a force loyal to Bashagha arrested Milad in October 2020 (Magdy, 2020). In January 2021, Bashagha announced 'Operation Snake Hunt' against fuel and migrant smugglers in the region west of Tripoli. Although no actual operation followed, the intended target was clearly the Buzriba network, and Ali Buzriba publicly lashed back at Bashagha (Tomassini, 2021).

Bashagha's adversarial stance, and the threat of him becoming prime minister, caused the Buzribas to ally with several Tripoli militias against Bashagha. Immediately after Bashagha's announcement, Serraj issued a decree to create the Stability Support Apparatus (SSA), with Kikli at its head and Hassan Buzriba as one of Kikli's deputies (Al-Wasat, 2021a). The SSA reported to the Presidency Council rather than the Interior Ministry—giving Kikli and Buzriba a new official mantle that was outside Bashagha's administrative reach—and had a wide-ranging mandate.

The militia leaders who were at odds with Bashagha, including the Buzribas, were jubilant when the LPDF, in February 2021, designated Abdelhamid Dabeiba as prime minister of a new Government of National Unity (GNU), dealing an unexpected defeat to Bashagha.⁴⁹ Moreover, the three-member Presidency Council, selected together with Dabeiba, included Abdallah al-Lafi—an HoR member from Zawiya who had a reputation for pragmatism in the city. In a clear sign of a more permissive environment



for Zawiyian factions, Dabeiba's interior minister immediately reinstated Ali and Hassan Buzriba's brother Essam as the ministry's chief financial officer, after Bashagha had dismissed him the previous year (MoI, 2021). Milad was released less than a month after Dabeiba took office in Tripoli—reportedly following Dabeiba's intercession with the attorney general.⁵⁰ Milad then resumed his functions, after being promoted in rank (Cordina, 2021; Horsley and Gerken, 2022).

As relieved as the Buzribas had been by Bashagha's defeat, they rapidly discovered that Dabeiba did not favour them over other Zawiyian factions. Instead, the GNU's advent spurred competition among Zawiyia's main actors for influence within the government. Bahroun, who had long headed the Zawiyia police directorate's so-called 'support force', now also gained influence within the General Intelligence Service (GIS), by providing protection to GIS head Hussein al-Ayeb in Tripoli.⁵¹ In late 2021, Bahroun also began protecting Minister of Oil Mohamed Oun, who had taken an

Ali Buzriba (right) and Mu'ammr al-Dhawi (left), October 2022. Source: Ali Buzriba/Facebook



office at the NOC, despite being involved in a bitter struggle with its chief, Sanalla.⁵² Around the same time, Bahroun was among the largest recipients when Dabeiba distributed an overall LYD 100 million (around USD 20 million at the time) to buy the loyalty of a handful of armed groups in the greater Tripoli area.⁵³ Meanwhile, Ben Rajab benefited from his close ties with the Central Bank governor al-Siddiq al-Kabir, who had emerged as a key ally of Dabeiba, to mobilize government funding for Brigade 52.⁵⁴

The Buzriba brothers themselves used their new institutional umbrella, the SSA, to gain greater access to funding and boost their share of the region's counter-migration business. Around mid-2021, they opened an SSA migrant detention centre in the Maya district, seeking a clean reputational slate, since the Nasr detention centre at the refinery was no longer officially recognized by the government and had long been discredited by the UN sanctions against Milad and Kashlaf. The new detention centre, established in the dilapidated warehouses of a former pharmaceutical company, was in an area controlled by the Warshafana militia leader Muammar al-Dhawi. The latter had, for some time, emerged as a close ally of the Buzribas, and now also manned the Bridge 27 checkpoint on the coastal road. Together with the opening of the centre, SSA patrol boats began intercepting migrants and surrendering them to the Maya detention centre (Horsley and Gerken, 2022; UNSC, 2022, p. 117).

Political rivalries over access to state funding combined with struggles over control of territory fuelled a gradual escalation of violence. The Buzribas' expansion through the SSA prompted Bahroun and Leheb to ally against them—a move that began with clashes between Bahroun and two Buzriba allies outside of Zawiya. In June 2021, Bahroun's and Leheb's forces attacked Mohamed Barka ('al-Shalfuh'), the dominant militia leader in Ajeilat, who played a key role in the local smuggling economy and was at the time allied with the Buzribas. The clashes were reportedly triggered by a drug shipment seized by Barka. Defeated, Barka withdrew to his Buzriba allies in Abu Surra, while Bahroun and Leheb extended their dominance over Ajeilat.⁵⁵ In late July and early August, Bahroun repeatedly clashed with Dhawi over control of the Bridge 27 checkpoint (Akhbar Libya 24, 2021; Hadiya, 2021). In Zawiya itself, intermittent confrontations began in July between the Kabowat—an Awlad Sagr militia in the Harsha area that was at the time allied with Bahroun and Leheb—and the Buzribas' ally Kashlaf at the refinery (Al-Hufi, 2021). The same parties fought again in October, causing damage to the refinery complex.⁵⁶ Bahroun's and the Buzribas' forces also clashed directly on several occasions, including in the Juddaim district of eastern Zawiya in late August and again in November (Ghanmi, 2021a, 2021b; Horsley and Gerken, 2022).

Zawiya's main factions were therefore deeply polarized by the time a new power struggle unfolded at the national level. With the cancellation of the presidential and parliamentary elections, initially scheduled for 24 December 2021, a new alliance of actors in eastern and western Libya formed with the aim of dislodging Dabeiba:

Haftar backed the formation of a new government led by his former enemy Bashagha (Megeerisi, 2022). The opportunism at the heart of that alliance became even clearer in the way it reshaped political alignments in Zawiya.

Bashagha needed support from armed groups in and around the capital in order to take power. To this end, he mobilized the backing of the very groups he had denounced as criminals when he was interior minister: the Buzribas in Zawiya; their ally Dhawi in Warshafana; and the Nawasi Battalion and Kikli in Tripoli. Kikli, however, turned against Bashagha when the latter chose Essam Buzriba—Ali and Hassan’s older brother—as interior minister, thereby ignoring Kikli’s demand that the post should go to the Zintani militia leader, Emad al-Trabelsi (Lacher, 2023a). Kikli immediately proceeded to order the closure of the Maya migrant detention centre, and cut off Hassan Buzriba’s group from SSA salaries; as a result, the number of detainees in the Maya detention centre declined, as detainees were increasingly able to pay for their release.⁵⁷

Bahroun and Ben Rajab, who had been on good terms with Bashagha while he was at loggerheads with the Buzribas, now both staunchly opposed Bashagha.⁵⁸ Bahroun, in particular, became a key figure in a new alliance of militia leaders who supported Dabeiba.⁵⁹ Bahroun’s growing dominance in Zawiya, thanks to Dabeiba’s financial backing, transformed Leheb into Bahroun’s bitter enemy: Leheb had previously allied with Bahroun against the Buzribas, but joined the latter’s pro-Bashagha camp in the spring of 2022.⁶⁰ The irony of this shift was even starker when considering that Bahroun had been among the allies of the Buzribas when he fought with Hnesh between 2015 and 2017, whereas Leheb had been their common enemy, as he had supported Khadrawi.

Conflicts and alignments in Zawiya were therefore neither a matter of ‘historic tribal divisions between Awlad Bu Hmeira and Awlad Saqr’ (UNSC, 2017, p. 103), nor one of ‘deep ideological enmity’ between the Awlad Buhmeira and supposed Muslim Brotherhood-aligned factions (Horsley and Gerken, 2022, p. 39). In fact, none of the main armed factions could be considered as aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. Rather, the constantly changing alliances appeared to be defined by the shifting balance of power, driven by militias’ evolving access to funding, as groups allied against ascendant factions—which they perceived as growing threats (Christia, 2012).

Throughout the first half of 2022, Bashagha and Dabeiba competed for the backing of Tripolitania’s armed groups, leading to the emergence of two opposing coalitions. Yet, remarkably, the main armed factions in Zawiya largely avoided direct confrontations among themselves, despite being key components in each of the two camps. In March, forces backing Bashagha made a first unsuccessful attempt to enter Tripoli, with Dhawi’s and the Buzribas’ forces deploying at Bridge 27, but were deterred by the mobilization of Ben Rajab’s Brigade 52 at Janzur’s western end.⁶¹ In early May, forces associated with Bahroun and the Buzribas briefly fought in Zawiya (Al-Quds al-Arabi, 2022); however, later that month, they avoided a direct clash after again mobilizing

at Janzur’s western end, during Bashagha’s second failed attempt to take power in Tripoli.⁶² In July, after Dabeiba appointed Farhat Bengdara as the new NOC chairman based on a deal with Haftar, a big convoy of fighters from Leheb’s, Kashlaf’s, and other Zawiyen groups moved into Tripoli, attempting to prevent Bengdara from taking office. Ben Rajab’s Brigade 52 let them pass, and they went on to stop in western Tripoli; Dabeiba’s emissaries eventually negotiated their withdrawal, reportedly for a payment of millions of dinars.⁶³

The violent denouement finally came in August, when Kikli and the Deterrence Apparatus (formerly the Special Deterrence Force) moved against Bashagha’s allies in Tripoli. GNU drone strikes—almost certainly carried out with Turkish approval and assistance—targeted the forces of the Zintani commander, Usama al-Juwaili, at the 7 April base, as well as Dhawi’s and the Buzribas’ forces at Bridge 27, compelling them to withdraw. This dealt a decisive blow to the pro-Bashagha camp, and allowed Ben Rajab to deploy his forces along the entire stretch of the coastal road between Janzur and Zawiya.⁶⁴

A security crisis without catharsis (2022–23)

While the Buzribas, Dhawi, and Leheb suffered an important defeat in August 2022, they nevertheless held on to most of their positions, preventing the pro-Dabeiba camp from gaining overall control. Since early 2022, Leheb’s Sila’ Battalion had a new institutional umbrella as Brigade 103. Just like Ben Rajab’s Brigade 52, the brigade reported to the Western Coastal Military Region, whose commander was former GNA defence minister Salaheddin al-Namrush. As Brigade 103, Leheb’s forces manned several checkpoints between Zawiya and the Tunisian border. Moreover, Ben Rajab had made clear that, while he would oppose Bashagha’s takeover, he was not a staunch supporter of Dabeiba; indeed, in the spring of 2022, he had attempted to broker an agreement between the two opposing camps on a new government to replace both Bashagha and Dabeiba.⁶⁵

In this tenuous balance of power, recurrent but short-lived clashes in residential neighbourhoods regularly caused civilian casualties. The four leading actors, however, continued to avoid direct, major confrontations among themselves. Instead, these clashes generally opposed smaller armed groups and gangs rumoured to be supported by one or another of the main actors. In September 2022, two children were killed in clashes between Leheb and Mohamed al-Sifao, a well-known drug trader who had recently gained an official capacity as leader of a force for Zawiya’s police directorate.⁶⁶ Sifao was widely believed to have Bahroun’s backing. Lieutenants of Kashlaf and Bahroun clashed in December 2022—reportedly over a hashish shipment—and again in February 2023.⁶⁷ That month, two local armed groups fought in the Shurafa’

neighbourhood of central Zawiya, with both sides allegedly involved in selling drugs.⁶⁸ In early April, Bahroun's men clashed with the Kabowat—the militia from Awlad Sagr then allied with Leheb—in the Harsha area (Sky News Arabia, 2023).

During this period, murders became increasingly frequent.⁶⁹ Most targeted young men, and while many appeared to be drug-related, or revenge killings for previous murders, others remained unexplained. The majority of interlocutors, however, saw the incidents as common criminality rather than politically motivated.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the unresolved power struggle in the city clearly contributed to its worsening security crisis. The murders provoked growing popular anger,⁷¹ as did the repeated clashes between militias, the open selling of drugs, and the fact that militia involvement in the black market for fuel meant that car fuel was not available at the official, state-subsidized price in the city.

In late March, which corresponded to the early month of Ramadan, young men from across Zawiya began organizing a youth movement that held small demonstrations in the city's central Martyrs' Square and began meeting with local officials, asking them to move to address insecurity and the fuel black market—with little success.⁷²

Tensions finally boiled over in late April 2023. The murder of Abdu Za'eet, a minor militia leader, sparked clashes between Za'eet's group and that of a certain Hazem Aweis, who was allegedly responsible for the killing. As had become common among Zawiya's armed groups, the two factions indiscriminately shelled each other's territories, killing two civilians in their home. On 26 April, a video began circulating on social media that had reportedly been found on the phone of one of Za'eet's men, and appeared to show two men from Za'eet's group—one of whom was Sudanese but had been born in Zawiya and lived there all his life—torturing a young man. Social media commentary, however, stoked popular anger by framing the incident as 'mercenaries' torturing 'Libyans', stoking popular anger.⁷³ Large protests erupted that night, with the youth movement taking the lead and beginning a permanent sit-in in Martyrs' Square. Protesters closed down the coastal road at the city's eastern and western exits, as well as the municipal council, police directorate, and refinery.

The sudden transformation of a small group of activists into a large group of protestors made it more difficult for them to agree on their demands. The core group of activists asked for 'the army'—in this case, Ben Rajab's Brigade—to deploy. But when that unit moved into the city, some protestors began throwing stones at their vehicles, claiming that Ben Rajab had Syrians under his command. These protestors were associated with Ben Rajab's rivals—Leheb and the Buzribas—and had not been part of the initial group of activists.⁷⁴ Brigade 52 withdrew immediately to avoid a confrontation.⁷⁵

The Tripoli authorities were in no position to act on the protestors' demands. Different officials in Tripoli were associated with competing actors in Zawiya. Attempts to drive

out any of the big militias in the city also risked provoking major violence, and units from outside the city were likely to face local rejection. Moreover, the most obvious response—to deploy Brigade 52—had already failed. The army’s chief of staff, Mohamed al-Haddad, met with protesters and made promises, but could do nothing more than establish a committee of various security officials, which brought no meaningful improvements. The protesters denounced government inaction and increased their pressure throughout May, with leading activists threatening to stop recognizing the GNU.⁷⁶

Compelled to act, Dabeiba ordered a campaign of drone strikes that began on 25 May and, according to the GNU, targeted locations used by drug, fuel, and migrant smugglers (AFP, 2023). Yet, the first strikes targeted one of Ali Buzriba’s properties as well as the Maya port—which the Buzribas and Dhawi used for their SSA patrol boats—suggesting that Dabeiba and Bahroun, his key ally in Zawiya, were using the anti-smuggling campaign as a cover to target their political adversaries.⁷⁷ Meshri, the Zawiyan head of the High Council of State who was by then fiercely opposed to Dabeiba, joined Ali Buzriba in denouncing the campaign as politically motivated (Al Jazeera, 2023; Al-Wasat, 2023b). Foreign embassies expressed their reservations. In Zawiya itself, however, the campaign appeared to meet with widespread approval. Many interlocutors declared themselves relieved to see the militias’ ‘technicals’ (pick-up trucks with weapon-mounting capabilities) disappear from the streets; they were also largely indifferent to the obvious bias in targets, and contemptuous of Meshri’s criticisms, pointing out that he had previously displayed little interest in Zawiya’s long-standing security crisis.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, the drone strikes appeared to become more even-handed as the campaign continued. Two days into the operation, reports spread that one of the targeted locations belonged to Mohamed al-Sifao, the drug trader allied with Bahroun. Eyewitnesses and security officials insisted, however, that Sifao had himself donated an old armoured vehicle, to make it look as if the campaign had also targeted a Bahroun ally.⁷⁹ Soon the targets widened to include smugglers’ facilities in Ajeilat, Sabratha, and Zuwara, seeming to dispel allegations of a campaign against political adversaries in Zawiya. Most strikes caused only material damage, clearly seeking to reduce the risk of a backlash from casualties. Yet on 28 May, a second strike on al-Maya port killed a lieutenant of the Buzribas and a member of Dhawi’s battalion, and injured a nephew of the Buzriba brothers.⁸⁰ Dhawi vowed a ‘fierce response’, and Ali Buzriba denounced the use of Turkish drones.⁸¹

Ten days into the drone strike campaign, the threat of a wider escalation began receding as the rhythm of the strikes gradually decelerated, and eventually stopped. Neither the Buzriba-led camp nor Bahroun and Dabeiba were strong enough to risk an all-out confrontation on the ground. Bahroun and Dabeiba could hardly initiate a ground operation without the support of Ben Rajab and Western Coastal Region Commander

Namrush—both of whom were highly critical of the drone campaign’s political tilt, and of Dabeiba’s heavy reliance on Bahroun.⁸² Indeed, Ben Rajab and Namrush brought Hassan Buzriba as well as representatives of Bahroun and Leheb together with Attorney General al-Siddiq al-Sour to agree on the arrest of suspected criminals (GOL OAG, 2023a). This move was clearly designed to bridge the divide between the two opposing camps in Zawiya and pre-empt any attempts to launch a ground operation, while also proposing a pragmatic approach towards dealing with Zawiya’s security crisis.

The results of this initiative were mixed and mostly short-lived. Black market fuel sales largely disappeared in June and July; petrol stations in Zawiya and neighbouring cities temporarily reopened, selling fuel at official prices.⁸³ But from August onwards, cities to the west of Zawiya followed by Zawiya itself witnessed the return of the black market for fuel.⁸⁴ The four leading actors initially competed with each other in displaying their willingness to cooperate with the attorney general by making arrests; by early August, the latter announced that several dozen suspects in murder cases and other serious crimes had been detained (GOL OAG, 2023b; 2023c). Nevertheless, other suspects for whom the attorney general had issued arrest warrants were declared untouchable.⁸⁵ Some of the actions that ensued were based on negotiated arrangements: Sifao, for example, was not arrested, but instead was given safe passage to transfer his arsenal and men to Tripoli, where they joined Kikli’s forces. Abdelghani ‘al-Kabo’, whom the attorney general accused of drug and fuel smuggling, was arrested—briefly triggering a violent backlash from other armed Awlad Sagr elements (Al-Wasat, 2023d; Aswat Magharibiya, 2023). But his group, the ‘Kabowat’, continued to operate in the Harsha district and, by December 2023, Leheb was negotiating al-Kabo’s release with the attorney general.⁸⁶ Murders were far less frequent in the months following the operation than they had been in 2022 and early 2023. Drug sales, however, soon resumed on the streets of Zawiya’s city centre, with local residents alleging that drug traders enjoyed Bahroun’s protection.⁸⁷

Overall, the four key actors appeared to settle for making the tenuous balance of power between themselves more sustainable. They sought to secure their own position, while sacrificing some pawns in a nod to the public pressure they were exposed to by the city’s security crisis. Meanwhile, their alignments continued to shift in the aftermath of the drone campaign. Dabeiba’s entourage reached out to Leheb, attempting to pry him away from both the Buzribas and Ben Rajab. While Leheb entered into talks to see what he could obtain from Dabeiba, he continued to maintain his ties to Dabeiba’s foes: the Buzriba brothers and the Zintani military commander, al-Juwaili.

In December 2023, the reconfiguration of alliances came into full view when Dabeiba held a public meeting with Zawiyan officials at the refinery. During that event, Dabeiba reportedly spoke at length behind closed doors with Leheb, as well as with Kashlaf and his lieutenant Walid Khammaj. On the same occasion, Dabeiba appointed Khammaj as a deputy commander in the Support Forces, a body created by Dabeiba in May

2023 to assemble armed groups across western Libya.⁸⁸ Given Kashlaf's and Khammaj's notoriety for their involvement in the illicit economy, Dabeiba's visit to the refinery stood in stark contrast to his declared enmity towards fuel smugglers just months earlier. It also drove a rift between the Nasr Battalion and its long-time patrons, the Buzriba brothers. This rift had been developing for some time, with Kashlaf reportedly resenting the Buzribas for escaping the international sanctions that had been imposed on him, and the Buzribas viewing Kashlaf as a reputational liability.⁸⁹

Dabeiba's rapprochement with Leheb and Kashlaf could hardly please Bahroun, who was on bad terms with both. Since the end of the drone campaign, Bahroun had adopted a lower profile, refraining from attempts to expand his territorial footprint; now his support became less critical to Dabeiba, who had gained other allies in Zawiya. Ben Rajab, in turn, opposed Dabeiba increasingly openly—partly as a result of deteriorating relations between Dabeiba and Central Bank governor, al-Siddiq al-Kabir, to whom Ben Rajab had close ties. As 2023 drew to a close, relations among the leading actors in Zawiya were marked by ambiguity. Several protagonists acknowledged that they were uncertain over their respective counterparts' alignment. The threat of a renewed polarization of groups into two opposing camps, however, continued to loom over their calculations.⁹⁰ ●



Across Libya, access to state resources and the mantle of legitimacy has been volatile since 2011, and in Zawiya, this was even more the case than elsewhere.”

2. Struggling over resources: The militia economy

For Zawiya’s armed groups, the city’s isolation from, and marginalization in, the governments in Tripoli during 2015 and 2018 was a formative period. Groups experienced serious disruptions in access to government funding and official status. Those with revenues from illicit activities became the dominant actors and, on this basis, benefited from significantly greater influence in state institutions from 2019 onwards. The legitimacy and budgets associated with state security institutions facilitated the expansion of armed groups that had become deeply rooted in criminal activities. Official status was a resource in itself, since it allowed armed groups to man checkpoints or operate migrant detention centres that were major sources of income. A senior military official from Zawiya summed it up: ‘The main drivers behind militia activities are fuel, migrant and drug smuggling’.⁹¹ Funding from illicit activities, in turn, enabled militia leaders to offer additional incentives to their fighters; to hire mercenaries; and to buy the cooperation of politicians, bureaucrats, and security officials. The major exception to this rule was Ben Rajab’s Brigade 52, which relied entirely on state funding and was not involved in the illicit economy.

Official status, state funding, and state capture

Across Libya, access to state resources and the mantle of legitimacy has been volatile since 2011, and in Zawiya, this was even more the case than elsewhere. In the immediate post-revolutionary period, Zawiya’s revolutionary armed groups enjoyed ample funding, though its institutional channels evolved rapidly—initially through the Zawiya Military Council, then through the Libya Shield Forces, and for a brief period in 2013 through the Libyan Revolutionaries Operations Room.⁹² With the split between two governments in 2014 and the Central Bank’s drastic budgetary cuts in 2015, state funding suddenly became much scarcer (Lacher, 2023b; Lacher and al-Idrissi, 2018). Limited salary budgets were available through the Central Security Apparatus, headed by Omar al-Khadrawi in Tripoli, with the Zawiya branch led by his brother, Mohamed Hussein al-Khadrawi.

After the advent of the GNA, cooperation with Italy on counter-migration brought new funding through the Interior Ministry’s Department for Combatting Illegal Migration (DCIM), which financed detention centres that rapidly multiplied across western coastal cities (Malakooti, 2019). As will be shown below, the migration and counter-migration businesses rapidly became closely intertwined. The coastguard, as well as the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG), offered additional conduits for salaries for Milad’s group and Khashlaf’s Nasr Battalion, though those paled in comparison with the profits to be made in fuel smuggling and the migration business. The police directorate, long headed by Col. Ali al-Lafi, provided cover and budgets to various armed groups. Most notoriously, Bahroun operated under the police directorate from 2017

onwards. Lafi, however, succeeded in striking a balance and accommodating the city's competing factions, who backed him in return. When Interior Minister Bashagha attempted to replace him in August 2020, strong opposition from Zawiya eventually compelled him to relent.⁹³

With the end of the Tripoli war, political rivalries in the capital and the new weight of Zawiya's armed groups suddenly gave the latter far greater access to official status and state funding. New bodies and units proliferated—most significantly the SSA—along with new military units, as well as the Law Enforcement Force promoted by Interior Minister Bashagha. But these new institutional umbrellas could prove fickle in the context of the intensifying power struggles—as shown by Kikli's suspension of funding to the Buzribas' SSA branches.

As Dabeiba focused on his political survival, the funds armed groups could obtain corresponded to the level of support they could offer him and the threat their defection to Bashagha would pose. This also went for the new army units, such as Brigades 52 and 103. Beyond their salary budgets, the extent to which their commanders could expand and dispense patronage primarily depended on the operating budgets, which could vary greatly and be used at discretion.⁹⁴

In the search for legitimate status and funding, militia leaders frequently changed their institutional affiliation. In June 2022, Bahroun left the police directorate's criminal investigations department and gained a new institutional cover in the GIS. A year later, Bahroun fell out with GIS head al-Ayeb and transferred to a new body set up at his own behest, the Apparatus for the Fight against Security Threats (Jihaz Mukafahat al-Taahdidat al-Amniya), which reported directly to the prime minister's office.⁹⁵ As of late 2023, that body had churned out hundreds of recruits at its bases in Sabratha, Sorman, and Tripoli, but had yet to establish any presence on the ground.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, it obtained lavish funding from Dabeiba in December 2023 (Council of Ministers, 2023).

Increasingly, however, Zawiya's most prominent militia leaders were able to gain far more from the state than recognition and funding for their units. By the time of the tug of war between Bashagha and Dabeiba, the leading figures from Zawiya had emerged as key actors on the national stage, along with other western Libyan commanders as well as Haftar's sons. Together, these militia leaders now wielded decisive influence over the distribution of government positions, as well as over whether a government could take or retain power in Tripoli. In the case of Zawiya and its surroundings, those who aspired to such influence included the Buzriba brothers—Bashagha's most powerful supporters in western Libya—and Dhawi, both of whom appointed relatives as ministers in the Bashagha government. Ben Rajab, Bahroun, and the latter's associate Manfukh, in turn, formed part of a small group of western Libyan figures who, from early 2022 onwards, repeatedly met with Haftar's sons abroad to

negotiate, even as they ensured that the Bashagha government could not take office in Tripoli.⁹⁷

The substance of western Libyan commanders' negotiations with Haftar's sons or their representatives evolved over time. While the tug of war between the two competing governments lasted, the talks explored ways to overcome the deadlock, by either agreeing an electoral framework for elections, or forming a new government.⁹⁸ Once Bashagha's final attempt at taking office had failed in August 2022, negotiations centred on a reshuffle of ministerial posts in the Dabeiba government.⁹⁹ Despite failing to achieve a consensus on the reshuffle, the parties successively reached deals on a range of other issues. These included agreements on the Tripoli government's payment of debts incurred by Haftar; the reshuffle of the board of directors of the General Electricity Company of Libya (GECOL); and an exchange of prisoners, including a fighter pilot in Haftar's forces who had been in Bahroun's custody.¹⁰⁰

Such deals showed that a select group of western Libyan commanders, among them Zawiya's leading figures, had become influential enough to get things done at the highest levels of state institutions in Tripoli, and to appoint their allies to key positions. In August 2022, for example, Manfukh's father was appointed as general manager of GECOL (Al-Wasat, 2022). This was part of a broader trend, however, towards the capture of state institutions by western Libyan militia leaders, increasingly in cooperation with their counterparts in eastern Libya: Haftar's sons.¹⁰¹

The black market for fuel

The most distinctive aspect of Zawiya's illicit economy is the city's function as a key node in the black market for fuel. The structure of this market, and the role of armed groups in it, has changed significantly since 2011; its current form therefore has to be understood as the product of its successive iterations.

From Zawiya's refinery, both imported and locally produced fuels are distributed across the entire region west of Tripoli, including the Nafusa mountains. Vehicle oil produced in Zawiya supplies the entire Libyan market. Brega Petroleum Marketing Company, which is fully owned by the NOC, operates fuel depots in Zawiya and other key hubs across Libya. Distribution is managed by four subsidiary companies of Brega—Libya Oil, al-Rahila, al-Sharara, and al-Turuq al-Sari'a. These distribution companies operate stations that should sell fuel at heavily subsidized prices set by the state. Octane-95, for example, officially costs LYD 0.15 (around USD 0.025–0.03 at 2023 black market currency prices) per litre. The resulting differential with world market prices made fuel smuggling to neighbouring countries a highly lucrative business even during the Qaddafi era. But after 2011, and particularly from 2014 onwards, the scale of fuel smuggling operations increased significantly. Prior to 2011, the

combined amount of petrol and diesel distributed from Zawiya was around 1.2 million litres per week; the weekly amount increased after 2011 and, by 2023, had reached an average of four million litres.¹⁰² Fuel stations multiplied, most of which were ghost stations that existed only on paper or were closed to the public, but sold the fuel they bought at official prices on the black market (Eaton, 2019).

The black market for fuel distributed from the Zawiya refinery developed into a large-scale, organized racket during the period of Zawiya's isolation from Tripoli, from 2015 onwards. During the first half of 2015, fuel distribution from Zawiya towards the Nafusa mountains—from where some fuel was typically smuggled on to Tunisia—was heavily disrupted by road closures, as forces from Warshafana and Zintan clashed with Libya Dawn-aligned Amazigh communities.¹⁰³ At that time, far greater amounts of fuel were distributed to Zuwara, where organized networks with international ties were using tankers to illegally sell fuel to counterparts in Italy, Malta, and beyond—most notoriously to the network led by Fahmi Khalifa (UNSC, 2016a, pp. 179–86). Given the new scale of smuggling from Zuwara, these networks had to operate in collusion with elements in the distribution companies and the refinery—where Kashlaf's Nasr Battalion had officially acted as the Support Force of the local PFG unit since July 2014, and therefore controlled all fuel trucks leaving the complex. The need for Zuwaran smugglers to strike arrangements with Kashlaf was even greater given that Kashlaf cooperated closely with coastguard officer Milad, who could intercept tankers on the sea (UNSC, 2018, pp. 210–14).

Similar arrangements straddling the PFG unit, distribution companies, and gas station owners then took root with smugglers in Nalut. Armed groups along the way, not knowing which shipments were legitimate and which ones were destined to be smuggled, began demanding payments from all fuel trucks passing through their checkpoints. This was notably the case in Bir Ayad, a key node for access to the Nafusa mountains and the Tunisian border at Wazin. In mid-2016, a PFG officer from Zintan began manning a checkpoint at Bir Ayad, where he made fuel trucks pay a toll of LYD 1,000 (around USD 230 at the time) at first, then LYD 6,000 (around USD 720 at the time) per truck by March 2017.¹⁰⁴ Multiple such checkpoints appeared along all roads from Zawiya towards the Tunisian border, including along the coastal road (UNSC, 2018, p. 206). As a consequence, the fuel was no longer available at official prices, and fuel stations had to close. According to municipal officials in the Nafusa mountains, any local attempts to clamp down on fuel smuggling triggered a complete suspension of fuel supplies from the Zawiya refinery—with some at the time explicitly blaming Kashlaf for such retaliation.¹⁰⁵

As a result, fuel was no longer only smuggled abroad, but also sold at a black market premium to local consumers. In 2017, this even became the case in Zawiya itself, although the city was home to the refinery. During 2017 and 2018, the share of the local black market—as opposed to smuggling destined for Tunisia—increased further

because Tunisian security forces policed the border more heavily.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, Fahmi Khalifa was arrested in August 2017 and his network dismantled; thereafter, fuel smuggling by sea from Zuwara devolved into multiple smaller-scale operations (UNSC, 2018, pp. 38, 42).

From Bridge 27 in Warshafana to the Tunisian border, fuel at official prices was available only in limited quantities—if at all—from mid-2017, requiring buyers to wait long hours in queues. Instead, it was sold at fluctuating prices along the road by sub-Saharan African migrants, who in turn were working for black market traders closely linked to armed groups. In February 2023, for example, 20 litres sold for around LYD 8 (around USD 1.6) in Zawiya (or LYD 0.4 (USD 0.08) per litre) and LYD 10 (USD 1.9) in Sabratha, though prices had previously been significantly higher at times, and rose again towards the end of 2023.¹⁰⁷ Fuel was therefore sold in the domestic black market at more than double the official price, and smuggled abroad for much more. With a weekly supply of around four million litres, this meant that the black market for fuel distributed from Zawiya was worth at least LYD 310 million (around USD 60 million at 2023 prices) per year, and likely multiple times that.

Arrangements between the armed groups controlling these flows constantly evolved, as did the routes, and attempts to renegotiate arrangements regularly provoked conflict. From October 2017 onwards, fuel destined for the border area at Regdalein and Zuwara could no longer move along the coast, since Sabratha had been taken over by forces that were de facto loyal to Haftar. Forced to circumvent Sabratha via Bir Ghanem, fuel trucks provided a boon to Trabelsi, whose force manned a checkpoint there.¹⁰⁸ Later, in December 2017, Kashlaf reportedly prevented trucks from leaving the refinery, in an apparent dispute over the distribution of profits. That quarrel was solved by negotiations led by Ali Buzriba the following month.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, Kashlaf tightened his control over the refinery by repeatedly resorting to violence, sending men to beat up managers or vandalize their offices.¹¹⁰

Another dispute illustrates how armed groups were infiltrating the distribution companies. Throughout 2018, the engine oil produced at the refinery could not be distributed, as competing criminal networks associated with armed groups in and around Zawiya disagreed on how to split the substantial profits to be reaped by selling it on the black market. A kilogram of engine oil cost LYD 2 (around USD 0.3 at the time) officially, but sold for more than ten times that price on the black market. By November 2018, the amount stored in the refinery had reportedly reached one million kilograms, and production had to be suspended. The armed groups disputing each other's right to sell the oil had helped set up competing boards of Brega's Sharara subsidiary: Kashlaf had backed the registration of a Sharara administration in Zawiya; the head of the Fursan Janzur militia, Naji Gneidi, controlled the administration based at the company's original headquarters in Janzur; Kikli had another Sharara administration registered in Abu Salim; and the Salafist-leaning Criminal Investigations Department

in Zawiya's Mutrid district reportedly backed a fourth administration.¹¹¹ The Tripoli war—which caused the flight of Gneidi, the dismantling of the Mutrid Criminal Investigations Department, and a convergence of interests between Kashlaf and Kikli—then allowed for the dispute to be resolved and production to resume (Sada, 2020).

Over time, then, tight networks formed that straddled armed groups, black market traders, and the management of the distribution companies. Establishing responsibility for black market sales was increasingly difficult, since the distribution companies' sales to gas stations all had legitimate paperwork; at times, fuel would also change hands several times before ending up in the hands of black market traders.¹¹² The attorney general occasionally tried to contain the phenomenon by prosecuting gas station owners who were not selling the fuel they had received to the public (LANA, 2022; Libya al-Ahrar, 2019). But these efforts had no lasting impact. The Zuwara area saw a resurgence in fuel smuggling by sea; one of the illegal storage facilities hit by GNU drone strikes in May and June 2023 reportedly held two million litres of petrol.¹¹³ The strikes targeted fuel smuggling locations across western coastal cities, and caused fuel sellers to vanish from the streets overnight as black market traders chose to lay low. After an interval of around a week, gas stations began reopening to sell fuel at the official price, though not yet in quantities sufficient to satisfy demand.¹¹⁴ By August, however, the quantities of fuel available at the official price began decreasing again in cities west of Zawiya, and black market sales resumed, including in Zawiya itself eventually.¹¹⁵ The black market for fuel therefore remains a key feature of Zawiya's militia economy at the time of writing.

Migration and counter-migration

The Libyan economy has long been, and remains, reliant on labour migrants for most manual and many skilled jobs. Additionally, in 2014, Libya became a key transit country for migrants and refugees seeking to reach Europe. Prior to 2022, virtually all departures from Libya took place along the country's western coast, from Misrata to the Tunisian border. In the absence of central authority, these flows have created a business of coercion centred around the protection and extortion of transiting migrants, as well as rent-seeking in the context of counter-migration; all three types of profit-making schemes are closely linked, and are often carried out by the same armed actors.

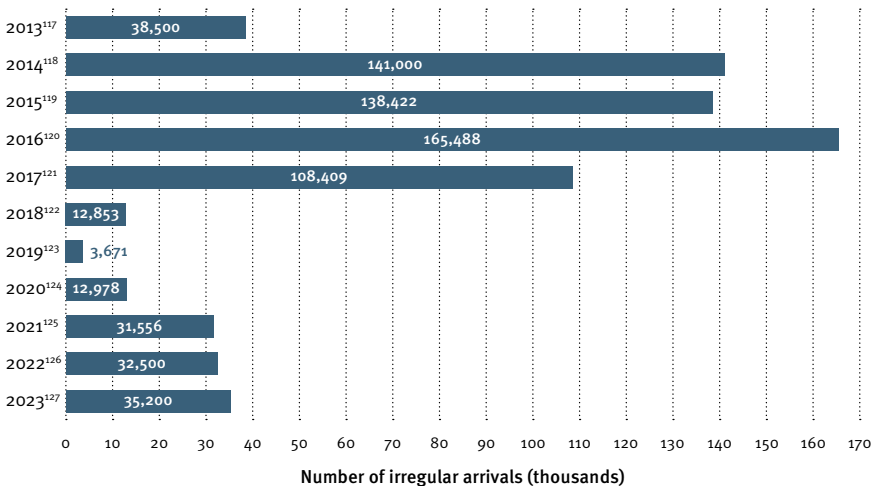
Zawiya's business of coercion in counter-migration began with the appointment of Milad ('al-Bija') as a coastguard officer in late 2014, at a time when Zuwara was the primary departure point of migrants along the western coast (UNSC, 2018, p. 211). In late 2015, Zuwara closed as a departure point owing to a local clamp-down, prompting smugglers to move to Sabratha, Sorman, and western Zawiya (Micallef, 2017). At

this point, Milad’s close associate Kashlaf, the head of the PFG Support Force at the Zawiya refinery, opened the Nasr detention centre in the refinery, and Milad began intercepting increasing numbers of migrants on the sea (Malakooti, 2019). Milad’s coastguard unit in Zawiya reportedly intercepted some boats, while allowing those run by smugglers who had struck arrangements with the coastguard to pass (Amnesty International, 2017; Raghavan, 2017). The Nasr detention centre, which gained the status of a legitimate DCIM facility in April 2016, became notorious for horrific conditions, torture, sexual slavery, and the extortion of migrants in exchange for their release—as did a second detention centre in the city’s Abu Issa district (Amnesty International, 2017; UNSC, 2017, p. 133).

With the GNA cooperating with Italy and the European Union (EU) on counter-migration from 2016 onwards, actors across western Libyan coastal cities shifted towards the anti-migration business. In early 2017, the Criminal Investigations Department in Mutrid shut down migrant smuggling operations in the districts. In June, the leading migrant smuggler in Sabratha, Ahmed al-Dabbashi, as well as the Milad–Kashlaf–Buzriba network in Zawiya began cooperating on stopping departures (Micallef and Reitano, 2017). Arrivals to Italy from Libya collapsed instantaneously, and would only begin to recover in 2021 (see Figure 1).

While counter-migration did not offer the same profits as migrant smuggling, it did promise a politically savvy and financially lucrative survival strategy. Operating detention centres under the Interior Ministry’s DCIM provided official legitimacy, state salaries, and opportunities for embezzlement by overcharging on catering contracts; moreover, migrants held in the centres could be hired out to employers for forced

Figure 1 Irregular migrant arrivals to Italy from western Libya¹¹⁶



labour, sold to other detention centres or smugglers, or released against payments (Amnesty International, 2017; Malakooti, 2019). The coastguard offered access to international contacts; recognition; and support in the form of boats, training, and intelligence supplied by Italy and the EU. Overall, involvement in counter-migration activities appeared to enable armed groups to convert themselves into legitimate actors whose actions enjoyed the support of European governments. In the words of a close associate of Bahroun, ‘European support allowed migrant smugglers to become legitimate several years ago. Today, they control migrant flows to clear themselves in front of the attorney general and the international community.’¹²⁸

This survival strategy has not always worked out for the actors involved. Nevertheless, it has continued to define the counter-migration business in Zawiya. Arrivals to Italy from the area remained low despite the constantly changing constellation of actors. In October 2017, Sabratha was taken over by pro-Haftar forces, prompting Dabbashi to seek refuge with his allies in Zawiya. The DCIM issued orders to close the Abu Issa and Nasr detention centres following reports of abuses, in 2017 and April 2018, respectively—though both centres remained open (Malakooti, 2019). Dabbashi, Kashlaf, and Milad were sanctioned by the UN Security Council in June 2018. That same month, Milad was suspended from his post (though Kashlaf was not), but he remained *de facto* in charge of the Zawiya coastguard unit. In interviews with the author in November 2018, Kashlaf and Milad showed themselves eager to restore their international reputation by doubling down on counter-migration efforts.¹²⁹ That is precisely what Milad did when he was released and rehabilitated in April 2021, after several months of detention. He stepped up interceptions and later gained a leading position at the Naval Academy in Janzur, thereby distancing himself from the migration business (Horsley and Gerken, 2022, pp. 36–37).

Meanwhile, conditions in the Nasr detention centre improved, and the more pernicious aspects of its business model receded (Malakooti, 2019, p. 43). But this could not restore Kashlaf’s reputation. With the creation of the SSA in early 2021, the Buzribaled network saw an opportunity to whitewash its counter-migration business. The Buzribas and Dhawi pursued this goal by running maritime patrols and opening a detention centre under the SSA (Horsley and Gerken, 2022). Hassan Buzriba acknowledged as much in an interview with the author: ‘Al-Bija [Milad] has a bad reputation, he’s a burnt figure. We [the SSA], by contrast, had a clean reputation. It’s the same with al-Qsab [Kashlaf]. He’s trying to better himself, to improve his reputation, to get out of the sanctions. But we don’t work together in business.’¹³⁰ The SSA failed, however, to obtain international support for its Maya detention centre—partly due to reports of endemic violence and disastrous conditions at the centre, and partly because SSA commander Kikli declared it closed in early 2022.

International standing was indeed a key concern of counter-migration, driven by the heavy European focus on it. As a close associate of Bahroun emphasized, Bahroun

regularly received an Italian intelligence officer who congratulated him on the efficient anti-migration efforts in Zawiya.¹³¹ Hassan Buzriba claimed that the SSA's Maya detention centre had maintained relations with many foreign embassies to return migrants to their countries of origin, including Bangladesh, Egypt, and Morocco. He also declared that the SSA's maritime patrols had received coordinates from Italian officers through the Libyan Joint Rescue Coordination Centre in Tripoli.¹³² Whether these claims were accurate or not, they showed that Buzriba and others saw international approval as integral to their business model. More specifically, Buzriba's insistence on international support for the SSA was a reaction to the GNU's claims that the SSA's boats had been used in smuggling, and were therefore targeted in drone strikes.

While the SSA's counter-migration efforts had clearly been a for-profit enterprise, its business model evolved due to the Buzribas' and Dhawi's changing fortunes. Initially, the SSA had focused on assembling several thousand detainees at the centre, in order to obtain government budgets as well as support from the EU, Italy, and international organizations. To this end, the Buzribas had bought patrol boats in Europe and Turkey, not only using the SSA budget but also mobilizing some funds themselves, suggesting that this was an investment.¹³³ In 2022, it was extremely difficult for detainees to obtain their release, even by paying ransoms. As the centre failed to gain foreign backing and lost the Tripoli government's recognition, however, it became easier for detainees to pay for their release.¹³⁴ Moreover, sub-Saharan African detainees were sent to detention centres in southern Libya ahead of being expelled; such transfers often involved payments, since southern detention centres would sell migrants as forced labour (Malakooti, 2019, p. 44). Finally, the SSA's business model also involved a measure of collusion with migrant smugglers. Militiamen with relations to both the Buzribas and migrant smugglers alleged that the former would extract payments from the latter by exploiting inside information on where and when boats were departing.¹³⁵ Even though the SSA was patrolling the entire coast up to the Tunisian border, and by 2022 most departures in the region were again taking place in Zuwara and Sabratha, it was common knowledge that migrant smugglers were also operating in Zawiya's Harsha and Mutrid districts, only a few kilometres from the refinery. In June 2023, a GNU drone strike hit a workshop of the most notorious of these smugglers, a former police officer called Haitham al-Tumi, in the Harsha district.¹³⁶

Drug smuggling

Among the different sectors of Zawiya's militia economy, drug smuggling is the most difficult to assess, since it has no legal component. Zawiya sits on two drug smuggling corridors: alcohol and Moroccan hashish move from the west and south-west into Libya—or, in the case of hashish, on to Egypt. Tramadol and other prescription drugs are imported via ports such as Misrata and al-Khoms to be either consumed

in Libya or smuggled on to Tunisia and Algeria.¹³⁷ The nearby town of Ajeilat is a key node for both routes, just as it has long been an important hub for fuel smuggling; it also increasingly serves as an assembly point for migrants before they are embarked at Zuwara or Sabratha.¹³⁸

Since 2011, competition among armed groups over the Ajeilat area has been closely linked to the profits to be made in controlling these illicit flows. Such rivalries were reportedly the driver behind repeated clashes in the town in 2012 and 2013, between local smugglers and Jamal al-Ghaeb's Libya Shield Force unit from Mutrid.¹³⁹ Security officials and battalion leaders agree that they were also a key factor in the violent expulsion of the Buzribas' ally Barka ('al-Shalfuh') from Ajeilat by Bahroun and Leheb in 2021.¹⁴⁰ In May 2023, GNU drone strikes targeted a facility of Hatem al-Fehri, who had reportedly replaced Barka as the leading drug smuggler in Ajeilat (al-Gumati, 2023a). According to a well-connected resident of neighbouring Sabratha, Fehri was not allied with any particular party in Zawiya, but had been pragmatic in dealing with the city's leading security actors.¹⁴¹

In parallel, selling drugs to smaller dealers and consumers also became a business for armed groups in Zawiya itself. Hnesh's group, from which Bahroun's group would emerge after Hnesh's death in 2017, initially formed as a hashish-selling enterprise. Under the protection of armed groups, drug and alcohol sales became increasingly open in the city, provoking the ire of local residents. Later, Sifao gained notoriety as a leading drug dealer who enjoyed official status under Zawiya's police directorate. As one security official put it, 'Sifao carved up the drug market in Zawiya. As a result, Awlad Sagr and Zuwaran drug traders no longer did any business in the city. That's why they attacked Sifao [in September 2022].'¹⁴²

Whether the main battalion leaders in Zawiya are directly involved in moving drugs remains unclear. While some interlocutors described Bahroun as the dominant actor in the regional drug trade, or suggested that the Buzribas' boats at the Maya port had been used for drug smuggling, others argued that Leheb and Bahroun were not involved themselves. Instead, they blamed individual commanders in these leaders' forces, or armed gangs that were loosely allied with, but not a formal part of, these forces.¹⁴³ Sifao, for example, was widely considered to be under Bahroun's protection at the time of his conflict with Leheb, in September 2022. In this reading, Bahroun and Leheb closed their eyes to drug smuggling by allies in order to make use of their firepower when needed.

The local geopolitics of illicit flows

The illicit flows outlined above mean that control over roads has been a key concern for Zawiyan armed groups, and the ability to man checkpoints along them critical. With

the rise of the local black market in fuel from 2016 onwards, in particular, checkpoints became a major source of income and therefore a key focus of competition over territory—a local geopolitics. Attempts by one group to obstruct the passage of a rival group—or of goods protected by that group—were a common cause of clashes between armed groups. Checkpoints by less powerful armed groups specialized in extorting vulnerable groups, such as Tunisian petty traders; in 2023, this applied for instance to the ‘najm w hilal’ (‘star and crescent’) checkpoint in Ajeilat, which was being manned by an SSA unit from Zawiya that remained allied with Leheb even while switching its formal allegiance from the Buzribas to Kikli, in order to retain access to salaries.¹⁴⁴

While patterns of control over western Libyan roads have continuously changed, one constant has been that no single actor could establish control over the entire stretch linking Tripoli to the Tunisian border. Actors along these roads therefore needed to strike deals, or at least to manage conflict among themselves.¹⁴⁵ According to one key security actor from Zawiya, ‘all the clashes are over control of the roads. Al-Far

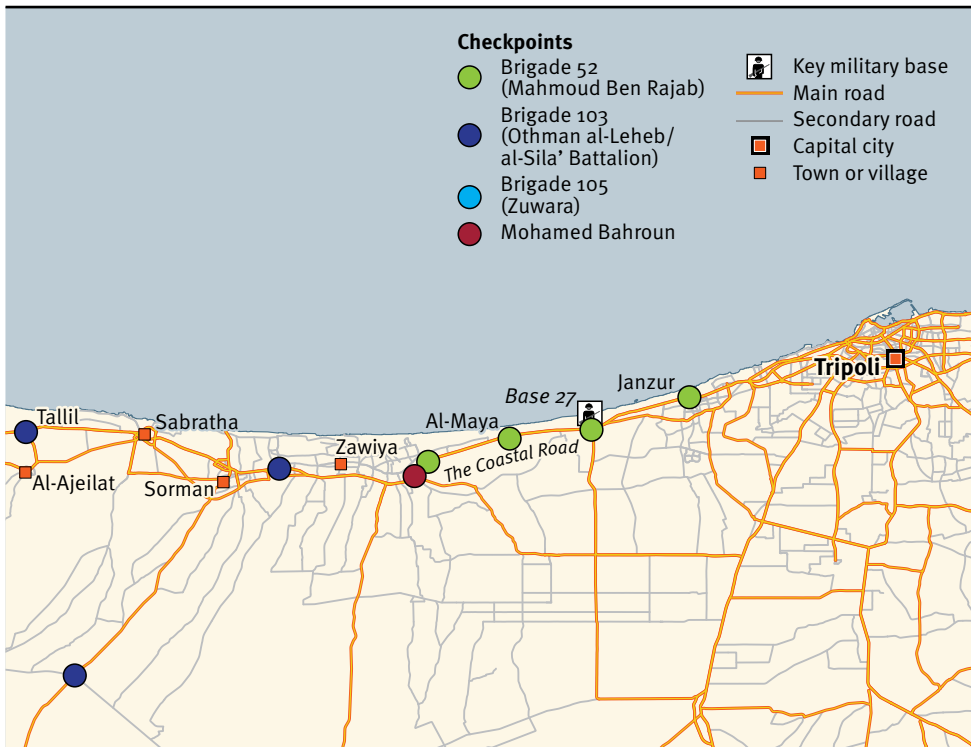
Map 1 Zawiyan groups’ checkpoints between Tripoli and the Tunisian border



[Bahroun], Buzriba and Othman [al-Leheb] are competing over petrol, migrants and pills. They fight over the checkpoints, over being able to pass them. At times, they come to terms and let each other pass. At others, they disagree and fight.¹⁴⁶ Another of the leading actors complemented this view: ‘Othman and al-Far have tried to avoid confrontation, by not stopping each other’s shipments. Othman controls much of the road, but lets al-Far’s people pass—and the other way around. If one seizes shipments, the other one will, too.’¹⁴⁷ This was confirmed by a close associate of Leheb: ‘We won’t stop al-Far’s vehicles. We don’t want problems.’¹⁴⁸

Indeed, key actors cooperated on manning checkpoints even as they found themselves on opposing political sides. By early 2022, the main checkpoints along the coastal road from Zawiya to the border crossing at Ras Jdeir were generally joint checkpoints shared by several forces.¹⁴⁹ As relations between Bahroun and Leheb deteriorated during the power struggle between the Bashagha and Dabeiba governments, Leheb compelled Bahroun’s men to withdraw from most of these checkpoints. Several of them, however, continued to be manned by the police directorates support

Source: Author



force (quwat da'm al-mudiriyat), whose unit in western Libya was in itself a power-sharing arrangement between Bahroun and Leheb—with its commander reporting to Bahroun, and his deputy to Leheb.¹⁵⁰ The checkpoint at Abu Kammash—the last checkpoint before the border crossing—was manned jointly by Leheb's Brigade 103, Ben Rajab's Brigade 52, and Brigade 105 from Zuwara (see Map 1). Leheb and Ben Rajab also jointly thwarted an attempt by Interior Minister Trabelsi in November 2023 to deploy forces to the Assa airbase at the Tunisian border, where Brigades 52 and 103 both maintained bases.¹⁵¹ The need for cooperation along the roads presumably also acted as a deterrent against all-out escalation in Zawiya itself.

Likewise, patterns of control in the city itself have remained characterized by ambiguity, which again reflected a desire to avoid open confrontation (see Map 2). Only two districts fell clearly under the control of a single group, owing to their demographic make-up—and forces external to these areas made no attempt to encroach on these two. First, Leheb controlled the areas along the road to Bir al-Ghanem—areas in which Awlad Sagr form a majority. Second, the Buzriba brothers exercised de facto authority in Abu Surra, an Awlad Buhmeira district. By contrast, Bahroun could not claim exclusive control over any extended area. Much of central Zawiya and parts of the Harsha district were not clearly under the authority of any major group. Certain smaller neighbourhoods in these districts were considered the turf of minor local militias or criminal gangs. Elsewhere, no standing armed group was in control, often because demobilized fighters who retained their weapons were expected to resist attempts by any single force to exert control over their neighbourhoods.¹⁵² ●

“Zawiya’s armed groups, such as they exist today, are the product of conditions that have continuously shifted over the past decade.”

3. Armed group–society relations

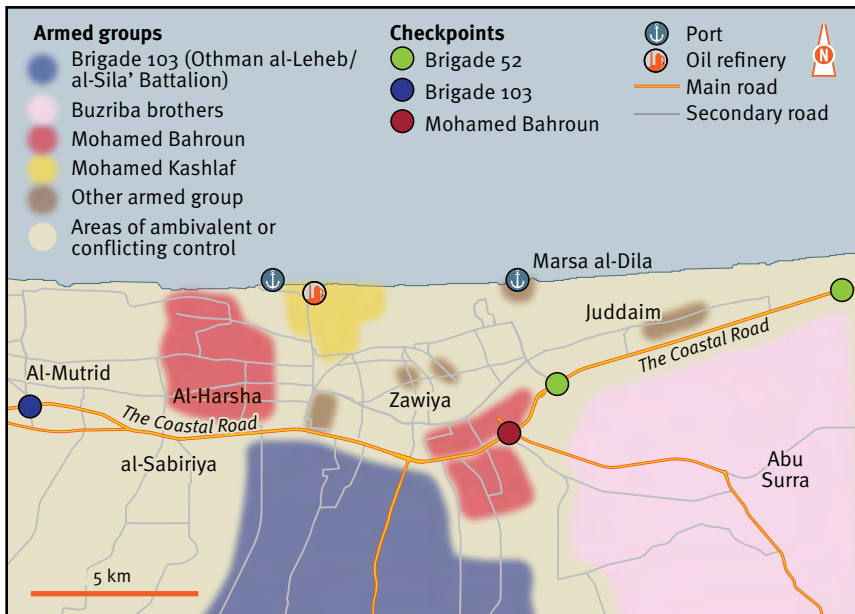
Zawiya’s armed groups, such as they exist today, are the product of conditions that have continuously shifted over the past decade: their positions towards successive local and national conflicts, their changing leadership structures, their relations with the authorities in Tripoli, and their financing models. These factors have transformed the relations between the city’s armed groups and the civilian population beyond recognition compared to 2011. Moreover, they have led to widely divergent outcomes: the city’s four principal forces today differ significantly from each other with regard to their ties with local communities.

A transformed relationship

Zawiya’s revolutionary armed groups fought for a cause in 2011 that enjoyed widespread support in the city in subsequent years, and continues to be cherished by many local opinion leaders. Yet, they did not have the deep social embeddedness of local revolutionary armed groups in Misrata and the Nafusa mountains, which had emerged in the context of their communities’ collective struggle against an external threat (Lacher, 2020). Zawiya’s revolutionaries, by contrast, had organized either outside of their community—mostly in the mountains—or as small, clandestine cells

Map 2 Patterns of control in Zawiya

Source: Author



in the city. When they took control of the city as the regime fell, many—predominantly young—men joined them for opportunistic reasons, without sharing the revolutionaries' deep commitment to the liberation struggle.

Nevertheless, the armed groups enjoyed close relations with the local community in the first years after the revolution. Many revolutionary commanders and fighters were respected members of local society and professionals who gained political or administrative positions after 2011. They also continued to exert moral authority over the armed groups that controlled abusive and criminal behaviour, at least towards residents of Zawiya. Moreover, several prominent revolutionary commanders focused on crime-fighting, and their groups acquired a reputation for religious devoutness and relative discipline.¹⁵³ According to a former revolutionary fighter, 'if a father could no longer rein in his son as he committed crimes, he would ask the Na'am Company [of Mohamed Ben Yousef] or the Faruq Battalion [of Mohamed Yousef al-Khadrawi] to arrest and keep him. People knew these groups would treat prisoners well.'¹⁵⁴

The leadership vacuum and generational change at the head of the armed groups from 2014 onwards disrupted these relationships. The reckless fighting between Hnesh and Khadrawi in the densely populated city centre over a two-year period fundamentally changed society's perception of the armed groups. Civilians' grievances against the armed groups that had sprung up in their midst were further exacerbated by the recurrent killings, the increasingly open sale of drugs and alcohol, the economic hardship provoked by the disappearance of fuel at official prices, and the recruitment of sub-Saharan African mercenaries.

By 2023, Zawiya's armed groups had come to be widely and intensely despised by the city's residents. Even former revolutionaries no longer recognized the city's armed groups as their own. 'Our groups [*jama'atna*] [. . .] actually, we should no longer call them our groups', as a religious figure and former revolutionary put it when discussing the latest clashes in the city.¹⁵⁵ Another former revolutionary fighter vented his fury towards the militias:

Most people simply hate them and fear them. There are so many *aliyat* [technicals] here, they use them as if they were their regular cars. When a technical drives by you, your first instinct is to take your distance, because they're unpredictable, they think they can permit themselves anything. Honourable fighters went back to their civilian lives after 2011, or after the Warshafana war. The young guys who now run the militias, they didn't even fight in 2011, and now they sell drugs on our street. They're a threat to my children. I fought in 2011, I lost a brother in war, in our family there are people who lost limbs. I didn't fight so these groups could rule over us. We just want anyone to establish order—one head, not several.¹⁵⁶

A prominent former revolutionary commander and long-standing security actor, when asked about his feelings about the GNU's drone strikes in the city, described a generational rift:

The criminals are all young—they're twenty years old today, meaning in 2011 they were eight years old. They don't listen to their parents. Our generation grew up in fear [of the regime]. We were persecuted for praying at dawn, even though we were not part of any organized group. But the young guys, they live a life of thuggery [*baltagiya*], in search of money. So when these strikes came, we were happy about them. I don't care that the strikes were politically motivated—we were just happy that the technicals disappeared from the streets, at least for a while.¹⁵⁷

Militarizing politics, the economy, and the administration

With revolutionary leaders' loss of moral authority over armed groups and the generational change at the top, militias faced few barriers to extending their influence over the administration and the economy. In Misrata and the Nafusa mountains, local businessmen and politicians generally had close relations with, and influence over, armed groups—relations that went back to the common struggle in 2011. In Zawiya, such relations were far weaker, and no longer had any meaningful relevance after the changes armed groups underwent during the 2014–15 civil war.

From that period onwards, Zawiya businessmen stopped making transactions through banks in the city, fearing this would draw the attention of armed groups and expose them to extortion and kidnapping. As a result, bank branches in Zawiya perform a disproportionately small number of letter of credit transactions—Libya's standard procedure for accessing hard currency for imports.¹⁵⁸ More broadly, the city exhibits very little private sector investment—with the exception of businesses owned by militia leaders. A prime example is the Nasr Medical Centre, a shiny new clinic opened by Kashlaf in 2019, in the presence of Ali Buzriba and Zawiya's mayor (Sada, 2019). A water bottling company that began operating in 2019 in the Abu Surra area is reportedly owned by Milad. Of course, their state salaries could hardly explain their ability to make such substantial investments. Bahroun, in turn, is said to own cleaning companies that have contracts with public bodies in the city.¹⁵⁹

The administration itself was subservient to the armed groups. The municipal council of central Zawiya, elected in May 2022, has been docile in the face of armed groups' excesses. The mayor, Jamal Bhar, has gained a reputation for downplaying or denying problems caused by militia activity outright, apparently fearing a backlash from the armed groups more than the scorn of his constituents.¹⁶⁰ In May 2022, he dis-

missed clashes between Bahroun and Buzriba as ‘a quarrel’, and the fighting between Bahroun and the Kabowat in April 2023 as ‘a simple matter [. . .] between families’, and declared the security situation in Zawiya otherwise ‘stable’. The Zawiya police chief, Ali al-Lafi, known for allowing militia leaders and notorious criminals to operate under the city’s police department, praised Zawiya’s armed groups in a meeting with the author in November 2022, calling them ‘cleaner and more honourable’ than its politicians.¹⁶¹ Both the municipal council and the police directorate would be key targets of the protesters’ ire in May 2023. Around the same time, the Buzriba brothers and Leheb successfully lobbied the parallel, eastern-based government to establish new municipalities that they would directly control: Abu Surra and Middle Zawiya (Zawiya al-Wasat). Persuading the eastern-based government to issue such a decree was easy, since its minister of local government was a relative of the Buzribas’ close ally al-Dhawi. The far greater challenge, however, would be to get the new municipalities recognized in Tripoli, and thereby gain easier access to funding. While Leheb attempted to obtain this recognition from Dabeiba as part of his rapprochement, the Buzribas were well aware that this was next to impossible for Abu Surra. Instead, they staged municipal elections in which only their list of candidates was voted on, and their new municipal council was sworn in by the eastern-based government in September 2023.¹⁶²

Public services were deeply affected by the dominance of the armed groups. By 2022, the hospital was led by Usama Ali Sarkaz, who before then had worked with Ali al-Lafi at the police directorate and lauded Bahroun for providing security in central Zawiya.¹⁶³ The university administration had split in two, with one part located in Awlad Sagr territory in southern Zawiya, under the influence of Leheb’s group, and another part in the city centre, in Bahroun’s sphere of influence. According to a professor at the university, the split had occurred ‘because there was money to be embezzled’, with appointments being ‘based on tribal criteria’, given that most armed groups recruited from particular tribal constituencies.¹⁶⁴ Bahroun’s rise was cemented with his election as president of Zawiya’s football team, the Olympic Club, in November 2021 (Rimessa, 2021).

Zawiyani politicians such as Meshri (president of the High Council of State from 2018 to August 2023) or Abdallah al-Lafi (vice-president of the Presidency Council since 2021) played no meaningful role in resolving tensions between the city’s armed groups. Instead, they sought to gain the groups’ support by facilitating their access to funds and positions. An interlocutor with direct insight into these relations offered the following analysis: ‘In Misrata, politicians are the leaders, and armed groups follow. In Zawiya, the armed groups are independent. Politicians such as Meshri, Dabeiba, Bashagha try to buy their loyalties. But the armed groups do what they want.’¹⁶⁵ By 2022, power relations between Zawiyani politicians and the armed groups had been inverted. Commanders such as Bahroun and Ben Rajab would meet with Meshri to pressure him

to abandon his ‘political games’—as a close associate of Bahroun put it—and would take matters into their own hands, by negotiating directly with Haftar’s sons.¹⁶⁶

Finally, the tribal notables claiming to mediate in the city’s conflicts at best exerted little influence and at worst became a respectable face for armed groups. An activist in the 2023 civilian mobilization effort heaped ridicule on them: ‘We tried their rice and *bazin* [a western Libyan dish] sessions for years. It’s just empty talk. Nonsense.’¹⁶⁷ A professor at the university concurred: ‘The conflicts in the city are not social conflicts. The youth are influenced by social media, not by what the elders are saying. The notables have no role at all, they’re just fronts for armed groups.’¹⁶⁸ And a senior security official, when asked about approaches to containing the black market for fuel, said: ‘The *a’yan* [notables] can’t do anything about fuel smuggling. They are afraid, and content if militia leaders give them a car as a present.’¹⁶⁹

Four distinct models

The four primary protagonists in the city since 2020 represented four distinct models of armed groups’ relations with society. Three of them—Bahroun’s, the Buzribas’, and Leheb’s forces—were deeply involved in the region’s illicit economy, and their competition over territory was a function of their rivalry over control of illicit activities. Their violent confrontations were either a direct result of such competition, or an outcome of their intricate relationships with smaller criminal gangs. Groups associated with these three forces were reputed to be extorting payments at checkpoints they controlled, although the official part of Leheb’s forces—Brigade 103—did so less than others.¹⁷⁰ Ben Rajab’s Brigade 52, by contrast, kept its distance from the illicit economy and refrained from attempting to exert control over particular districts of the city, instead confining itself to manning checkpoints along the coastal road. The Brigade 52 soldiers manning checkpoints displayed discipline, and were known not to extort payments. Brigade 52’s finances were based exclusively on state funding.

The Buzribas’ and Leheb’s forces, moreover, were rooted in two specific local communities: the Awlad Buhmeira and the Awlad Sagr, respectively. Both the Buzribas and Leheb described themselves as defenders of their community’s interests, while simultaneously insisting that they sought to operate under state authority. Neither could expand into each other’s heartland, where they would be seen as outside forces.

Nevertheless, the two forces’ relationship with their communities differed. The Buzribas had long been a prominent family among the Awlad Buhmeira. The Buzriba brothers’ father, Mohamed, had been in the Qaddafi regime’s Popular Social Committees, and several of the brothers had embarked on careers in the regime’s administration before 2011. Ali Buzriba had been head of the student union at Zawiya university when the revolution broke out.¹⁷¹ Ten years on, the Buzribas’ power structure was fundamentally

paternalistic and conservative in nature: they were strongmen who used their political influence; military force; and control over the illicit economy to provide jobs, services, and security to their community, legitimating their rule through their traditional leadership role. On a visit in June 2023, the Awlad Buhmeira's Abu Surra area featured newly paved roads, paid for by the eastern-based government, in which Essam Buzriba was interior minister. The Buzribas also liked to organize conspicuous displays of wealth, including large social gatherings at one of their many properties. Hassan Buzriba said, '[t]here is no fuel smuggling and no drug smuggling in Abu Surra. We are a tribal area, one family.'¹⁷²

Leheb, on the other hand, was a self-made man who owed his leadership to his revolutionary legitimacy and bravery on the battlefield, evident in the eye he lost in the 2014–15 civil war. Former revolutionaries who had become disillusioned with Zawiya's armed groups nevertheless expressed their respect for Leheb, arguing that he had fallen under the bad influence of his entourage.¹⁷³ Leheb, too, described himself as a defender of his tribe, the Awlad Sagr, whom he saw as being discriminated against by other components of Zawiyan society. (Indeed, Zawiyan interlocutors often argued that Awlad Sagr were particularly prone to smuggling and other criminal activity, having historically lacked prominent, educated figures.) According to Leheb, 'I'm a very social person, in touch with the people. I go to many social gatherings, I sit down with old people, with everyone.' He also expressed reluctance to arrest and surrender Awlad Sagr suspects from his tribe to the attorney general, arguing that this would cause him problems in his tribe.¹⁷⁴ And where the Buzribas would have their pictures taken with expensive clothes, cars, and yachts, Leheb drove around in a small, dirty car.¹⁷⁵

While Bahroun's and Ben Rajab's forces, by contrast, were not associated with any particular tribal constituency, their make-up could not have been more different otherwise. Ben Rajab was a charismatic leader who could point to his revolutionary credentials and notable role in thwarting Haftar's attempt to reach Tripoli in April 2019. His Brigade 52 was one of several units set up after the Tripoli war with Turkish support, thus institutionalizing the relationships Turkey had developed during the war (Badi and Al-Jabassini, 2023). The unit gained renown for its discipline and, following a recent trend among Libyan armed groups, sought to distinguish itself as a security provider (Lacher, 2023b). It had also maintained impartiality in clashes in Zawiya since 2020—though some interlocutors would make (unsubstantiated) claims that it covertly backed one side or another. Contrary to Bahroun, moreover, Ben Rajab maintained a distance from Dabeiba during the two rival prime ministers' power struggle, even as he staunchly opposed Bashagha. Ben Rajab's relationships with Turkish officers may partly account for his ability to chart his own path—although Ben Rajab himself played down the extent to which he continued to benefit from Turkish support, such as training.¹⁷⁶ In Zawiya, his popularity was somewhat diminished by recurrent but unproven rumours that he continued to use Syrian mercenaries—rumours that persisted not least

because Brigade 52's headquarters were located right next to the Sidi Bilal base in Janzur, which hosted Syrian fighters and flew a Turkish flag.¹⁷⁷

Finally, Bahroun's group had emerged out of Ibrahim Hnesh's drug smuggling business, but had significantly broadened its base since then by integrating gangs from across Zawiya. Bahroun himself was not from any of Zawiya's main tribes; his family originally hailed from the southern city of Sabha. Since the end of the Tripoli war, he had focused on gaining a reputation for crime-fighting, particularly in central Zawiya, with partial success. But he owed his rise from 2021 onwards primarily to his privileged access to state funds and his influence in state institutions—a function of his close alliance with Dabeiba as the latter tried to ward off challenges to his rule. Like the Buzribas and Leheb, following the June 2023 campaign of drone strikes Bahroun displayed his readiness to cooperate with the attorney general by arresting suspects, in order to ward off pressure; however, his forces remained fundamentally rooted in the illicit economy, without enjoying the communal embeddedness that provided cohesion to Leheb's and the Buzribas' forces. According to one resident, 'al-Far's group is held together only by him. If he is killed, his entire group will disintegrate.'¹⁷⁸ Hassan Buzriba, too, perceived the make-up of Bahroun's forces as a weakness: 'Without the drone strikes, the balance of power would be in our favour, because we are tribal forces. We and Othman [al-Leheb], we defend our land, whereas they [Bahroun] are out there for the money. So we are stronger.'¹⁷⁹ ●

“ Having initially enjoyed widespread local support, Zawiya’s armed groups have become increasingly predatory and abusive over the years.”

4. Conclusion

Having initially enjoyed widespread local support, Zawiya's armed groups have become increasingly predatory and abusive over the years. Their post-2011 trajectory was defined by the combination of two developments: first, a crisis of leadership that began in 2014, and accelerated a generational change among militia leaders, bringing to the fore young men who had been socialized by violence since 2011; and second, their loss of political influence and access to state funds during the same period, promoting a shift towards illicit economic activities. By the time the groups had regained their sway over the balance of power in Tripoli, these factors had fundamentally reshaped the make-up of Zawiya's armed groups, as well as their relations with local society. They have come to be widely hated among the civilian population from which they originally emerged.

For Zawiya's residents, the consequences of this evolution have been dire. For years, life in the city has become unpredictable, with clashes liable to erupt at any moment, trapping civilians in crossfire, and routinely involving indiscriminate shelling. Killings have become common, and the motives behind them often remain obscure. Public services—including education, healthcare, and the provision of fuel at heavily subsidized prices—have fallen prey to armed groups' profit-making schemes.

But for all the endemic violence this situation entails, Zawiya has never seen an all-out war among its main forces. Clashes have generally been intermittent—with most ending after only a few hours, and no single confrontation causing a large number of casualties. Even the Hnesh–Khadrawi war was a series of clashes that rarely lasted longer than a few days. Local mediation efforts are hardly a sufficient explanation for this fact, given the clear lack of civilian influence over armed groups.

Two aspects provide clues to this puzzle. First, the rivalries between Zawiya's armed groups drive constantly shifting coalitions that maintain a balance of power. Factions fearing the dominance of any single actor ally with that actor's other adversaries to ensure their survival. To gain overall supremacy is all the more difficult as several of the biggest forces are rooted in particular communities, making any attempt to dislodge them and take their place particularly costly. None of the leading actors seem to believe that they could crush any of their principal rivals outright. No force, for example, has ever seriously challenged Kashlaf's control of the refinery—which, after all, is considered to be located in Awlad Buhmeira territory. Zawiya's armed groups appear to be primarily driven by a combination of materialist motives and fear—of being vanquished and defenceless, or being one day brought to justice. While this motivation is sufficient to drive recurrent clashes that constantly re-establish a balance of power, it is insufficient to justify a costly all-out war.

Second, since Zawiyan groups re-emerged in 2020 to project their influence across the coastal strip from Tripoli to the Tunisian border, they have had to cooperate with each other to operate in that space. Being able to man checkpoints and support allies across the region is key to their ability to profit from illicit economic flows by offering

protection or threatening interception. All-out confrontation in Zawiya would jeopardize cooperation along the roads, and therefore disrupt vital cash flows. Conversely, should any single actor attempt to monopolize control over the roads, this could raise the risk of major escalation within the city itself.

These aspects help explain why power relations in Zawiya have tended towards equilibrium even amid endemic conflict. The role of the authorities in Tripoli in this context has generally been to strengthen particular actors over others, not only contributing to continuous realignments in search of a balance of power, but also allowing a handful of leaders to consolidate their power over time. More recently, the four big players have displayed goodwill by cooperating—with the Western Coastal Military Region and the attorney general, rather than with Prime Minister Dabeiba—in the arrest and handover of suspects. This was a temporary measure aimed at warding off pressure from popular mobilization, and it is unlikely that these groups can keep their rivalries in check for long. But it also fits into a longer-term trend in which Libyan armed groups have sought to become legitimate, respectable entities, while their predatory activities become less visible, rather than less central to their *raison d'être* (Lacher, 2023c). Improving their reputation by sacrificing some of their more notorious criminal allies is likely to help Zawiyian militias cement their power further, instead of weakening them—particularly if it helps to thwart future popular mobilization. More broadly, the dominant role established by Zawiya's militia leaders across politics, the economy, and the administration appears set to prevail in the long term—unless sustained civilian mobilization limits their power. ●

Endnotes

- 1 A comparative study of armed groups in Misrata, Zawiya, and Zintan was published as this Report was being edited (Eaton, 2023). Its analysis on Zawiya, however, contains numerous factual inaccuracies.
- 2 For comparative analyses of Libyan armed groups, their financing models, and their relationships with local communities, see McQuinn (2012); Lacher (2020); Eaton et al. (2020); and Badi (2020).
- 3 Author interviews with former revolutionary fighters and commanders, Sabratha, Tripoli, Zawiya, and Zintan, 2016–23.
- 4 Author interview with former head of the Warriors Affairs Commission in Zawiya, Zawiya, June 2023.
- 5 Author interviews with Mohamed Kahlaf, Mahmoud Ben Rajab, Othman al-Leheb, Shaaban Hadiya, and other former revolutionary field commanders, Tripoli, Zawiya, and Istanbul, 2018, 2022, and 2023.
- 6 Author interviews with former revolutionary commanders, politicians, and academics, Tripoli and Zawiya, February and June 2023.
- 7 Author interview with Shaaban Hadiya, Istanbul, June 2022.
- 8 Author interviews with former revolutionary commanders and academics, Tripoli and Zawiya, February and June 2023.
- 9 For example, the influential TV presenter Khalil al-Hassi repeatedly claimed that Ben Rajab adhered ‘ideologically’ and ‘organizationally’ to al-Qaeda, without advancing any evidence for such accusations (218 TV, 2022).
- 10 Author interview with an LROR founding member, location withheld, June 2023; see also Lacher and Cole (2014, pp. 45–46).
- 11 Author interviews with Mahmoud Ben Rajab and Othman al-Leheb, Tripoli and Zawiya, November 2022 and February 2023, and telephone interview with Shaaban Hadiya, October 2023.
- 12 Author interview with an LROR founding member, location withheld, June 2023; see also Lacher and Cole (2014, pp. 45–48).
- 13 Author interviews with members of armed groups and local residents, Zawiya, November 2022–June 2023.
- 14 For an analysis of the violent socialization of Libya’s youth and generational change among armed groups, see Badi (2023).

- 15 Author interview with a local academic and former revolutionary, Zawiya, February 2023.
- 16 Author interviews with Misratan and Zintani field commanders, Tripoli and Zintan, April 2016.
- 17 Author interviews with a lawyer and politician from Warshafana, Tripoli, September 2016; see also al-Mabrouk (2015).
- 18 Author interviews with a lawyer and politician from Warshafana, Tripoli, September 2016. See also Ean Libya (2016a); Ben Hamel (2016a); and al-Haddad (2016a; 2016b).
- 19 For details of the ministerial line-up, see Al-Wasat (2016a). The analysis of ministers' geographical origin is the author's own.
- 20 Author telephone interview with a Zawiya resident, February 2022, and a leading figure in Zawiya armed groups, Tripoli, February 2023.
- 21 Author interview with Shaaban Hadiya, Istanbul, June 2022.
- 22 Author interviews with Mahmoud Ben Rajab and Mohamed Hussein al-Khadrawi, Tripoli and Zawiya, June 2022 and June 2023; see also Wehrey (2021).
- 23 Small-scale, short-lived clashes had occurred before between local armed groups, such as between fighters from the Awlad Sagr and the Ajina family, in February 2014 (Afrigate-news, 2014).
- 24 Author interviews with armed group leaders and academics, Zawiya, February and June 2023. For information on the initial clashes, see Ben Hamel (2015).
- 25 Author interview, identity and location withheld, February 2023.
- 26 Author interviews with armed group leaders and a religious figure, Zawiya, February and June 2023; see also Ben Hamel (2016b).
- 27 Author interviews with a religious figure and a battalion leader, Zawiya, February 2023; see also Al-Wasat (2016c).
- 28 Author interviews with Othman al-Leheb, a religious figure, and academics, Zawiya, February 2023; see also Al Jazeera (2016).
- 29 Author interview with a political adviser from Zawiya, Tripoli, June 2023; see also UNSC (2017, p. 103).
- 30 See a 2018 letter from Zawiya's police chief Ali al-Lafi to the GNA interior minister, reproduced in UNSC (2021, p. 80).
- 31 Author interviews with battalion leaders, a religious figure, and a political adviser from Zawiya, Tripoli and Zawiya, November 2022 and February and June 2023.
- 32 Letter from Attorney Nuri al-Ghali to the Head of the Deterrence Apparatus for the Fight against Organized Crime and Terrorism, Tripoli, 22 July 2020, seen by the author.
- 33 See UNSC (2017, p. 103) and UNSC (2018, p. 206). For information on the reopening of the coastal road, see al-Haddad (2016a, 2016b) and Al-Wasat (2017b).
- 34 Author interviews with a local resident, Zawiya, November 2018, and with a former associate of Muhanned Sweisi in a former armed group, Tripoli, February 2023; see also Ean Libya (2016b) and Micallef, Horsley, and Bish (2019, pp. 33–35).
- 35 Author interviews with Adel Benweer, Misrata, April 2018, and with Ahmed al-Dabbashi and Ali Buzriba, Zawiya, November 2018.
- 36 See Al-Wasat (2017c); Libya al-Mostakbal (2017); 218 TV (2018); and al-Ghitani (2018).
- 37 Author interview with a local resident, Zawiya, November 2018.
- 38 Author interview with a local resident, Zawiya, November 2018; see also Wehrey (2021) and Harchaoui (2022).
- 39 Author telephone interviews with a Zawiya resident, April–June 2019; see also Al-Marsad (2019).

- 40 Author telephone interview with a Zawiya resident, January 2020.
- 41 Author interviews with Khaled al-Meshri and a former close associate of Meshri, February and June 2023.
- 42 Author interview with a close collaborator of Ali Buzriba during that event, Tripoli, February 2023. For details of the HoR's establishment in Tripoli, see Ean Libya (2019a) and Ben Said (2019).
- 43 For information on the Turkish intervention, see Wehrey (2020) and Badi and Al-Jabassini (2023).
- 44 Author interviews with Mahmoud Ben Rajab, Mohamed Ben Yousef, and other battalion commanders, Tripoli and Zawiya, May and November 2022.
- 45 Author interview with Mahmoud Ben Rajab, Tripoli, May 2022; see also Brigade 52 (2020).
- 46 Author interview with Mohamed Ben Yousef, Tripoli, June 2023; see also Libya al-Ahrar (2020).
- 47 Author interviews with Muadh al-Manfukh and Othman al-Leheb, Zawiya, November 2022 and June 2023.
- 48 Author interview with Muadh al-Manfukh, Zawiya, November 2022.
- 49 Author telephone interviews with Tripoli and Zawiya residents, Tripoli and Zawiya, February 2021.
- 50 Author telephone interview with a legal professional with close ties to the attorney general, April 2021.
- 51 Along with other leaders in the anti-Haftar forces, Bahroun had initially opposed al-Ayeb's appointment in May 2021 (Al-Estiklal, 2021). By October of that year, his forces were providing protection to al-Ayeb in Tripoli (author interviews with observers with close ties to armed groups, Sabratha and Tripoli, November 2021). In June 2022, al-Ayeb appointed Bahroun to a newly created Western Region Counter-Terrorism Bureau in the GIS (Fawzi, 2022).
- 52 Author interview with Mustafa Sanalla, Tripoli, December 2021; see also Abaad (2021).
- 53 Author interviews with two battalion leaders whose groups equally received major payments, Tripoli, November 2021 and May 2022.
- 54 Author interview with Mahmoud Ben Rajab, May 2022. For more on Kabir's relationship with Dabeiba, see Lacher (2023b).
- 55 Author interviews with battalion leaders, security officials, and observers with close ties to armed groups, Sabratha, Tripoli, and Zawiya, November 2021, November 2022, and February 2022; see also Al-Wasat (2021c).
- 56 Author telephone interview with a close associate of Othman al-Leheb, August 2023; see also Al-Wasat (2021d).
- 57 Author interview with a confidential source, September 2023. According to Hassan Buzriba himself, the number of detainees had by June 2023 declined to 2,000, from a peak of 8,000 a year earlier. Author interview with Hassan Buzriba, Zawiya, June 2023. See also SSA (2022).
- 58 Author interviews with Mahmoud Ben Rajab and Muadh al-Manfukh, Tripoli and Zawiya, May and November 2022.
- 59 That group also included Kikli; the commander of Brigade 444, Mahmoud Hamza; the de facto commander of Brigade 111, Abdesselam Zubi; and the head of the Joint Force in Misrata, Omar Bughdada. Author interviews with two close associates of these figures, Tripoli, November 2022 and February 2023.
- 60 Author interview with Othman al-Leheb and several members of his Sila' Battalion, Zawiya, February 2023.

- 61 Author interview with Mahmoud Ben Rajab, Tripoli, May 2022; see also Reuters (2022a).
- 62 Author interviews with Mahmoud Ben Rajab and Othman al-Leheb, Tripoli and Zawiya, May 2022 and February 2023; see also Reuters (2022b).
- 63 The convoy also included fighters from Hassan al-Za'et's, Walid Khammash's, and Ali Farhat's groups. Author interviews with battalion leaders and a political adviser from Zawiya, Tripoli and Zawiya, February and June 2023; see also Al-Arabiya (2022).
- 64 Author interviews with battalion leaders and local observers, Tripoli and Zawiya, November 2022. See also Mahmoud (2022); Al Jazeera (2022a); and Lacher (2023a).
- 65 Author interviews with Mahmoud Ben Rajab, Tripoli, May and November 2022.
- 66 Author interviews with local residents, senior army officers, and a close associate of Bahroun, Tripoli and Zawiya, November 2022 and February 2023; see also Al-Saaa 24 (2022a). For details of the clashes, see Al Jazeera (2022b) and LCW (2022).
- 67 Author telephone interview with a local observer, December 2022; see also Abu al-Kheir (2022) and Mahmoud (2023).
- 68 Author interviews with a senior military official and local residents, Zawiya, February 2023. The same forces would clash again in May 2023. See also Libya Press (2023) and Hawadith al-Yawm (2023).
- 69 A member of Zawiya's council of elders, al-Beshti al-Zuhuf, said in November 2022 that the city had seen eight murders within one month (Al-Saaa 24, 2022b). A media report in late December 2022 counted 21 murders in 2022, 15 of which occurred in November and December alone (Hadiya, 2022). A member of Zawiya's youth movement said there had been 347 murders since 2011 (author interview, Tripoli, June 2023).
- 70 Author interviews with the head of the police directorate Ali al-Lafi, and other security officials, battalion leaders, and local residents, Zawiya and Tripoli, November 2022 and February 2023.
- 71 In December 2022, for example, a man and his wife were killed and their children injured after armed men opened fire on their car near a school in the al-Harsha district (Ghanmi, 2022).
- 72 Author interview with a founding member of Zawiya's youth movement, Tripoli, June 2023; see also Harak Tashih al-Masar al-Zawiya al-Kubra (2023a).
- 73 Author interviews with security officials, battalion leaders, and local residents, Tripoli and Zawiya, June 2023; see also Al-Mashhad al-Libi (2023a) and Al-Rasd (2023a; 2023b).
- 74 Author interviews with security officials, battalion leaders, and a founding member of Zawiya's youth movement, Tripoli and Zawiya, June 2023. Othman al-Leheb acknowledged as much: 'Of course, I have people in the movement. They're from my people, my tribe. But they only threw stones.' Author interview, al-Ma'mura, June 2023.
- 75 Author interviews with Mahmoud Ben Rajab and a senior military official, Tripoli, June 2023.
- 76 Author interviews with security officials, battalion leaders, and a founding member of Zawiya's youth movement, Tripoli and Zawiya, June 2023; see also Harak Tashih al-Masar al-Zawiya al-Kubra (2023b) and Abu Joseph (2023).
- 77 Two senior GNU military officials both said they believed the targets in Zawiya had been identified by Bahroun, and supplied by him to Dabeiba's entourage. Author interviews, Tripoli, June 2023.
- 78 Author interviews with battalion leaders, academics, and other local residents, Zawiya, June 2023.

- 79 Author interviews with battalion leaders and local residents, Tripoli and Zawiya, June 2023.
- 80 Author interviews with Mu'ammār al-Dhawī and Hassan Buzriḃa, al-Ma'mura and Zawiya, June 2023; see also Al-Mashhad al-Libi (2023c).
- 81 Both publicly and in closed meetings with the Buzriḃa-led camp, Turkish representatives denied that Turkey had any role in the strikes. Although there is some debate over whether the GNU has the ability to conduct strikes without Turkish assistance and approval, senior GNU military officials and Western diplomats insisted that no strike could be carried out without Turkish assent. Author interviews, Tripoli and Zawiya, June 2023; see also Abaad (2023), Al-Mashhad al-Libi (2023c), and Al-Wasat (2023c).
- 82 Author interviews with senior military officials, Tripoli, June 2023.
- 83 Author observations, Zawiya, June 2023; author telephone interviews with local residents, July and August 2023.
- 84 Author telephone interviews with Zawiya and Sabratha residents, August–October 2023.
- 85 Author interviews with two of the four key figures involved, Tripoli and Zawiya, June 2023.
- 86 Author interview with a close associate of Othman al-Leheb, Zawiya, December 2023. Al-Kabo was eventually released in January 2024.
- 87 Author interviews with residents of central Zawiya, Tripoli, December 2023.
- 88 Author interviews with a close associate of Othman al-Leheb, a leading security actor from Zawiya, and an attendee of refinery meeting, Tripoli and Zawiya, December 2023.
- 89 Author interviews with a leading security actor from Zawiya and Hassan Buzriḃa, Tripoli and Zawiya, February and June 2023.
- 90 Author interviews with key security actors in Zawiya and a close associate of Othman al-Leheb, Tripoli and Zawiya, December 2023.
- 91 Author interview with a senior military official from Zawiya, Tripoli, June 2023.
- 92 A founding member of the LROR recounted: '[GNC President Nuri] Busahmain gave the LROR a budget of 60 million dinars. Shaaban Hadiya spent that money quickly and arbitrarily, placing many people on the payroll who had nothing to do with the LROR. After the LROR was moved from the GNC to the Chief of Staff, it lost its budget, and then the entire body quickly disappeared.' Author interview, location withheld, June 2023.
- 93 Author interviews with battalion commanders, local residents, and a religious figure, Zawiya, November 2022 and February 2023. Al-Lafi has been in place since at least 2014 (Al-Masyr al-Yawm, 2014; Libya's Channel, 2017a). For information on Bashagha's attempt to dismiss Lafi, see Zawiya Police Directorate (2020).
- 94 Mahmoud Ben Rajab, for example, complained that Dabeiba had neglected his Brigade 52 in the allocation of funds: in 2021, 'of the 100 million dinars that Dabeiba distributed], al-Far [Bahroun] and Brigade 301 got 30 million; the Stability Support Apparatus and the Joint Force got 10–15 million each; and I initially got 5 million. [Central Bank governor] al-Siddiq al-Kabir became angry with Dabeiba and told him: "He's the only one I asked you to give money to, and he gets less than all the others?" So Dabeiba gave me another 5 million.' (Author interview, Tripoli, May 2022.) In a later interview, Ben Rajab argued that Dabeiba had been less than generous because he saw Ben Rajab as politically unreliable (author interview, Tripoli, February 2023). A senior military official from Zawiya confirmed this: 'Dabeiba empowers militias and smugglers to stay in power. Al-Far [de facto commander of Brigade 301], [Abdesselam] Zubi, Ghnewa, and [interior minister Emad] al-Trabelsi get money from Dabeiba. Ben Rajab sometimes gets money, sometimes he doesn't.' (Author interview, Tripoli, February 2023.)

- 95 Author interviews and telephone interviews with local residents and a close associate of Bahroun, Zawiya, November 2022 and June and August 2023. See also UNSC (2021, p. 80); Al-Estiklal (2021); Fawzi (2022); and Al-Mashhad al-Libi (2023b).
- 96 Author interview with Muadh al-Manfukh, Tripoli, December 2023.
- 97 Other key figures who participated in these negotiations included Kikli; the commander of Brigade 444, Mahmoud Hamza; the de facto commander of Brigade 111, Abdesselam Zubi; and the head of the Joint Force in Misrata, Omar Bughdada. Author interviews with three participants in the negotiations, Tripoli and Zawiya, June and November 2022, and February and June 2023.
- 98 Author interview with a participant in the negotiations, Tripoli, June 2022.
- 99 Author interview with three participants in the talks, Tripoli and Zawiya, November 2022 and February 2023.
- 100 Author interviews with two participants in the talks, Tripoli, February 2023.
- 101 Another key protagonist in this process of state capture was Kikli (see Hakan, forthcoming); see also Lacher (2023a; 2023c).
- 102 Author interviews with Zawiya residents with close ties to refinery and distribution companies, Zawiya, February 2023. See also the figures published weekly by Brega (Brega, n.d.).
- 103 Author interviews with officials and activists from Nafusa mountain communities, Jerba and Tripoli, January and March 2015.
- 104 Author interviews with military officers, battalion leaders, and municipal council members, Jadu and Zintan, March 2017.
- 105 Author interviews with municipal council members, Jadu and Nalut, March 2017 and November 2018. For information on the shutdown of fuel stations in Sabratha, see also UNSC (2017, p. 105).
- 106 Author interviews with local officials and residents, Nalut, November 2018; see also Eaton (2019).
- 107 Author observations, Sabratha and Zawiya, November 2018, November 2021, November 2022, February 2023, and December 2023; see also UNSC (2018, p. 42).
- 108 Author interview with an official from Sabratha, Tripoli, November 2018; see also UNSC (2018, p. 42).
- 109 Telephone interviews with a Zawiya resident, December 2017 and January 2018.
- 110 Author interview with Zawiya residents, November 2018 and November 2022; see also Al-Wasat (2018).
- 111 Author interviews with Mohamed Kashlaf and a Zawiya resident, Zawiya, November 2018; see also Al-Sharara (2018), which mentions competing administrations registered in Abu Salim, Misrata, and Zawiya.
- 112 Author interviews with local residents, Zawiya, February and June 2023.
- 113 Author interview with a senior military official involved in target selection, Tripoli, June 2023.
- 114 Author observations, Zawiya, June 2023.
- 115 Author telephone interviews with Zawiya and Sabratha residents, August–October 2023.
- 116 Figures for 2013–21 are for Libya as a whole; during this period, virtually all departures took place from western Libya.
- 117 Estimate. '[In 2013] Italian authorities recorded 42,925 arrivals [by sea] . . . most migrants arrived from Libya and some from Egypt' (IOM, 2015).
- 118 UNSMIL (2015).

- 119 UNHCR (2017).
- 120 UNHCR (2018).
- 121 UNHCR (2018).
- 122 Forin and Frouws (2022).
- 123 Forin and Frouws (2022).
- 124 Forin and Frouws (2022).
- 125 UNHCR (2022).
- 126 Nova.news (2024).
- 127 Nova.news (2024).
- 128 Author interview with Muadh al-Manfukh, Zawiya, November 2022.
- 129 Author interviews with Mohamed Kashlaf and Abderrahman Milad, Zawiya, November 2018; see also Micallef, Horsley, and Bish (2019, p. 19).
- 130 Author interview with Hassan Buzriba, Zawiya, June 2023.
- 131 Author interview with Muadh al-Manfukh, Zawiya, November 2022.
- 132 Author interview with Hassan Buzriba, Zawiya, June 2023. For details of Italian and Frontex efforts to enable Libyan interceptions of migrant boats through the Libyan Joint Rescue Coordination Centre, see Micallef, Horsley, and Bish (2019, pp. 19–20) and Creta et al. (2021).
- 133 Buzriba described this as a collective, charitable fund-raising effort in Abu Surra. Author interview, Zawiya, June 2023.
- 134 Author interview with a confidential source, September 2023.
- 135 Author interviews with members of armed groups, Zawiya, June 2023.
- 136 Author interviews with security officials and battalion leaders, Zawiya and Tripoli, June 2023.
- 137 Author interviews with security officials, Zawiya and Tripoli, February and June 2023. For an overview of drug smuggling and routes in Libya, see Micallef (2019) and Mangan (2020). For details of recent Tramadol seizures at the ports of Misrata and al-Khoms, as well as on roads westwards from those ports, see 218 TV (2021); Libyan Customs Authority (2022); al-Gumati (2023b); and Al-Wasat (2023a).
- 138 For information on hashish and alcohol seizures in Ajeilat, see Libya Observer (2018); Afri-gatenews (2019); Al-Wasat (2021b); LANA (2021); Al-Watan (2023); and Ean Libya (2023).
- 139 See Press Solidarity (2012); ICG (2013, p. 1); and Al-Quds al-Arabi (2013).
- 140 Author interviews with security officials and battalion leaders, Tripoli and Zawiya, November 2022 and February 2023.
- 141 Author interview with a well-connected local resident, Sabratha, June 2023.
- 142 Author interview with a security official from Zawiya, Tripoli, November 2022.
- 143 Author interviews with security officials, battalion leaders, and members of armed groups, Tripoli and Zawiya, November 2022, February 2023, and June 2023.
- 144 Author interviews with a well-connected Sabratha resident and a long-distance taxi driver, Sabratha and Tripoli, June 2023.
- 145 For an analysis of tacit and explicit arrangements among rival armed actors leveraging their power to stop movements along roads in central Africa, see Schouten (2022).
- 146 Author interview with a leading security actor from Zawiya, Tripoli, June 2023.
- 147 Author interview with a leading security actor, Zawiya, June 2023.
- 148 Author interview with a close associate of Othman al-Leheb, location withheld, September 2023.
- 149 Author interviews with security actors, Zawiya, June 2023.

- 150 Author telephone interview with a close associate of Othman al-Leheb, August 2023.
- 151 Author interviews with Mahmoud Ben Rajab and a close associate of Othman al-Leheb, Tripoli and Zawiya, December 2023.
- 152 Author observations and interviews with security actors and residents, Zawiya, November 2022, and February and June 2023.
- 153 Author interviews with a religious figure and academics, Zawiya, February and June 2023.
- 154 Author interview with a former revolutionary fighter, Zawiya, June 2023.
- 155 Author interview with a religious figure, Zawiya, February 2023.
- 156 Author interview with an academic and former revolutionary fighter, Zawiya, February 2023.
- 157 Author interview with a security actor and former revolutionary commander, Zawiya, June 2023.
- 158 Author interview with a senior financial sector professional from Zawiya, Tripoli, February 2023.
- 159 Author interview with a journalist from Zawiya, Tripoli, November 2022. The water bottling company is the Masna' al-Watan lita'biyat al-Miyah.
- 160 Author interview with Jamal Bhar and municipal council members, Zawiya, November 2018; see also Al-Marsad (2022) and Al-Saaa 24 (2023).
- 161 Author meeting with Ali al-Lafi and several other security officials, Zawiya, November 2022.
- 162 Author interviews with a close associate of Othman al-Leheb, a senior financial sector professional from Zawiya, and a founding member of Zawiya's youth movement, Zawiya and Tripoli, December 2023; see also LANA (2023).
- 163 Author interview with Usama Ali Sarkaz, Zawiya, November 2022; see also Zawiya Police Directorate (2021).
- 164 Author interviews with university professors, Zawiya, February and June 2023.
- 165 Author interview with a political adviser from Zawiya, Tripoli, February 2023.
- 166 Author interviews with Mahmoud Ben Rajab, Muadh al-Manfukh, and Fahim Ben Ramadhan, Tripoli, May 2022 and February 2023.
- 167 Author interview with a founding member of Zawiya's youth movement, Tripoli, June 2023.
- 168 Author interview with a university professor, Zawiya, June 2023.
- 169 Author interview with a senior security official from Zawiya, Tripoli, February 2023.
- 170 Author interviews with security officials from Zawiya, as well as with Othman al-Leheb and leading members of the Sila' Battalion and Brigade 103, Tripoli and Zawiya, February and June 2023.
- 171 Author interviews with Zawiya residents, February and June 2023.
- 172 Author interview with Hassan Buzriba, Zawiya, June 2023.
- 173 Author interviews with former revolutionary fighters and commanders, Zawiya and Tripoli, February 2023.
- 174 Author interviews with Othman al-Leheb, Zawiya and al-Ma'mura, February and June 2023.
- 175 Author observations, Zawiya, June 2023.
- 176 Author interviews with Mahmoud Ben Rajab, Tripoli, June 2022 and February 2023.
- 177 Author observations, Janzur, February and June 2023.
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- 179 Author interview with Hassan Buzriba, Zawiya, June 2023.

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