



Whispering Bell

Libya Weekly Political & Security Update

May 26, 2020



Whispering Bell

1. The Big Picture

Momentum shifting in GNA's favour but conflict is far from over

This week, Government of National Accord (GNA) forces supported by Turkey captured key positions from the Libyan National Army (LNA) across Tripoli's southern frontlines. GNA forces gained ground in Salah Eddien, Al-Hadba Mashro, and Ain Zara between 21-24 May, seizing Tekbali and Hamza camps alongside other positions under LNA control since at least December 2019. GNA forces reported newly-acquired positions were booby-trapped by LNA forces in a likely attempt to slow advances.

Meanwhile, LNA forces under Khalifa Haftar's command shifted to a defensive posture and withdrew further south towards Tripoli International Airport (TIP). The disengagement was described by Haftar's forces as a tactical retreat to enable civilian families to meet during the Eid Al-Fitr period, though most observers viewed it as the latest in a string of setbacks over the past few weeks. More importantly, LNA disengagement was accompanied by the documented withdrawal of Russian private military contractors (PMCs) believed to be affiliated with the Wagner Group towards Tarhunah, and later airlifted from Bani Walid to Al-Jufra airbase.

While momentum continues to shift in favour of the GNA and Turkey, the conflict is far from over. Viewing the latest combat changes across the western region and LNA disengagement as a GNA victory is a leap to hasty conclusions. While recent GNA gains present serious obstacles to LNA prospects on the outskirts of Tripoli, there is no evidence to suggest Haftar's forces have been compelled to suspend operations and/or enter negotiations in the medium term. On the contrary, escalation is now assessed as likely across the western region.

Turkey reportedly sent additional military supplies over the past few days, as documented by the significant number of Turkish Air Force military aircraft tracked by open source platforms arriving from Turkey to Misrata. Turkey is likely sending additional supplies to consolidate its presence across Al-Watiyah airbase and support Tripoli frontlines. Similar flights have also been monitored arriving in the east to supply LNA forces. The developments underscore the threat of an escalation in the medium term.

Looking ahead, GNA forces will look to build on recent military momentum to attack Tarhunah, the remaining pro-LNA stronghold southeast of Tripoli. WB recorded a gradual GNA-led advance towards Tarhunah between 21-22 May. GNA forces dropped leaflets over the town urging civilians to avoid military targets. An advance on Tarhunah would be facilitated by recent GNA gains in the vicinity of Gharyan. The GNA's gains and shifting alliances in towns south of Tarhunah have crippled supply lines, enabling GNA forces to encircle the pro-LNA town.

However, the GNA and Turkey could be dragged deeper into the fighting in Tarhunah. A drawn-out offensive will impact the GNA's momentum, exacerbate current divisions in GNA ranks, and provide sufficient time for the LNA to

consolidate its capabilities and reorganize resources. In addition, the GNA is far from winning hearts and minds of key tribes across the west and Fezzan. While the GNA can militarily subdue Tarhunah and other western towns, alliances will likely remain fluid.

For its part, the LNA rallied public support in the face of losses. In an audio recording, Haftar attempted to raise fighters' morale and called for steadfastness in confronting any Turkish target in Libya. The audio recording underlines bellicose rhetoric in sharp contrast to the LNA's passive posture over the past few weeks. Meanwhile, LNA spokesperson Ahmed Al-Mismary downplayed the setbacks claiming they are part of controlled manoeuvres to defeat the GNA and Turkey. Al-Mismary reported the GNA's non-abidance by the humanitarian ceasefire during Eid prompted LNA forces to immediately shift to an offensive course of action.

So far, the LNA's threats to launch an unprecedented aerial counteroffensive are yet to materialize. The LNA focused efforts on reversing the GNA's immediate gains south of Gharyan. The LNA reported four recently-refurbished combat jets entered the theatre. In a separate development, a MiG-29 aircraft was spotted at Al-Jufra airbase. In the next few weeks, LNA intent will be to consolidate supply lines into Tarhunah to ensure the offensive against Tripoli can be sustained in the long-term and to repeat the looming GNA attack on the town. This helps explain the LNA's focus on areas south of Gharyan and the strategic town of Ash Shwayrif, which serves as a critical node linking the east and south to the western region. LNA forces will likely focus remaining offensive capabilities on eastern frontlines between Sirte and Misrata. Overall, the stakes are too high for the LNA's foreign backers to suspend their support in light of recent setbacks.

It is clear the conflict is entering a new phase marked by a gradual shift in combat activity away from Tripoli towards key positions in the west amid broader regional power projections in the east Mediterranean. Analysts are of the view negotiations will likely be preceded by escalation across the western region and Fezzan as both forces have an interest in engaging in a show of force to maximize their leverage at the negotiating table. For GNA forces, attempts to increase their bargaining leverage may include a move to control and resume production at Al-Sharara and Al-Feel oil fields in Libya's south. But an expansion into the Fezzan via negotiations is unlikely to deter LNA forces from targeting key pipelines transporting crude to Zawiya and Mellitah. In a best-case scenario, an entente between Turkey and Russia will help determine a ceasefire line in the western region.



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KEY POINTS

- Coronavirus cases reach 75 as of 23 May
- LNA disengagement from Tripoli; focus on west
- Both GNA & LNA gear up for likely escalation

2. National Security Map

GNA airstrikes amid push to capitalise on gains across west; resurgence of IS activity in south

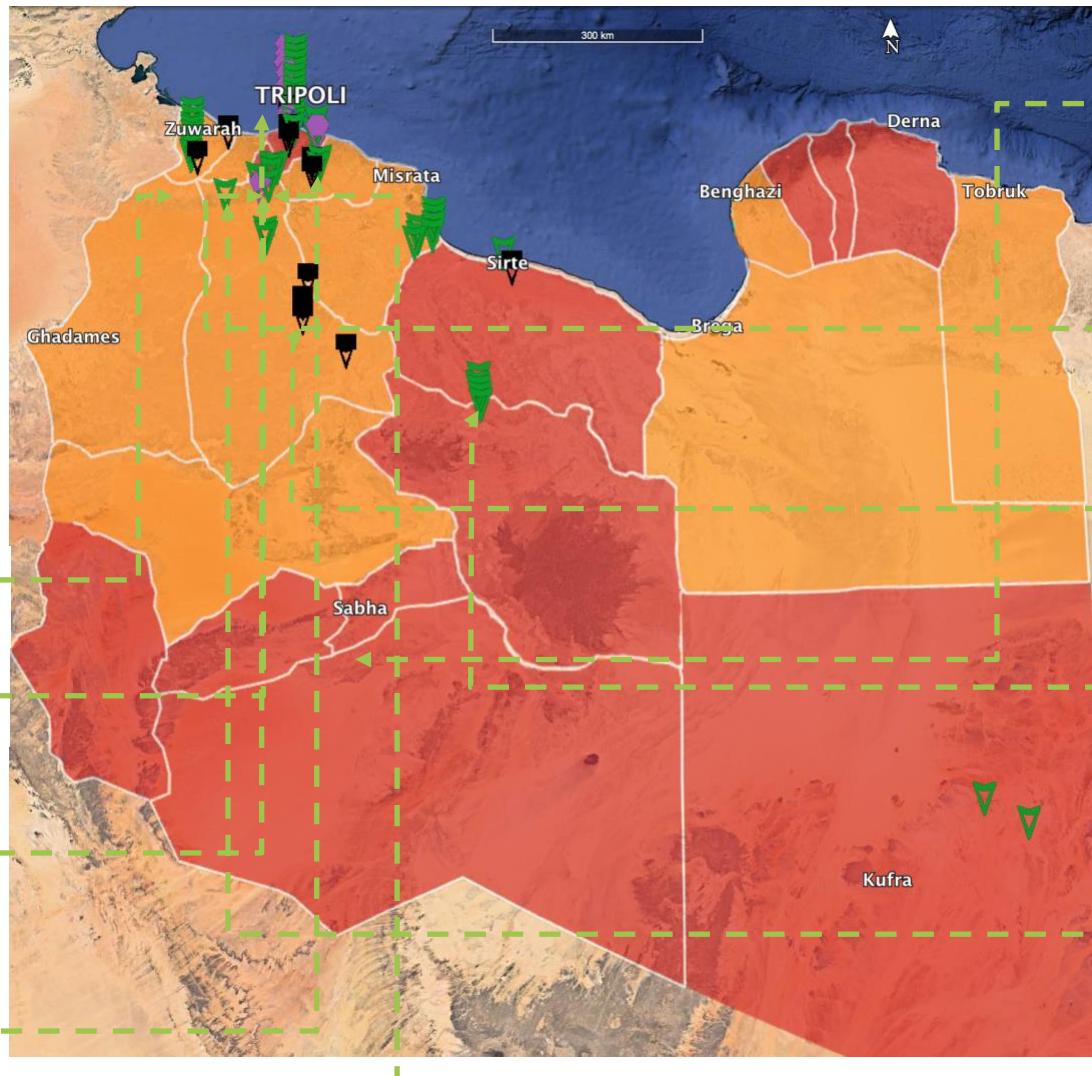
Key

THREAT INDICATORS

- Severe Threat
- High Threat
- Moderate Threat

EVENT INDICATORS

- IED | VBIED
- Violent Clash
- Isolated Gunfire
- Other



The Islamic State's (IS) Libya province claimed responsibility via its Amaq outlet for an improvised explosive device (IED) attack targeting an LNA 628 Infantry battalion vehicle at the entrance of Taraghin on 23 May. Sources reported the attack was likely carried out by Tebu IS militants with a residual presence on the outskirts of Murzuq. The group claimed three other low-level attacks in the south between 17-19 May via Al-Naba publication.

GNA forces entered Alasaba on 21 May while the town of Alurban publicly declared its support for the Tripoli government. Reports indicate these shifting alliances prompted pro-LNA fighters from Tarhunah to withdraw from Tripoli frontlines back into their native town.

A GNA-operated Turkish UAV was downed over Al-Qaryat in the early hours of 22 May and another on 23 May. Further, LNA forces reported a GNA-operated Turkish UAV was downed in Bu Ghreib, south Bani Walid, in the early hours of 22 May. In a separate incident, the LNA's 128 Battalion reported it downed a GNA-operated Turkish UAV over Ash Shwayrif on 22 May.

Four GNA airstrikes targeted Al-Rawagha road linking Sirte District with Jufra District, resulting in the destruction of two LNA military vehicles, a truck loaded with ammunition, and a fuel truck, as well as five casualties among LNA ranks on 18 May.

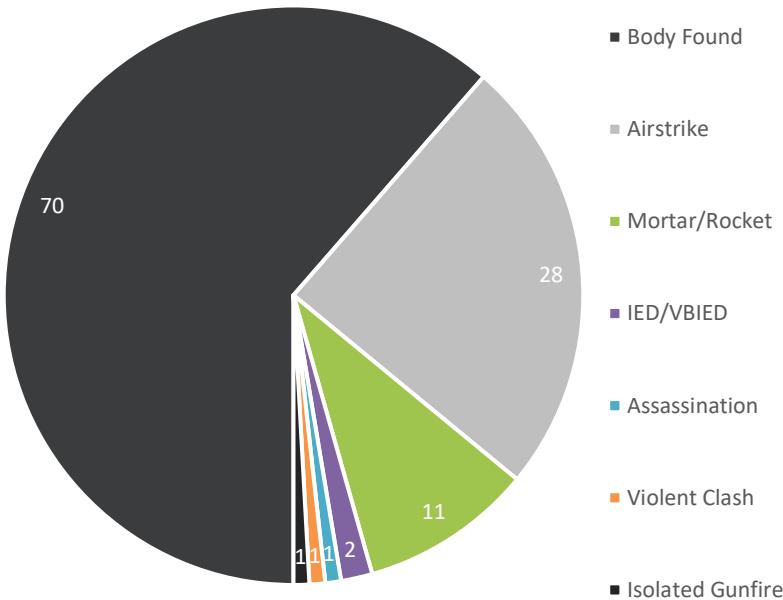
Reports indicate locals reopened a key valve along the pipeline transporting crude from Al-Sharara oil field to Zawiya oil refinery on 22 May. The valve was closed in the vicinity of Al-Riyyna by pro-LNA groups from Zintan as part of the oil blockade orchestrated by pro-LNA tribes in Jan 2020. Production at Al-Sharara remains shut.

LNA airstrike targeted a GNA-affiliated camp in Gharyan's Tgessat area in the morning on 24 May. Later that night, LNA airstrikes targeted GNA positions in Gharyan, including the Jandouba area.

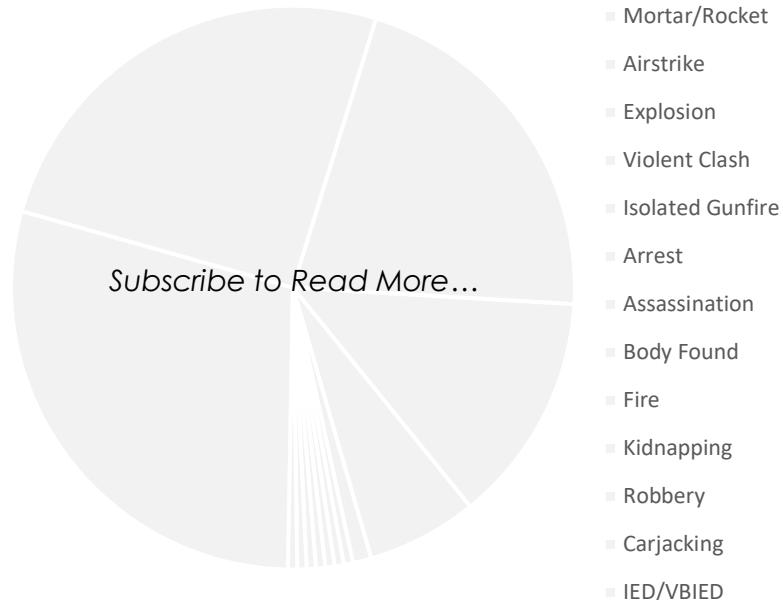
3. Nationwide Security Analysis

GNA air superiority across west; mass grave found in Tripoli

Nationwide fatalities by type of attack (Past week)



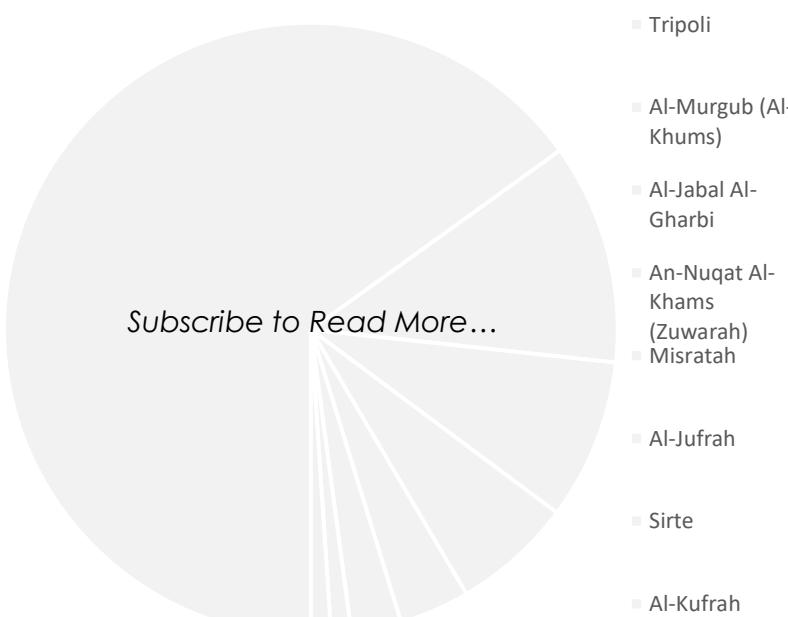
Nationwide incidents by type of attack (Past week)



Nationwide fatalities by national district (Past week)



Nationwide incidents by national district (Past week)



Nationwide Fatalities by Type of Attack (Past 27 Weeks)



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Data Analysis

WB recorded this week a total of 114 confirmed deaths in Libya, which compares to 31 deaths reported last week and 83 the week before, marking a significant increase in fatalities in contrast to the previous week, largely due to Government of National Accord (GNA) reporting a mass grave containing 70 bodies on an unidentified frontline in Tripoli. Meanwhile, 28 fatalities came as a result of airstrikes, 11 fatalities as a result of indiscriminate shelling, 2 fatalities due to an improvised explosive device (IED) explosion, while three fatalities were recorded as a result of an assassination, gunfire incident and violent clashes. Similar to the patterns witnessed since the Libyan National Army (LNA) launched its offensive on Tripoli in early April 2019, the majority of fatalities remain related to combat operations and are commonly a result of mortar/rocket shelling incidents, airstrikes, violent clashes, and civilians caught in crossfire.

In western Libya, WB recorded a total of 180 incidents, including 123 in Tripoli marking a significant decrease in security incidents recorded in the west in contrast to the previous week, largely due to a decrease in mortar/rocket shelling incident dominating last week's statistics. In Tripoli, WB recorded 55 mortar/rocket shelling incidents and 39 audible explosions as a result, 23 violent clashes, 3 isolated gunfire cases, 1 kidnapping, 1 carjacking, 1 fire, 1 airstrike, and 1 IED incident. This week's statistics mark an uptick in criminal activity in both engagement and non-engagement areas despite the full curfew imposed during the Eid Al-Fitr period. Meanwhile, WB recorded 11 civilian casualties as a result of indiscriminate shelling in the Furnaj and Garabouli vicinities. Further, a spokesperson at the GNA's health ministry reported two civilians were killed in an IED explosion in Salah Eddien.

In the wider western region, the security environment remains dominated by military operations, including airstrikes and mortar/rocket shelling incidents. This week GNA forces carried out the majority of airstrikes, with 38 airstrikes out of a total of 48 conducted across the Al-Jabal Al-Gharbi, Al-Murqub, An-Nuqat Al-Khams, Misrata and Jufrah districts. The airstrikes continue to focus on depleting LNA supply lines and capitalising on recent GNA gains across the western region. The LNA western stronghold of Tarhuna and the formerly LNA-controlled Al-Watiyah Airbase stood as the main targets for GNA airstrikes. Meanwhile, LNA retaliation came in the form of the downing of GNA-operated Turkish unmanned aerial vehicle (UAVs) across western frontlines. WB recorded the downing of 8 Turkish UAVs over the Al-Jabal Al-Ghari, Al-Murqub and An-Nuqat Al-Khams districts. In relation to LNA airstrikes, local reports of a heavy explosion in Zintan, likely as a result of an LNA airstrike targeting Zintan's Castle in the early hours of 21 May. The incident would closely follow Zintan's Supreme Council of Notables and Elders voicing support for the GNA. Separately, in retaliation to clashes, a prominent Zintan field commander identified as Nouredine El-Naas was killed in combat in the vicinity of Heera, north Gharyan, on 22 May. Unverified reports indicate El-Naas was killed by laser-guided munition during engagement with LNA forces.

Meanwhile in the central region, GNA forces continued to focus on targeting LNA supply lines on Al-Rawagha Road linking the Sirte and Jufra districts. Separately, military operations remain ongoing in the Abugrein area on the border between Misrata and Sirte districts, with frequent airstrikes and an exchange of artillery shelling between LNA and GNA forces. Asides military activity, local reports from 16 May indicate a local dispute between young men resulted in one fatality on Sirte's Merah Street. The man was killed by a white arm and the perpetrator was arrested. According to reports, the incident marks the second act of crime witnessed in the city over the past 72hrs. On 14 May, a pharmacist was killed while on duty in a gunfire incident in the Abuhadi area. The killer handed himself over to security authorities shortly after committing the crime. The motive behind the incident remains unknown.

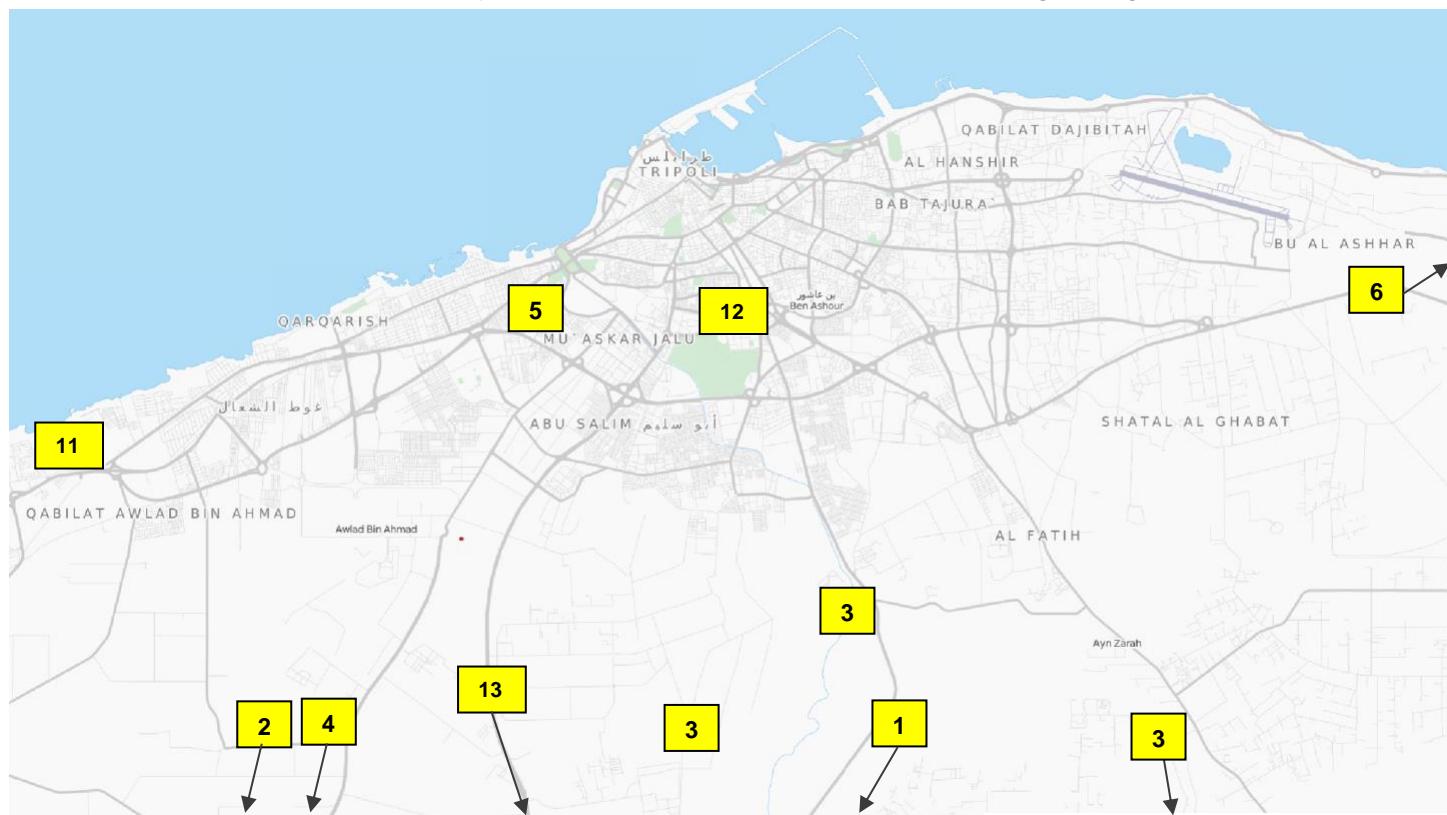
Turning to the south, this week was marked by the reemergence of Islamic State (IS) operations in the Sabha vicinity following months of inactivity. The Islamic State's (IS) Libya province claimed responsibility via its Amaq outlet for an improvised explosive device (IED) attack targeting an LNA 628 Infantry battalion vehicle at the entrance of Taraghish on 23 May, in the first documented attack by the group in a year. Security forces reported no casualties. Sources reported the attack was likely carried out by pockets of IS militants affiliated with the Tebus with a residual presence on the outskirts of Murzuq. In a separate development, IS Libya province claimed responsibility via Al-Naba publication for three other attacks targeting LNA forces in the vicinity of Sabha between 17-19 May, as part of its "attrition" warfare campaign in Libya. According to the group, the attacks included a Katyusha rocket attack targeting Tamahint Airbase on 17 May, an attack targeting the LNA's 628 Infantry Battalion's HQ in Taraghish on 18 May, and another Katyusha rocket targeting the LNA's Khalid Bin Walid battalion in Umm Al-Aranib on 19 May.

In the eastern region, WB recorded no security incidents in the area throughout the reporting period. Rapid military developments across the western region continues to dominate Libya's overall security environment, where the east remains calmer in contrast to the western, central and southern regions.

4.

Tripoli Neighborhood Report

Criminal activity on the rise despite full curfew; GNA gains ground in south



KEY INCIDENTS

1. (23-25 May) GNA consolidates control over Hamza Camp & temp. seizes Al-Yarmouk
2. (24 May) Woman kidnapped in Al-Kreymiya
3. (22-23 May) GNA southward advances amid partial LNA retreat & US pressure to de-escalate
4. (20 May) Gunmen kidnap local female UNSMIL employee in armed robbery
5. (20 May) Carjacking ivo Gorje
6. (20 May) LNA forces close Garabulli Coastal Road in fear of Al-Kaniat armed attack
7. (20 May) LNA warns of aerial counteroffensive amid reported Russian aircraft delivery
8. (20 May) LNA spox: 2-3 km withdrawal from frontlines to ease movement during Eid Al-Fitr
9. (20 May) Tajoura Municipal Guards & Security Directorate close shops violating curfew
10. (19 May) GNA accounts claim mass grave containing 70 bodies found during advance
11. (19 May) Local opens fire on civilian man due to traffic incident in Al-Seyaheya area
12. (18 May) Gunfire heard during alleged dispute b/w militiaman & locals in bakery
13. (17 May) New axis opens south of Airport Road, merges with Al-Ramla frontline

Two females kidnapped in separate incidents

Local reports indicate four gunmen aboard two unidentified vehicles stormed a house on Al-Sampa Street in Al-Kreymiya area and kidnapped a 25-year-old female identified as Wissal Minah at approximately 2130hrs on 20 May. The victim was kidnapped at gunpoint as the perpetrators stole cash and other possessions. Reports indicate the targeted family are affluent and the victim works for the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). It is unclear if the incident's motive is financial or political due to the victim's role. Minah's relatives shared photos of their abducted daughter across social media outlets and listed personal contact numbers in an effort to gather information on her whereabouts. Separately, pro-LNA accounts reported unidentified assailant(s) kidnapped a woman in Al-Kreymiya area in the evening on 24 May.

Carjacking ivo Gorje

A group of gunmen driving a grey Hyundai Sonata carjacked a white Hyundai Tuscan 2012 model in the Gorje area on 20 May. WB recorded a significant decrease in daily carjackings and vehicle thefts in Tripoli since the GNA announced a curfew in effort to contain the spread of the coronavirus pandemic

Gunfire reported during traffic incident

Sources reported a family aboard a black Hyundai Matrix accidentally cut the road in front of a man driving a BMW, prompting him to step out of his vehicle and open fire on the family's vehicle in the Al-Seyaheyya area at approximately 1700hrs on 19 May. The perpetrator, dressed in civilian clothing, shot the other driver in the leg using a 9mm gun and subsequently fled from the scene.

Gunmen presence ivo Aiport Rd; route to avoid

WB sources reported a group of gunmen driving a dark-blue BMW X5 with tinted windows and no license plates, scouring Wadi Al-Ahd Road in the Airport Road area over recent days. Meanwhile, locals warned travellers to avoid using the road in the Wadi Al-Rabeい area leading to Sidi Al-Sayeh village due to a recent uptick in carjackings.

Russian PMCs withdraw from Tripoli frontlines

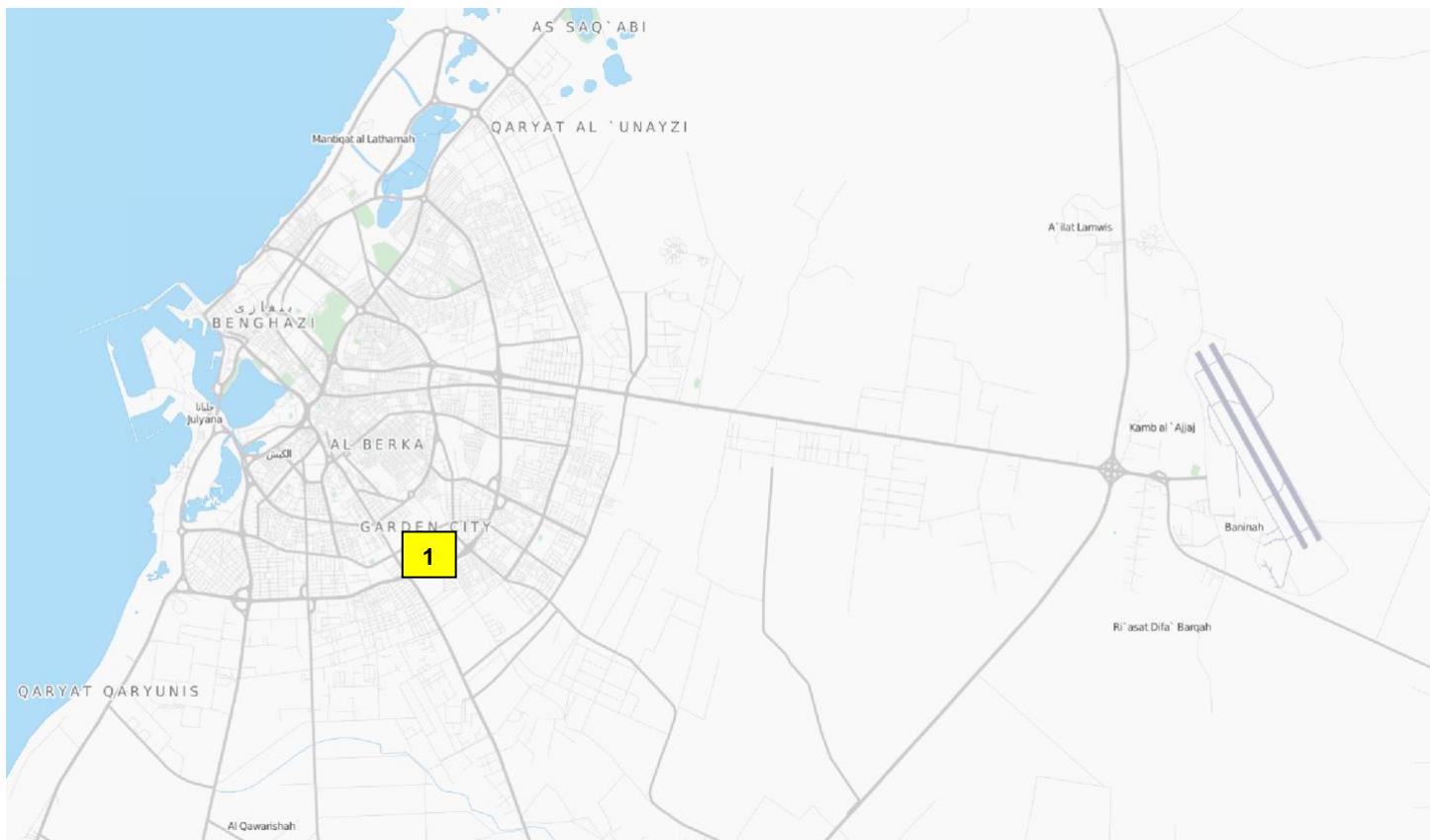
Reports of a complete withdrawal of Russian private military contractors (PMCs) believed to be affiliated with the Wagner Group from Tripoli frontlines to Bani Walid via Tarhunah between 23-24 May. Video footage purported to document the movement towards Bani Walid, in a further setback to the LNA. GNA military spox. Mohamed Gnounou reported 1500-1600 forces affiliated with the Wagner Group retreated towards Bani Walid. From Bani Walid airport, the fighters were then flown to Jufra airbase, the LNA's stronghold in the central region, according to Bani Walid's Mayor, Salem Alaywan.

GNA forces consolidate control over Hamza Camp

GNA forces continued with their push south of Tripoli, consolidating control over Hamza Camp in Al-Hadba Al-Mashro' area as of 25 May. In addition, GNA forces temporarily seized Al-Yarmouk Camp in the Khallat Al-Furjan area, before later retreating in the afternoon on 23 May. Reports indicate at least 54 fatalities in GNA ranks as a result of clashes in the Al-Yarmouk Camp vicinity, while 22 forces were captured by LNA forces. Further, GNA forces reached Al-Estraha Al-Hamra, south of Ain Zara, later that evening. Separately, pro-LNA accounts reported a GNA attack was repelled on the Wadi Alrabei frontline on 23 May.

5. Benghazi Neighborhood Report

Morality Police deny footage of armoured vehicle inside Benghazi Medical Centre



KEY INCIDENTS

1. (22 May) Morality Police deny footage of armoured vehicle inside Benghazi Medical Centre

Morality Police caution against spread of rumours

On 22 May, Benghazi's Morality Police denied that a circulated video of an armoured vehicle entering Benghazi's Medical Centre was recent, noting that the footage was taken over six years ago prior to their control over the Centre. The Police warned that measures will be taken against those responsible for circulating such "rumours" that attempt to hinder the capabilities of the city's security services.

6. What's next

LNA offensive on Gharyan & eastern fronts; GNA pursues advances in Tripoli

POLITICAL FORECAST

SECURITY FORECAST

While a new round of ceasefire negotiations is likely in the medium term, it will likely be preceded by an escalation as parties to the conflict seek to maximize their negotiating leverage. In response to the LNA's threat to target Turkish interests, Ankara's Foreign Ministry spox warned on 21 May that targeting Turkish interests will have "grave consequences", underlining the risk of a broader escalation. Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo held an "important" telephone conversation with GNA PM Fayez Al-Sarraj on 22 May, in the first such call between the two since before the conflict began in April 2019. Pompeo reiterated Washington's opposition to the inflow of weapons in Libya and commitment to a ceasefire leading to a political resolution as the "only option for the Libyan people". While difficult to ascertain, the call could be a sign of higher US engagement in the Libyan conflict and would follow a call between US President Donald Trump and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron on 20 May. Observers interpreted Pompeo's call as US pressure on the GNA and Turkey to immediately deescalate. Conflicting reports indicate the call is a sign of alignment between Ankara and Washington. Turkey's Presidential spox, Ibrahim Kalin, reported the two countries were in accord in terms of supporting the GNA in a phone conversation with US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien on 22 May. Domestically, the Speaker of the House of Representatives (HoR), Aguila Saleh, called on the UN Security Council to withdraw its recognition of the GNA. Meanwhile, 11 HoR members voiced their support for Saleh's recent political initiative on 25 May. The MPs called for adoption of the initiative without tampering with its "transitional philosophy that corrupted previous political settlements in Libya." The development would follow Saleh's renewed call for the reformation of the Presidential Council (PC) on 23 May, including a chairman and two deputies tasked with overseeing the historical regions of Tripolitania, Barqa and Fezzan on 23 May.

WHAT OTHER EXPERTS SAY

Libya expert Tarek Megerisi explores factors supporting the assessment an escalation is likely in Libya in the medium term. In a comprehensive brief published on *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, the author reviews developments that led to an internationalization of the conflict in the post-Gaddafi period and leading up to the LNA's latest offensive on Tripoli in April 2019. Further, Megerisi takes a closer look at Russia and Turkey's involvement in the conflict and how that contributed to pushing out Europe and the West from any political settlement in Libya. Looking ahead, Megerisi writes "The war in Libya is set for a dramatic escalation. Given Haftar's disadvantages in western Libya and the considerable Turkish support therein, Haftar is unlikely to make further gains and is already growing increasingly reliant on artillery just to maintain his positions. As the situation in western Libya worsens for him, he is likely to refocus his remaining offensive capacity on the de facto eastern front between the cities of Misrata and Sirte. However, further east, where Turkish air defenses are not present, he will likely remain unbreachable and comfortably absorb attacks by a GNA that is desperate to regain the country's oil terminals. As the war drags on, Europe has become more anxious at the potential destabilizing consequences of an internationalized conflict in its immediate backyard, potentially precipitating a new surge of refugees.¹⁶ The active role of France, however, blunts the multilateral instruments—the EU and UN—that Europeans are most comfortable using. Meanwhile, the United States, which Europe is accustomed to depending on for any force projection, appears unwilling to engage in another intractable conflict, let alone one where allies such as the UAE and Turkey are in direct opposition."

In Tripoli, GNA forces will likely attempt a renewed offensive on Al-Yarmouk camp. For their part, LNA forces will focus on maintaining positions across Tripoli International Airport (TIP) and Qasr Bin Ghashir, while shifting capabilities away from Tripoli frontlines towards Tarhunah and eastern fronts between Sirte and Misrata. Abugrein could see renewed military activity in the next few weeks. Of note, the commander of the Sumoud Brigade from Misrata, Salah Badi, appeared in a newly-published video speaking from the Abugrein frontline. Separately, the withdrawal of Russian PMCs from Tripoli is set to significantly undermine the LNA's posture across the majority of Tripoli's frontlines, although reports suggest Wagner Group PMCs assumed a passive posture over the past few months relatively compared with their "hands-on" involvement supporting LNA forces in September 2019. Meanwhile, escalation is assessed as likely in the medium term across the western region. LNA forces may begin the counteroffensive to reclaim air superiority with an initial focus on areas between Al-Jufra airbase and Gharyan. Of note, the LNA spox declared the LNA will focus on the axis linking Al-Jufra, Ash-Shwayrif, Bani Walid, Mizdah and Tarhuna. The LNA spox described this axis as critical to the LNA's supplies given it links the east and south to the western region. Further shipments of military supplies will continue to flock towards the East and West as both LNA and GNA forces gear up for a likely escalation. Advanced air defence systems could be deployed by the LNA's foreign backers to circumvent Turkey's UAVs and electronic warfare capabilities, especially after Russian-made Pantsir S1 systems proved ineffective. In the oil & gas sector, production remains suspended at Al-Sharara oil field, despite reports of ongoing negotiations to resume production at the field. Zintan elements within GNA forces are reportedly attempting to negotiate a resumption of production with local forces in the south, though the LNA continues to exert influence in the region. A shift in alliances across the entire southern region remains possible in light of recent GNA military gains across the west.

LIBYANS AND THE ARAB STREET

In a piece published by *The Guardian*, Bethan McKernan explores Turkey's bold plans in the east Mediterranean and how Libya fits in Ankara's broader bid to project power and influence across the region. Turkey's maritime demarcation deal with the GNA is inscribed in its "Blue Homeland" (Mavi Vatan) military doctrine announced in 2006. One of the objectives of the doctrine is to deny Cyprus and Athens access to hydrocarbon resources in the Mediterranean. Of note, Turkish President Recep Erdogan recently demoted Navy Chief of Staff (CoS), Rear Admiral Cihat Yayici, the architect of the maritime demarcation deal between Turkey and Libya's GNA in November 2019. Yayici's demotion to Turkey's General Staff was allegedly due to disagreement with Defence Minister Hulusi Akar. The Guardian article revisits Ankara's intent behind its involvement in the region, highlighting the fact that Turkey views hydrocarbon resources as a power projection tool, not a revenue stream per se. "But even if the deal is thrown out by international courts, the pending legal battles have for now delayed exploration projects by Ankara's rivals – most significantly a new joint effort by Greece, Cyprus and Israel to build a gas pipeline that would bypass Turkey. Rumours currently abound in diplomatic circles that Turkey and Israel are seeking to restore full diplomatic ties. "The push for control over any oil and gas in the Mediterranean basin is not really an economic project at all: gas supply is not a pressing need or financial imperative for Turkey yet. This is really about the projection of political power," said Mustafa Karahan, the director of consultancy Dragon Energy. "Spending on Mediterranean energy projects is a bit like national defence budgets. It's like an arms race where you have to act before your rival does." Turkey may yet find its *Mavi Vatan* project comes unstuck if it is dragged deeper into Libya's fighting. It is already battling both the regime and Kurdish militias in Syria and countering the UAE's influence in Somalia and across the Horn of Africa.

About Whispering Bell



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