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A POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TRIPOLI'S ABU SALIM

The Rise of the Stability Support Apparatus as Hegemon

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Front cover photo

Opening ceremony of SSA branch in Janzur, north-western Libya, February 2023.

Source: SSA_Gov/Facebook

Overview

The Stability Support Apparatus (SSA), entrenched in the strategic neighbourhood of Abu Salim, has emerged as a pivotal player in Libya's power dynamics. At the main southern gateway into the Libyan capital of Tripoli, Abu Salim has gone from a hotbed of pro-Qaddafi resistance during Libya's uprising of 2011 to a stronghold dominated by Abdelghani al-Kikli (widely known as 'Ghaniwa') and his SSA. Ghaniwa consolidated power over Abu Salim through processes marked by violence—the dynamics of which were often underpinned by national-level politics. In so doing, he reshaped the neighbourhood's political economy. The hegemonic nature of this military consolidation allowed the SSA to take on an outsized role in Libya's broader political and economic spheres. This Briefing Paper offers a political economy analysis of Abu Salim and a chronological account of the rise of the SSA as hegemon. The paper shows how the SSA's economic activities encompass revenue that leverage its geographic footprint and networks. It also demonstrates how the group shifted its modus operandi over time to serve the end goal of consolidation.

Key findings

- Ghaniwa and his group's rise to dominance in Abu Salim has been enabled by acting under various banners—based on contextual trends—from claiming revolutionary credentials post-2011 and brandishing the anti-crime mantle post-2014, to emphasizing stability post-2019.
- In its quest to dominate Abu Salim's political economy, the SSA, along with its leadership, has deliberately modified its modus operandi and involvement in governance to deepen co-dependence between the group and Abu Salim's residents.
- The aftermath of the 2019–20 Tripoli war marked a turning point that allowed the SSA leadership to expand its political and economic influence by transitioning from predation to state capture.
- The SSA markedly differs from other counterparts in Tripoli in that it has had the most advanced and longest-running hegemonic control over one neighbourhood. Despite this playing a positive role in stabilizing Abu Salim, it has come at the cost of its militarization.

Introduction

Over the past decade, Libya's security landscape has undergone significant transformations, with the collapse of Qaddafi's regime in 2011 inducing the fragmentation of its monopoly on violence. A plethora of armed groups emerged in the wake of this development, paving the way for the hybridization of Libya's security sector.¹ More than ten years later, a select number of these very groups have undergone processes of consolidation of their territorial control, while their peers have either been absorbed or vanquished, or vanished. In tandem, these same powerful armed groups have established intricate and diverse mechanisms to sustain themselves financially, all while configuring and reconfiguring their relationships with local communities and government authorities. The consolidation methods adopted by these powerful groups have had significant impacts on shaping local political economies. Moreover, their networks now also exert sizeable influence over national-level politics, effectively interacting with high-profile national-level stakeholders, as well as with foreign governments.

A microcosm of this process of consolidation has occurred in the famed neighbourhood of Abu Salim in the Libyan capital of Tripoli. The largest of Tripoli's 12 municipalities, Abu Salim is considered the main southern gateway into the capital, and borders its strategic Airport Road and the capital's coveted International Airport. Abu Salim is also Libya's most densely populated area and is home to two of Tripoli's largest hospitals, its largest garment market, and one of western Libya's largest scrap yards.

Prior to 2011, the neighbourhood was notorious for having the largest political prison of the Qaddafi regime. During the August 2011 uprising battles, Abu Salim was the last holdout of Qaddafi's forces, with hit-and-run battles between revolutionaries and regime forces persisting for weeks after the rest of Tripoli fell to the rebels (Malone, 2011).² After 2011, Abu Salim was an area of competition for control and influence between multiple armed groups. Of these groups, only one—the faction known today as the SSA—has emerged victorious, monopolizing territorial control over the neighbourhood as it consolidated power.

The group now referred to as the SSA has proven resilient, navigating multiple phases of Libyan developments, from uneasy peace to all-out internationalized civil war (Megerisi, 2019). Under the leadership of its enigmatic figurehead

Ghaniwa, the group has transformed from a rag-tag, inconsequential militia in Abu Salim in 2011 to an organized armed group whose leader's blessing is widely regarded as a prerequisite for any aspiring prime minister securing a foothold in Tripoli. As recently as 2022, the alignment of Ghaniwa and his Tripoli-based SSA was the main deciding factor in the clashes between two rival prime ministers, effectively illustrating that the SSA's—and particularly, its leader's—influence extended far beyond the Abu Salim neighbourhood stronghold (Lacher, 2023).

The journey of Ghaniwa's SSA is remarkable not only due to the group's contemporary influence, but also because it offers valuable insights into the processes of local armed group consolidation over time. It shows how non-linear the path towards consolidation can be, how armed groups can employ different strategies based on contextual factors, and how military victories are not necessarily the main determinant in assessing a given group's ability to consolidate influence. Moreover, Ghaniwa's SSA also serves as a case study in highlighting the trade-offs for localized stability. From the modestly sized and relatively stable neighbourhood of Abu Salim, Ghaniwa's influence is no longer confined to the local military arena but rather extends explicitly to national-level politics and economics, as well as to Libya's near future.

This Briefing Paper aims to explore different facets of the SSA's evolution, and its consolidation of control in Libya's most populous neighbourhood—Abu Salim—over time. Firstly, the brief will chronologically explore the group's trajectory, tracing its establishment and subsequent development, as well as its different phases of expansion in Abu Salim. Secondly, it will examine the group's economic activities, including some of the diverse revenue streams that the group has tapped into. Thirdly, it will consider the group's relationship with local communities and constituencies. Lastly, the brief will delve into the SSA's distinctive features, notably how it shaped its relationships with other actors, particularly local communities and national authorities. By analysing these aspects, the aim is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the SSA's distinctive trajectory. While this in-depth analysis presents only one case study of armed group consolidation in Libya, it concludes by considering the implications, as well as policy lessons applicable to the entirety of the country's biggest, largest, and most hybrid groups.

This paper is primarily based on interviews conducted by the author in Tripoli

in 2022 and 2023. It also draws on past interviews conducted during the Tripoli conflict of 2019, as well as the author's broader research on Libya undertaken between 2011 and 2022. Interlocutors included Libyan security officials and bureaucrats, as well as academics, politicians, journalists, and local residents.

The SSA's checkered journey to dominance

Origins in revolution and early evolution

Ghaniwa was relatively unknown in pre-2011 Libya, being an ordinary civilian born in the modest town of Kikla,³ and owning a bakery in the Um Durman area of Abu Salim.⁴ This all changed in August of 2011, against the backdrop of Tripoli slowly falling to revolutionaries who had flocked into the capital from Misrata, Zintan, and the Nafusa mountains. Seizing the momentum, Ghaniwa mobilized, alongside a dozen residents of Abu Salim from Kikla, to oust regime forces that had made the neighbourhood their last bastion in the capital (Harb, 2015).⁵ Wresting territorial control from retreating regime forces, Ghaniwa and his men captured a regime-era military barrack in the Um Durman area. To this day, the military camp remains Ghaniwa's main headquarters in Abu Salim.

Tribal affinities played an important role in the formation of Ghaniwa's early militia group. Because Abu Salim was one of the last regime strongholds in the Libyan capital, some revolutionary groups arriving from outside the capital had naturally moved towards the populated area not only to fight regime forces, but also for war spoils and territory (France 24, 2011).⁶ Leveraging this dynamic, the then small-time revolutionary commander from Kikla recruited among his hometown's revolutionary cadre to strengthen his own fledgling militia in Abu Salim. By late 2011, Ghaniwa's group comprised some 30 to 45 revolutionaries, most of whom were from Kikla.⁷

Security pluralism was a defining feature of Libya's post-revolutionary scene, and Abu Salim was no exception.⁸ Despite being at the helm of one of the first small groups that mobilized within the neighbourhood, Ghaniwa and his group were far from its most influential unit. The local Abu Salim Military Council, headed by former Abu Salim prison inmate Salah al-Burki, emerged as the dominant force in Abu Salim in 2011. Hailing from Tarhuna, Burki and his force's superiority was in

large part owed to his own network, which straddled the revolutionary and Islamist milieus because of his personal background.⁹ Nevertheless, Ghaniwa could easily claim the mantle of a 'revolutionary' then, and, as such, benefited from Burki's support. Ghaniwa's forces nominally operated under the umbrella of Burki's Abu Salim Military Council, though by and large retained operational independence.¹⁰

In the immediate post-revolution phase, one of the most pronounced social identity markers was communities' perceived alignment vis-à-vis the revolution (Badi, 2020). Abu Salim was largely viewed by revolutionary forces with suspicion, and the neighbourhood carries the stigma of being perceived as pro-regime to this very day. The sentiment that the revolution was 'unfinished' lingered after Tripoli fell to the rebels, but this ethos was more pronounced in Abu Salim—where revolutionaries securitized the discourse—than elsewhere in Tripoli (Wehrey, 2012). This dynamic was not lost on Ghaniwa, who instrumentalized this perception to his group's advantage. Arguing that he needed military support to address 'regime threats'¹¹ in Abu Salim, Ghaniwa solicited military support from commanders in the revolutionary-dominated neighbourhood of Suq al-Jum'a. This dynamic earned Ghaniwa the goodwill of the revolutionary forces at a time when conspiracies of regime comeback were at an all-time high. In October 2011, Ghaniwa's group was consequently folded into the Supreme Security Committee (SSC), established by the National Transitional Council (Wehrey, 2014). The appointment of Hashim Bishr, an Islamist from Suq al-Jum'a, at the helm of the Tripoli branch of the SSC proved a boon to Ghaniwa (Al Jazeera Mubasher, 2013). After cultivating a relationship with Bishr¹² using the same narrative and network, Ghaniwa managed to secure his group some cars and 'technicals' fitted with anti-aircraft machine guns through the SSC,¹³ and his group became known as the Abu Salim SSC unit. Much like other SSC units, it continued to operate with little to no oversight from the SSC headquarters (Wehrey, 2014).

For Tripoli-based armed groups, the transition phase that began with the election of the General National Congress (GNC) in July 2012 was decisive (France 24, 2012). Libya's elites had conflicting visions and agendas that bled into the political sphere, toxifying it with zero-sum calculations and impeding meaningful reform and progress. Politico-military alliances grew

more salient, and social fragmentation resulted in flashpoints between local armed groups (Lacher, 2013). By 2013, citizens had grown disillusioned with post-revolutionary militias across the country due to rampant insecurity (Al Jazeera, 2013a). Tripoli, which housed most of Libya's institutions as well as the seat of the GNC, had become the site of competition between armed groups representing or acting on behalf of the interests of different social and political stakeholders. A popular trend calling for the expulsion of revolutionary groups from outside Tripoli—perceived as responsible for insecurity—had crystallized in the capital as a result (HRW, 2013a).

Despite most of his cadre not originally hailing from Tripoli, Ghaniwa and his militia were viewed by Tripoli's residents as native to the capital and were therefore held in higher esteem than Tripoli-based Misratan or Zintani counterparts.¹⁴ Even the Abu Salim Military Council, whose mere name and leadership evoked revolutionary tropes and an association with Islamists,¹⁵ was negatively viewed by the neighbourhood's residents. Nevertheless, increased social legitimacy had limited effects in practice: Burki and his council continued to trump Ghaniwa and his group's influence in the neighbourhood.¹⁶

In 2013, owing to its strategic location, Abu Salim became one of the theatres for friction between Tripoli-based groups—a dynamic that almost spelled the end of Ghaniwa's group (Local Council for Free Men and Women in Libya and Arabs, 2013). Indeed, one of the simmering conflicts was between forces aligned with the Islamist-led Abu Salim Military Council—including Ghaniwa's SSC unit—and the more militarily potent Zintani units based in the capital. Tensions were partly attributable to Tripoli's unsustainable security arrangements and the belligerence of Zintani units, which respectively dominated and derived funds from the Abu Salim-adjacent Airport Road and International Airport (Libya History, 2014).¹⁷ The alignment of the Abu Salim Military Council and Zintani units with opposing political poles in the GNC compounded this divide (Al Jazeera, 2014a). Repeated confrontations and brinksmanship culminated in a flashpoint in Abu Salim in June 2013, with the first recorded instance of post-revolutionary large-scale urban warfare within Abu Salim—pitting Ghaniwa's unit against Zintani forces (Eaton, 2023; Free Zintani, 2013). Responding to Ghaniwa having arrested several individuals of Zintani origin on drug trafficking charges, Zintani units in the capital launched offensives

on Ghaniwa's barracks in Abu Salim.¹⁸ Benefiting from military superiority in both equipment and personnel, Zintani looted the entirety of Ghaniwa's weapons and vehicles from Abu Salim before retreating, freeing 130 detainees from one of his secret prisons in the process.¹⁹ This first military defeat almost ended Ghaniwa and his SSC unit's footprint in Abu Salim.

Opportunism and the aftermath of Fajr Libya

Despite suffering a heavy loss to Zintani units in June 2013, Ghaniwa's bout of conflict with them earned him the praises of the self-proclaimed revolutionary camp within the capital and beyond it.²⁰ At the time, political and military stakeholders with ties in the Islamist or hard-line revolutionary milieus considered themselves to represent the bulwark against a burgeoning anti-revolutionary movement sweeping the region (Al Jazeera, 2013b). In Libya, this movement was perceived by political Islamists and hard-line revolutionaries to be masterminded by their political opponent in the GNC, the National Forces Alliance (NFA). By extension, Zintani factions in the capital also represented a threat, given their alignment and ties with the NFA.²¹ Further compounding revolutionary antagonism towards Zintani units was their reconciliation with regime-era officers, and the subsequent recruitment of these officers into their ranks.²² Perceiving that the NFA was orchestrating a soft coup at best, or a comeback of the Qaddafi regime at worst, Islamist and revolutionary armed actors scrambled in May 2013 to force the GNC to pass a sweeping Political Isolation Law that barred thousands of Libyan officials from holding office (HRW, 2013b). This use of force for political goals occurred a month before clashes between Ghaniwa and Zintani units erupted in June. Viewed in this context, the clash between Zintani factions and the Military Council-aligned Ghaniwa was the first instance of revolutionaries and their opponents violently colliding. This backdrop was a windfall for Ghaniwa, as he easily claimed revolutionary creed, soliciting the support of Islamists and revolutionary forces to rebuild and reconsolidate.²³ Burki's links within the GNC were instrumental in this endeavour, and Ghaniwa regained his footing in Abu Salim thanks to his support.²⁴

Ghaniwa subsequently squarely positioned himself with the revolutionary coalition to benefit from their military

support.²⁵ When Khalifa Haftar launched Operation Dignity in May of 2014, Zintani units aligned with Haftar in Tripoli stormed the GNC headquarters in Abu Salim (*Deutsche Welle*, 2014). This pitted Ghaniwa against Zintani units once more and paved the way for Ghaniwa's eventual alignment with the Fajr Libya operation (Al-Wasat, 2014a). Launched in July 2014 by a coalition of revolutionaries and Islamists under the aegis of Misrata's Military Council, the operation's immediate military goal was to dislodge Zintani units from the capital's Airport Road and International Airport (Al Jazeera, 2014b).²⁶ Burki's Abu Salim Military Council aligned with Fajr Libya, and, by extension, so did Ghaniwa. Revolutionaries and Islamists within the GNC were also quick to announce support for the operation (Al-Araby, 2014). After weeks of fighting, the coalition's military goal succeeded: Zintani forces were evicted from the capital, but Tripoli's International Airport was no longer operational due to the violent clashes (France 24, 2014; Markey and al-Yaacubi, 2014). The destructive nature of the war, coupled with the evacuation of most diplomatic staff and the destruction of Tripoli's then only civilian airport, had a disproportionately negative impact on the Libyan population. Despite succeeding in ousting Zintani units, the pyrrhic nature of the victory in the 2014 civil war became an albatross of unpopularity for the Fajr Libya coalition.

Retreating from Tripoli, Zintani forces opted to target the town of Kikla—Ghaniwa's hometown situated 150 kilometres south-west of Tripoli—which was suspected of being prepared as a launching pad for Fajr Libya's units to potentially attack Zintan.²⁷ This was a defining moment for Ghaniwa, who mobilized in October 2014 to his native city to defend it alongside his Tripoli-based cadre with roots in Kikla.²⁸ Some of the deadliest fighting seen in Libya's post-revolutionary history raged in Kikla for weeks; despite benefiting from substantial military support from the Fajr Libya coalition, Ghaniwa's group and Kikla's revolutionaries were defeated, retreating to Tripoli (Al Jazeera, 2014c; Al-Wasat, 2014b). Some 4,000 households in Kikla were also internally displaced as Zintan occupied their town after indiscriminate shelling (Cousins, 2014; IOM, 2017, p. 14). Ghaniwa saw this defeat as an opportunity, offering the majority of Kikla's displaced families free shelter in an incomplete residential project in Abu Salim's vicinity.²⁹ He also recruited their youth—most of whom he had already armed and fought with in Kikla—into his SSC unit.³⁰

Fajr Libya's aftermath was a turning point for Ghaniwa's group in Abu Salim. The recruitment of Kikla's displaced youth into his group significantly expanded its ranks. Moreover, Ghaniwa had also retained an arsenal of heavy weaponry—notably tanks and cannons—provided by Misrata's Military Council during the fighting in Kikla.³¹ Just months after Ghaniwa's defeat in Kikla, the head of the Abu Salim Military Council, Burki, died in clashes against Haftar-aligned units in Aziziya in March 2015. Despite Burki's brother Ammrū replacing him at the helm, the Military Council's influence waned, gradually overshadowed by Ghaniwa's now more powerful SSC unit. This marked the first instance of Ghaniwa being the dominant force in Abu Salim—ironically emerging as a winner on the back of successive military defeats.

Rebranding and the rise of the Abu Salim hegemon

The aftermath of the conflict in 2014 and the political transformations that came about in its wake had a significant impact on Tripoli's security landscape. First, the GNC-linked, self-styled National Salvation Government established in August 2014, although internationally unrecognized, reconfigured the institutional affiliations of armed groups in the capital. Formed as a war cabinet, the newly established executive's Ministry of Interior set up a Central Security Apparatus in Tripoli to improve security in the capital, the only real territory controlled by the government.³² This decision provided an avenue for Ghaniwa—among others—to secure a new affiliation for his Abu Salim-based group.³³ This quest for a new affiliation was due to an Interior Ministry decree issued the previous year stipulating the dissolution of the SSC by the end of 2013, a decision that compromised Ghaniwa's institutional affiliation to the state (LANA, 2013). Ghaniwa's SSC unit, now strengthened with fresh recruits and newly acquired weapons, became the Abu Salim Central Security Directorate (ASCSD) (Lacher and al-Idrissi, 2018).³⁴

A second dynamic that impacted Tripoli's security was the by-product of the fragmentation of the Fajr Libya coalition and the then ongoing UN-led Skhirat talks to form a unity government (Al-Masry al-Youm, 2015). This led to increased tensions between Tripoli-based groups—including Ghaniwa's—over their preferred political blueprint for the way forward and their stances vis-à-vis the dialogue process. These tensions soon came to a head, with the

Skhirat talks culminating in the signing of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) in December of 2015, which stipulated the establishment of the Presidency Council (PC) and the formation of an inclusive Government of National Accord (GNA) (UNSMIL, 2015). But the LPA's section on interim security arrangements, which was meant to guarantee the newly established PC's arrival in Tripoli, was deliberately left vague (Lacher and al-Idrissi, 2018). These arrangements were crucial as Tripoli was still dominated by armed groups that had mobilized as part of Fajr Libya, and was also the seat of the National Salvation Government, which rejected the LPA.

Bishr, former head of the now dissolved SSC, returned to Tripoli shortly after the signing of the LPA as the informal intermediate between the PC's Security Arrangements Committee and the capital's armed groups. Charged with securing the arrival of the PC, Bishr relied primarily on his network in his native Suq al-Jum'a to build a pro-PC coalition. His immediate priorities were to secure the support of the Special Deterrence Force (SDF), which controlled Mitiga airport, and the Nawasi Battalion, which controlled the port and naval base.³⁵ Sensing the inevitable wind of change with the arrival of the PC through the Nawasi-controlled Busitta naval base in March 2016, Ghaniwa and Tripoli Revolutionaries Battalion (TRB) commander Haitham al-Tajuri, both of whom had links to Bishr through the SSC, decided to side with the new PC.³⁶

The PC subsequently opted to weaponize language around security arrangements in the LPA, which stipulated 'the withdrawal of armed formations from cities' (Al-Wasat, 2017a; UNSMIL, 2015, art. 34). Opportunistically, some Tripoli-based armed groups used the UN process and the institutions it produced to gain legitimacy, thus doing the PC's bidding. Now rebranding his Ministry of Interior-affiliated unit as a policing and counter-criminal force, Ghaniwa and his ASCSD leveraged the international community's blinkered quest for stability in Tripoli to take on local enemies and evict them from the capital.³⁷ While the broad fault-lines for conflict in Tripoli were indeed structured along rifts between supporters and opponents of the GNA, ambitions for expansion, territorial consolidation, and a desire to assert control over state-linked institutions and facilities were also at play, particularly in Abu Salim (Lacher and al-Idrissi, 2018). This paved the way for Ghaniwa's rise as a hegemon in Abu Salim.

From 2016 to 2017, Ghaniwa, acting in concert with a clique of other Tripoli-

based pro-GNA groups, moved against opponents. In a fateful turn of events, the ASCSD first turned on its old ally, the Abu Salim Military Council—which had rebranded as the 'Martyr Salah al-Burki Battalion'—in early 2016. Clashes over territory with the Burki Battalion were commonplace in Abu Salim throughout 2016, and the force was eventually pushed south of Abu Salim and towards al-Hadhba in February 2017 (Al-Marsad, 2016a; Al-Wasat, 2017b; *Deutsche Welle*, 2016).³⁸ Ghaniwa had also clashed with Misratan forces in al-Hadhba throughout 2016,³⁹ soliciting Tajuri's support in his effort to push them out of his territory (Al-Wasat, 2016a).⁴⁰ In March 2017, Ghaniwa expanded further, evicting the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group-linked Ihsan Brigade from its last holdout in Nasr forest and, with the help of Tajuri's TRB, dislodging the pro-GNC Presidential Security Force units from the vicinity of Rixos Hotel near Abu Salim. Disgruntled with Ghaniwa, a coalition of forces led by Misratan commanders Mohamed Baaoui and Salah Badi launched multiple unsuccessful assaults on the ASCSD in May 2017 (Al-Wasat, 2017c). Ghaniwa and Tajuri eventually ended this threat by pushing these forces outside of Tripoli's administrative borders in July, seizing the strategic Hadhba prison and its highly prized inmates in the process (Al Jazeera, 2017).

In under two years, Ghaniwa had risen to dominate Abu Salim, asserting control over Rixos, the seat of the new LPA-established High State Council, the strategic Hospitality Palaces, and the Nasr forest. This cemented the oligopoly of a so-called 'militia quartet'—the Nawasi, the SDF, the TRB, and the ASCSD—in the capital and Ghaniwa's hegemony over Abu Salim (Lacher and al-Idrissi, 2018).

Repression, wartime mobilization, and offshoots

The Tripoli militia quartet's oligopoly was the defining feature of the 2017–18 security landscape in the Libyan capital. Ghaniwa's hegemony over Abu Salim was, for the most part, territorially unchallenged, but he took measures to 'coup-proof' his force and consolidate command and control over his units through marginalization and violent repression.⁴¹ Ghaniwa also sought to shore up his group's social legitimacy within Abu Salim itself. One strategy he relied upon included launching recruitment campaigns within the neighbourhood itself, an effort meant to make his ASCSD's make-up more reflective of the demo-

graphics within his area of control.⁴² This also positioned Ghaniwa as an employer and provider in a time of economic malaise, particularly for youth. Another strategy, which Ghaniwa was famed across Tripoli for, was coercing the General Electricity Company of Libya (GECOL) and its staff to prevent load-shedding schemes from being applied in Abu Salim.⁴³ This significantly boosted Ghaniwa's popularity in his neighbourhood, despite his group being part of the quartet that gained notoriety for illicit enrichment throughout their years dominating the capital.

Haftar's famed offensive on Tripoli in April of 2019 upended the quartet's oligopoly, and threatened Ghaniwa's hegemony over Abu Salim. Ghaniwa was not one of the Tripoli-based groups who Haftar had focused on negotiating with over the capture of the capital. The Libyan Arab Armed Forces had instead focused on talks with the Kaniyat, from Tarhuna; Gheryani units, under Adel Daab; Zawiyan factions, under Mahmoud Ben Rajab and the Buzriba brothers; Naji Gneidi, the leader of Fursan Janzur; and the TRB's Tajuri. Arrangements with Zawiyan factions, critical to Tripoli's capture, fell apart on the same day Haftar launched his offensive—due to Ben Rajab reneging on an agreement to allow Haftar's forces safe passage to Janzur. With prospects of a blitzkrieg on Tripoli visibly collapsing, Haftar was clearly set on employing military means to seize the capital. Several groups from Tripoli's outskirts mobilized quickly to counter Haftar's offensive, notably units from Misrata, Zawiya, and Zintan. This put the onus on Tripoli-based groups to either militarily join the fight or openly admit their desire to negotiate with Haftar. On 10 April, then PC President Serraj brought representatives of armed groups to Abu Sitta's naval base in Tripoli to probe their stances on formalizing the establishment of a coalition with other western-based groups to defend Tripoli. The meeting, in which Tripoli's groups opted to put their differences with other western groups aside and mobilize under the GNA's umbrella, formalized the new alliance. The ASCSD—and broader quartet—sided with western armed groups that had mobilized to resist the offensive.⁴⁴

Despite the shared military goal, old grudges from the post-Fajr era, notably with Misratan groups mobilized at Tripoli's outskirts that had had previous run-ins with Ghaniwa's ASCSD, affected the mobilization process.⁴⁵ Ghaniwa, whose Tripoli-based group lacked any meaningful combat experience compared with more experienced Misratan and

Zintani units, was initially adamant not to allow the deployment of other forces towards the Hadhba front line via Abu Salim, as he worried they would never leave.⁴⁶ This led to the ASCSD suffering heavy losses in the early months of the offensive, including the loss of field commanders. Ghaniwa's position on allowing other units' deployment changed when his ASCSD became known as the Achilles heel in Tripoli's defences, with Haftar's coalition—and later, Wagner mercenaries—concentrating on penetrating Tripoli through Abu Salim and its vicinity as the war went on (Ibrahim and Barabanov, 2021; Libyan State Channel, 2020).⁴⁷

The official end of the offensive on Tripoli in June of 2020 represented another defining moment for Ghaniwa's ASCSD. While the anti-Haftar 'Volcano of Wrath' coalition had emerged victorious thanks to an influx of Turkish support, Ghaniwa was left weakened and vulnerable (Badi, 2021; Megerisi, 2020). His ASCSD's military performance during the war was lacklustre, and his ranks had suffered losses. Moreover, his group had not benefited significantly from Turkish security assistance, unlike other peers from western Libya.⁴⁸ In addition, many Volcano of Wrath-aligned units—predominantly Misratan—resented Ghaniwa and his ASCSD for their role in evicting revolutionary groups from the capital after the signing of the LPA. To make matters worse, the TRB—one of the ASCSD's powerful allies in Tripoli—had also experienced significant fragmentation in the aftermath of the war. Therefore, despite gaining credit for helping to defend the capital, Ghaniwa was left isolated.

Nevertheless, capitalizing once again on the political climate, Ghaniwa leveraged the weakness and international isolation of the GNA and its prime minister, Fayez al-Serraj, to reconsolidate once more. Serraj had, by then, grown weary of the ambitions of then GNA Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha to replace him as prime minister. Against the backdrop of an impending political dialogue, under the aegis of the UN, aimed at replacing the GNA, Prime Minister al-Serraj became even more desperate. He sought to secure the support of Tripoli-based groups against the Misratan Bashagha, who had eyes on the presidency. Bashagha had campaigned on the promise to reform security, dismantle Tripoli's cartel, and counter human smuggling groups west of Libya.⁴⁹ In a masterstroke of expedience, Ghaniwa brought figures targeted by Bashagha under one umbrella, convincing Serraj to institutionalize a new armed group, dubbed the SSA, under the PC (Al-Wasat,

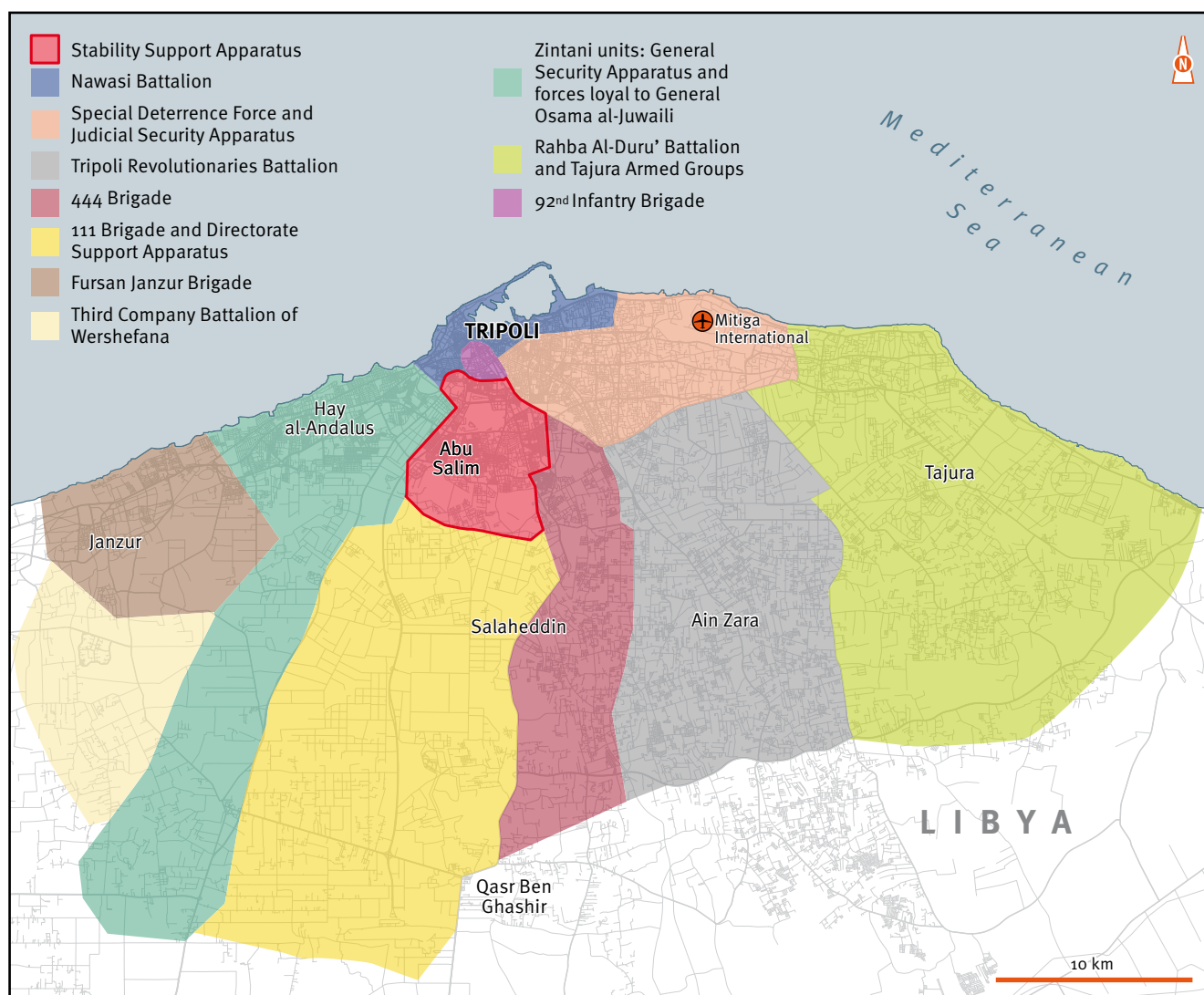
2021). For Serraj, the rationale was simply to secure the support of Ghaniwa and other groups in order to thwart Bashagha's attempts to replace him. But for Ghaniwa, the SSA was a vehicle to reconsolidate, rebrand, and project influence.

The SSA's role in manufacturing political change

For Ghaniwa, the SSA's set-up as a quasi-independent entity under the PC was a boon. It did not fall under the authority of any ministry, and the minimal oversight and weakness of the PC allowed Ghaniwa unfettered access to funding. The SSA's vague mandate also made it easier to exploit opportunities for expansion. In the SSA's initial decree, Ghaniwa's deputies included Ayoub Buras from Tripoli's TRB, Hassan Buzriba from the coastal city of Zawiya, and Mousa Masmous from the National Mobile Force in Janzur.⁵⁰ The coalition's perceived clout made it a force to be reckoned with. In addition, Ghaniwa convinced Serraj to appoint his ally from Kikla, Lutfi al-Hrari, as deputy head of the Internal Security Apparatus (ISA) in September 2020.⁵¹ He also leveraged his influence over the quartet-linked head of the Tripoli Military Zone, Abdelbaset Marwan, to create his own unit under the Ministry of Defence.⁵² Dubbed the 22nd Infantry Battalion, the Ghaniwa-linked group was formally established in July 2020, staffed with cadre from the ASCSD, and endowed with the heavy weaponry—including tanks and cannons—that Ghaniwa had procured from supplies intended to counter Haftar's offensive.⁵³

Serraj's gambit to stay in power by empowering Tripoli-based militias failed, but Ghaniwa was courted by several of the aspiring candidates for the post of prime minister who took part in the UN-hosted Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF).⁵⁴ The establishment of the SSA clearly marked a turning point in Ghaniwa's levels of political influence and his *modus operandi*. Abdulhamid Debaiba, appointed prime minister of the Government of National Unity (GNU) through a vote at the LPDF, directly negotiated his arrival in Tripoli with Ghaniwa in March of 2021, vowing not to marginalize the SSA.⁵⁵ Dabaiba also consulted Ghaniwa on the new executive's cabinet, with the SSA leader blessing the appointment of Khaled Mazen as interior minister.⁵⁶ Backing the nomination of a weak figure at the helm of this vital ministry was a deliberate choice by Ghaniwa, who leveraged Mazen's weakness by offering the minister personal

Map 1 Area of influence, pre-2022



Source: the author

protection in exchange for influence within his ministry.⁵⁷ Converting most of his ministry-affiliated ASCSD into SSA units, Ghaniwa nonetheless retained links with the Interior Ministry through Mazen.⁵⁸

Having consolidated control within Abu Salim once more, Ghaniwa's ambitions were now no longer local: he became invested in state capture and sought to project influence well beyond his neighbourhood stronghold. After elections anticipated for December 2021 were indefinitely postponed, Prime Minister Dabaiba was in a vulnerable position.⁵⁹ Bashagha had established a parallel government in eastern Libya in March 2022, and was threatening to enter Tripoli (ICG, 2022). Reliant on militia support to secure his footing in Tripoli, the GNU prime minister sought to secure the SSA commander's support.⁶⁰ He appointed Ghaniwa's ally Mohamed al-Khoja—former field commander within the ASCSD's

ranks—at the helm of the Ministry of Interior's Department for Combatting Illegal Migration (DCIM) in December 2021 (Ajel Fabray, 2020; Law Society LY, 2021). In April 2022, Dabaiba followed by appointing Osama Tellish—Ghaniwa's protégé and surrogate at the helm of the ASCSD—as the head of the Ministry of Interior's Facilities and Installations Protection Authority. In addition, he showed support to the SSA leader by publicly appearing next to him in Abu Salim multiple times (Hakomitna, 2022; Reality Heki, 2022).

While Bashagha also sought to obtain Ghaniwa's support, he had already conceded too many ministerial portfolios to Haftar and his allies in Zawiya for his advances to succeed.⁶¹ Ghaniwa backed Bashagha at first, but then turned against him when Bashagha named Zawiya's Esam Buzriba at the helm of the Ministry of Interior. Bashagha also solicited

the support of Ghaniwa's long-time ally, Tajuri, as well as the Nawasi Battalion (Lacher, 2022). Furthermore, he created a split within the SSA between Ghaniwa, who aligned with Dabaiba, and his deputy leaders Buras and Buzriba, who aligned with Bashagha.⁶² A flashpoint erupted when Tajuri, whose then modest force made up of TRB remnants had found shelter in Ghaniwa's territory, showed signs of intending to facilitate Bashagha's arrival in Tripoli in late August 2022.⁶³ In a turn of events reminiscent of 2014, Ghaniwa's SSA turned on Tajuri, crushing his units (Al Jazeera, 2022). Much like the post-LPA era, the main fault-line for the brief (but deadly) clashes that ensued was between supporters and opponents of the GNU in the capital. The SSA and the SDF, alongside some pro-Dabaiba units from Misrata as well as Zintan's General Security Apparatus under Emad Trabelsi, emerged victorious and had

evicted all pro-Bashagha groups from Tripoli by early September 2022.⁶⁴ Many of the remnants of the TRB who opted to remain in the capital were absorbed by Ghaniwa's SSA, while a minority of the Nawasi's cadre were integrated into the SDF.⁶⁵ Adding insult to injury, Ghaniwa's SSA put Tajuri's custom-made armoured car on display in front of the Abu Salim zoo, sending a clear message of dominance: the Tripoli quartet was no longer (Libyan Address Journal, 2022).

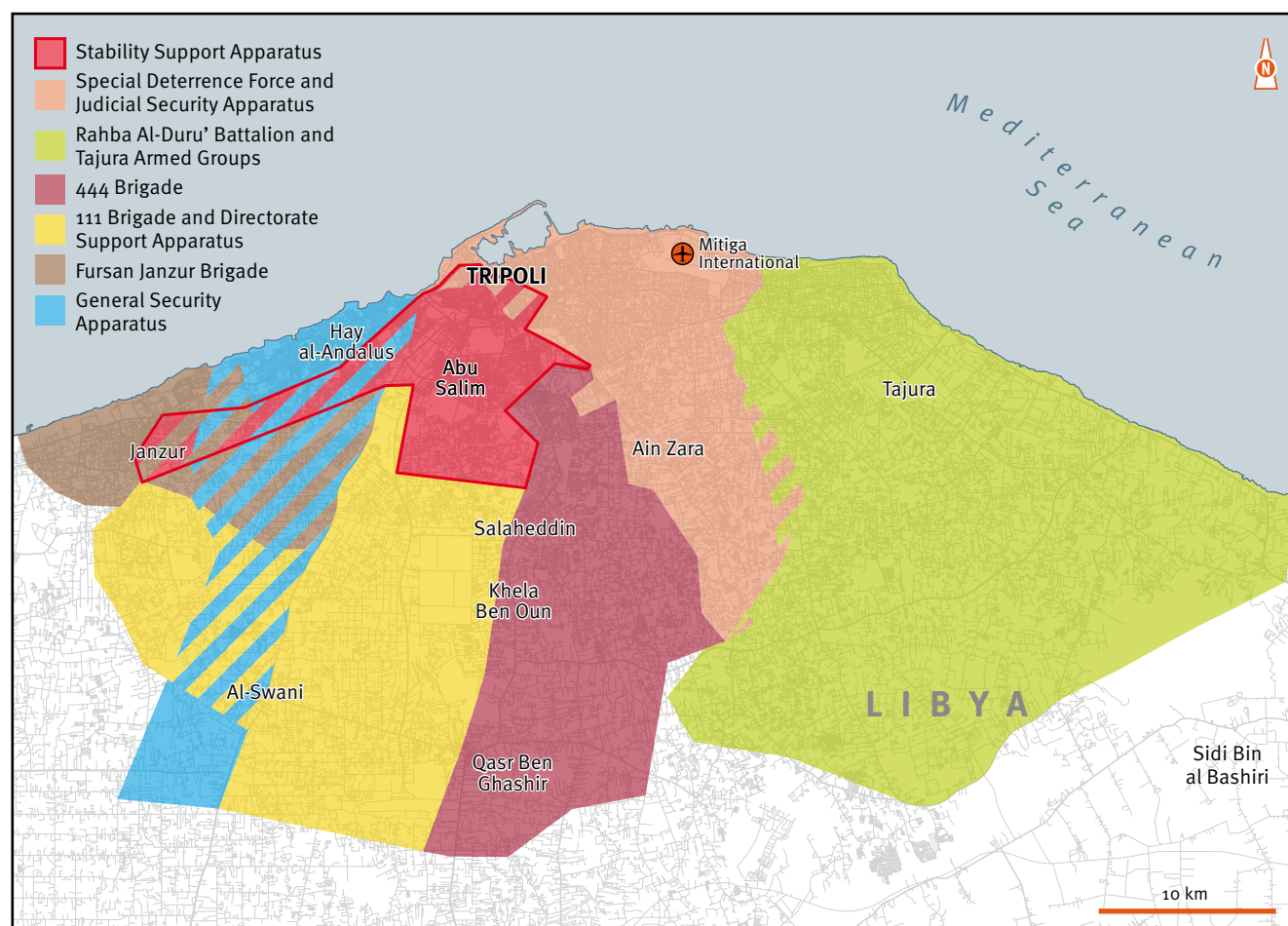
The prevailing narrative of a Dabaiba victory in the 2022 August clashes masked the extent to which armed groups now manufactured, rather than adapted to, political change. Unlike the negotiated—and, arguably, internationally supported—security arrangements of the post-LPA era, armed groups' alignments were now the main determinant for political change. Ghaniwa, by now well-established as the hegemon of Abu Salim and its vicinity, was the linchpin whose alignment determined the contours of contemporary Libya. The baker turned kingmaker significantly expanded his SSA by further recruiting in Abu Salim,

as well as establishing offshoots in several other cities in western Libya.⁶⁶ The SSA has now emerged as one of the dominant actors in Tripolitania writ-large, with Ghaniwa's network of allies and SSA offshoots straddling several institutions, including the ISA, multiple departments within the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Defence. His direct influence on politics also became overt, as he emerged as one of the main interfaces for negotiating Libya's political path forward; his SSA network, for example, was officially involved in negotiations brokered by the UN, regional organizations, and foreign states in dialogues with eastern Libyan counterparts affiliated with Haftar and his General Command (Al Arabiya, 2023; Al-Wasat, 2022; 2023a). Even the 5+5 Joint Military Commission—the body formed from five senior GNA-selected military officers and five senior Haftar-aligned officers and established to, among other things, support the reform of Libya's security sector—offered the SSA an award in June 2023 for making its Tripoli meeting at Rixos a success (LANA, 2023a).

The political economy of Abu Salim's SSA

The political economy of the Abu Salim neighbourhood has significantly morphed over the course of the evolution, consolidation, and eventual emergence of the SSA in its contemporary form. Most striking is the fact that the contours of Abu Salim's local political economy have largely mirrored the expansion and consolidation of Ghaniwa's group. As the group expanded to dominate the neighbourhood, it also tightened its grip over economic assets, state institutions, and infrastructure within its areas of control. The centrality of Ghaniwa as an individual to this ecosystem cannot be understated. Moreover, the transformation of his ASCSD into the SSA marked a turning point in the group's economic capital and the breadth of its financing strategies. As the head of the SSA, Ghaniwa's increased political clout and expanded state networks have secured him influence on political economies well beyond the geographic confines of his Abu Salim stronghold. Nevertheless, even

Map 2 Area of influence, November 2023



Source: the author

this new-found quasi-national stature was leveraged to become part and parcel of the group's consolidation strategies in Tripoli's Abu Salim.

Humble beginnings and dependence

In the immediate post-revolutionary era, Ghaniwa and his modest Abu Salim-based group were almost entirely financially dependent on state funding. They also relied heavily on military support through the local military council headed by Burki.⁶⁷ Securing an affiliation with the SSC through Bishr was an important milestone for the group as it allowed it to cover its cadre's baseline salaries. The group's equipment was basic, made up of war booty in the form of light weaponry from the Um Durman headquarters Ghaniwa had captured in Abu Salim, as well as a small number of technicals and anti-aircraft guns supplied to the group by the SSC.⁶⁸ Relative to its small

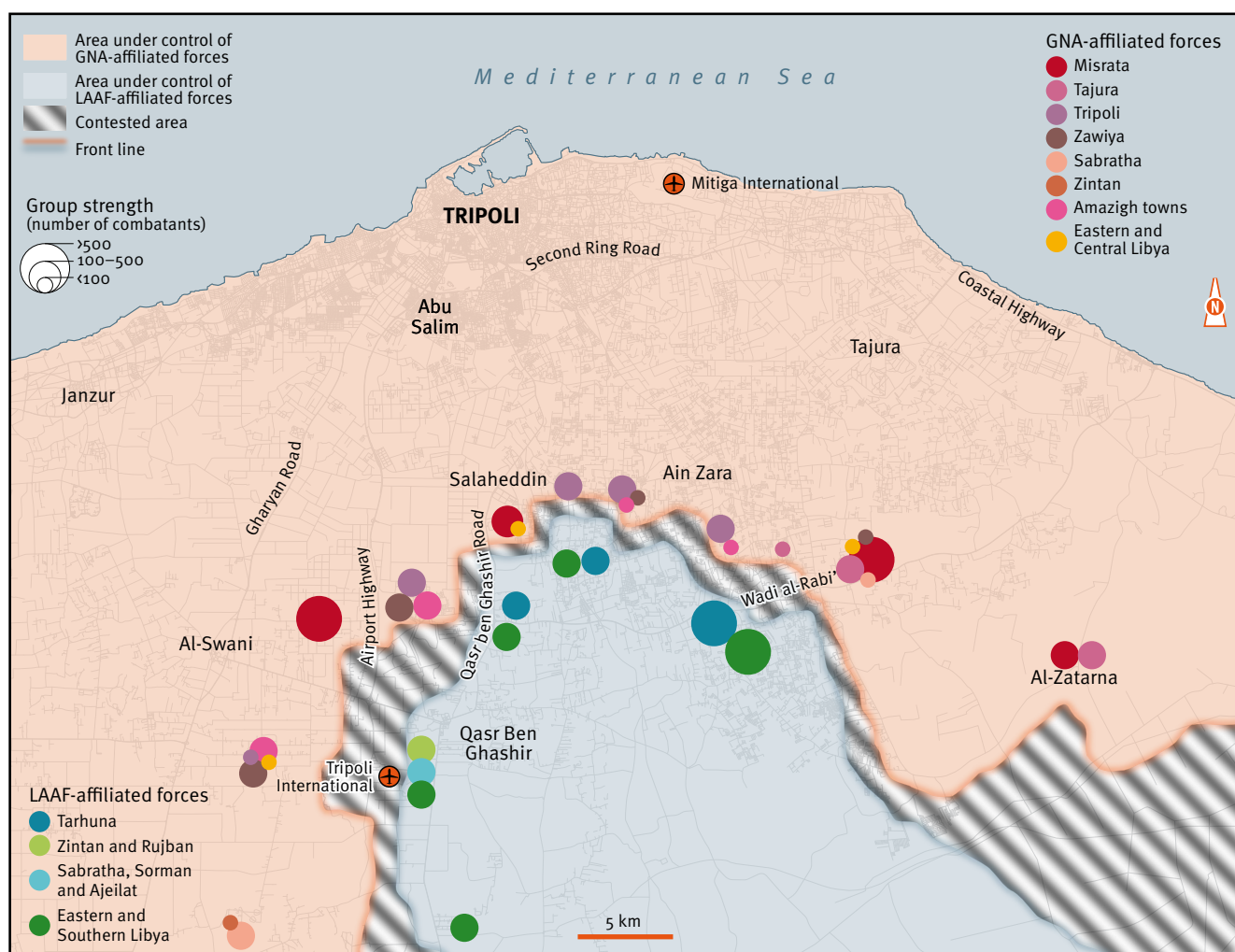
footprint in Abu Salim and its modest size, however, Ghaniwa's group was well-equipped. Nevertheless, it lacked the political, institutional, and social networks to expand, and had virtually no impact on Abu Salim's political economy.

This changed within the context of the Fajr Libya operation and its aftermath, with the subsequent rise of the quartet in Tripoli. During the GNA era, Ghaniwa sought to convert his new-found legitimacy and increased military footprint into more diverse funding streams. His successful transition from the SSC to the Ministry of Interior's Central Security Apparatus allowed him to secure a salary baseline for his cadre, freshly recruited from Kikla's displaced.⁶⁹ He also benefited from an influx of new weaponry provided to him as one of the only Fajr Libya-aligned units that mobilized to Kikla.⁷⁰ Austerity measures imposed by Libya's Central Bank then meant, however, that direct state funding in the form of salaries would not be forthcoming (Lacher and al-Idrissi, 2018).

The quartet's honeymoon era

As part of the Tripoli quartet, the ASCSD leveraged its influence to benefit from Libya's economic crisis. In the years 2016–18, the Tripoli quartet adapted to austerity by seeking indirect state funding, predominantly by coercing or conspiring with state officials to issue letters of credit to quartet-linked companies to import goods (Al-Wasat, 2018a). They then imported less than the amount declared, or nothing at all, profiting from the then widening disparity between the official and black market exchange rates of LYD to USD (Al-Wasat, 2016b). Although on a lesser scale than the TRB and the Nawasi, Ghaniwa's ASCSD benefited from this scheme.⁷¹ He also threatened and kidnapped multiple state officials, many within the Audit Bureau, to limit oversight on this practice.⁷² The ASCSD also monetized physical access to banks in Abu Salim, which allowed it to tap into other revenue generation

Map 3 Distribution of armed groups in greater Tripoli (as of August 2019)



Source: Wolfram Lacher (base map data source: OpenStreetMap)

schemes—including lucrative credit card withdrawal schemes that allowed enrichment by profiting from the black market exchange rate gap.⁷³ Another scheme included converting cash-strapped citizens' cheques into cash for a substantial fee. With banking officials fearing kidnappings and extortion, protection rackets became a new revenue stream for armed groups in Tripoli (Lacher and al-Idrissi, 2018). Unlike other Tripoli-based groups, which accepted banking officials independently hiring their cadre as 'guards' at local branches in exchange for protection, Ghaniwa centralized this funding stream.⁷⁴ To avoid ASCSD cadre independently enriching themselves, he solicited lump-sum payments from Abu Salim-based banks to accounts he independently oversaw.⁷⁵

The ASCSD's most distinctive funding streams came about as the group consolidated control over Abu Salim and its vicinity. Other Tripoli-based groups controlled territory that housed multiple state institutions or companies, ports of entry, or infrastructure that could be easily leveraged to infiltrate the state or derive revenue (Al-Wasat, 2018b). Despite being a strategic neighbourhood and housing some assets, Abu Salim lacked the same qualities. Instead, Ghaniwa opted to build influence within the local municipality, all with the intent to mould Abu Salim's local political economy.⁷⁶ His ASCSD imposed taxes on local businessmen and markets, chiefly the local garment market. Ghaniwa also took control over the local strategic scrap yard, taxing a portion of its profits to the group.⁷⁷ Members of the ASCSD were also deployed with employees of GECOL, imposing the payment of electricity bills on businesses, and enforcing the dismantlement of illegal electricity connections (Joint Deterrence and Intervention Force—Greater Abu Salim Area, 2017). Funds collected by the ASCSD supported the group's expansion, but a portion was also diverted with the help of Abu Salim's municipal council, and reinvested into local development projects.⁷⁸ This included, among others, the maintenance and paving of roads in Abu Salim, as well as the provision of equipment to the local hospital. This 'Abu Salim Trust Fund',⁷⁹ controlled almost unilaterally by Ghaniwa, boosted the commander's social legitimacy in the neighbourhood.

Unlike many of the groups outside Tripoli, the ASCSD did not rely heavily on illicit activities, such as fuel, human smuggling, or drug trafficking, to build revenue. A significant proportion of the group's funds were—and still are—directly or indirectly raised through the Libyan

state; however, with migration management and the detention of migrants becoming more lucrative and politically salient as a by-product of European foreign policy priorities and funding, the ASCSD sought to monetize the Abu Salim migrant detention centre, located in its area of control. While migrant detention centres generally fall within the *de jure* authority of the DCIM, the department generally engages with armed groups that *de facto* control the detention centres. This was the case with the Abu Salim detention centre, with the ASCSD-linked cadre within the centre having become notorious by 2020 for abusing and extorting migrants for profit, as well as diverting international humanitarian assistance material, meant for Abu Salim's detained migrants, for profit (Johnstone and Naish, 2020; MSF, 2021).⁸⁰

Entrenchment, influence projection, and state capture

The transition from the ASCSD to the SSA had a significant impact on the political economy of Abu Salim. The neighbourhood and its different strategic assets were, by then, dominated by the group. Moreover, Ghaniwa's novel funding stream through his affiliation with the PC, coupled with the group's sheer perceived influence, created an unprecedented pull factor for youth in Abu Salim into the newly established SSA. This was catalysed by Ghaniwa's own popularity in the neighbourhood, built on the back of his central role in shaping Abu Salim's political economy over the years. The SSA capitalized on this ethos by rolling out multiple rounds of recruitment in the years following its establishment (LANA, 2022; SSA Nesma Office, 2022). This recruitment effort militarized society itself within the neighbourhood, with many otherwise prospectless youth from the densely populated area becoming part of the SSA.⁸¹ The dependence on an SSA salary created an alignment between communal interests of Abu Salim residents and those of Ghaniwa, as they grew dependent on the group and its leader's prosperity. In practice, Ghaniwa and the SSA created a community and a shared Abu Salim identity of co-dependence. This social engineering exercise enabled the military commander to entrench the SSA in the neighbourhood, fend off any prospective threats, and focus on projecting influence beyond it.

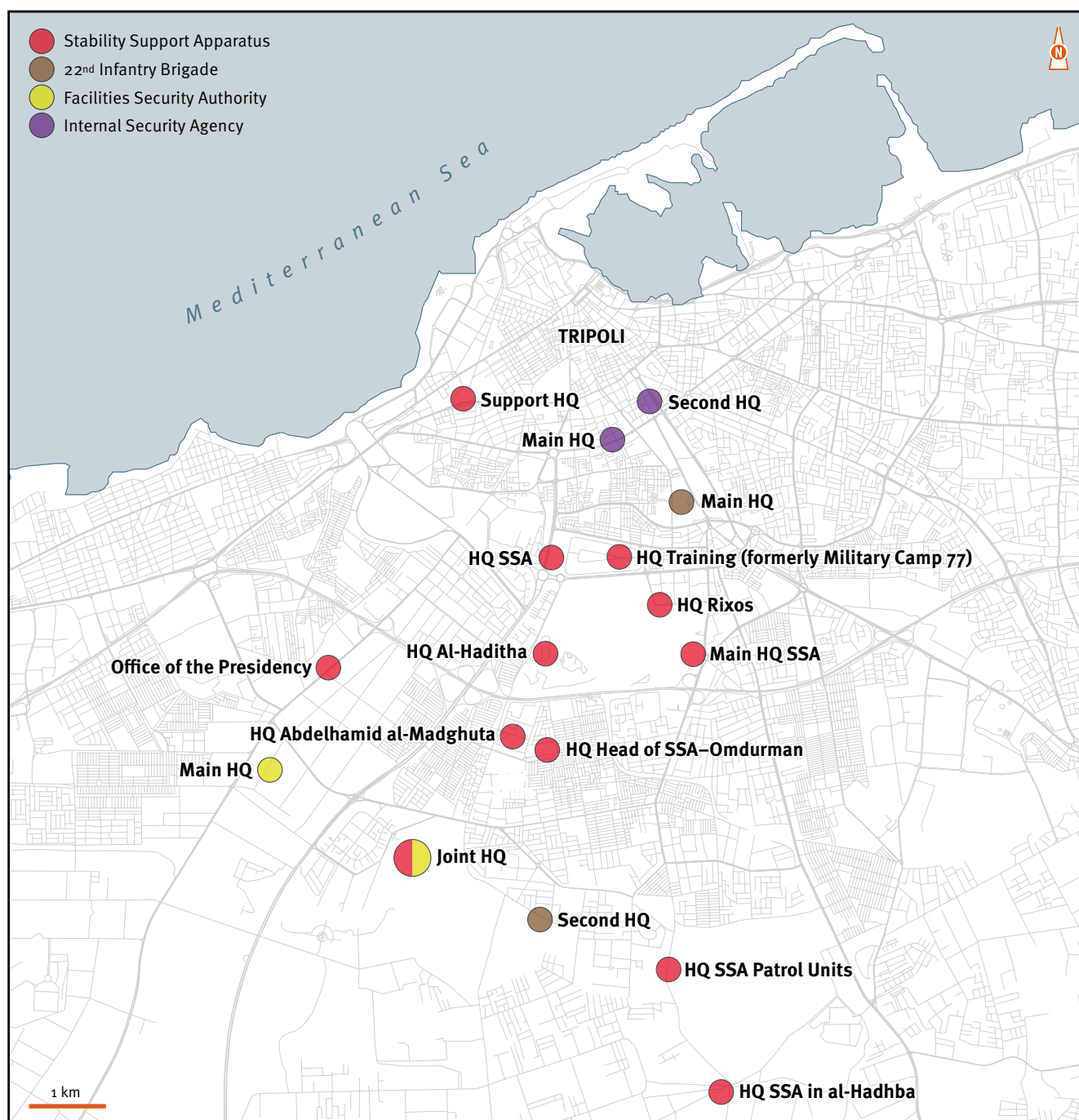
The increased political relevance of the SSA and its network, coupled with the executive's dependence on its support, also translated into an ability to obtain,

as well as shape, new and more sophisticated funding streams. For instance, in February 2022, the GNU Prime Minister Abdulhamid Debaiba allocated LYD 132 million (about USD 27 million) to the SSA, in large part to secure its leader's support against rival Prime Minister Bashagha (Amnesty International, 2022).⁸² Ghaniwa took significant advantage of this new-found political relevance, attempting to scale and diversify his funding streams, as well as making inroads into large sectors of Libya's economy. This included the health sector, which the SSA now indirectly dominates in Tripolitania. Throughout 2022, the SSA—conspiring with the ISA—orchestrated the kidnappings of multiple senior staff of large hospitals, clinics, and medical laboratories in Tripoli, replacing them with individuals with loyalties to the group.⁸³ Ghaniwa, lobbying the GNU and its prime minister, also forced the removal of the head of the state's Medical Supply Apparatus, placing a loyalist in his stead.⁸⁴ This allowed the SSA to establish a quasi-monopoly on the supply chain of the lucrative state-subsidized import business of medical equipment and medicine, which now primarily flows through SSA-linked medical import companies.⁸⁵

The SSA also scaled and institutionalized its taxation model, formerly implemented in partnership with the local municipality. While royalties imposed on sales at the local scrap yard and commissions on local electricity bills were still in place, the SSA established its own private company, the North Africa Development and Investment Holding Company, which now receives proceeds from local taxation.⁸⁶ The establishment of the holding company serves a dual purpose: to diversify the pools of funds the SSA can tap into and to serve as the official business interface of the SSA. Through it, the group can leverage its network and sway over state institutions and the executive to apply for state tenders and raise funds. Perhaps the most illustrative example of the extent of the company's influence is its official inroads into the oil services sector. In February 2023, the National Oil Corporation responded favourably to a letter sent by the SSA's leader, in which he had demanded that his holding company be registered and officially included in tenders pertaining to projects and services in the oil sector (Nabd, 2023a).

Another of the most lucrative SSA-linked enterprises was set up by Ghaniwa's young protégé from Kikla, Tellish, following the takeover of the Ministry of Interior's Facilities and Installations Protection Authority. The SSA leader and his ally successfully lobbied

Map 4 Locations and deployment of the Stability Support Apparatus and allies



Source: the author

the GNU into separating the department from the Ministry of Interior. Renamed the Facilities Security Authority, it was folded into the executive's cabinet by the GNU prime minister (FSA, 2022a). Tellish subsequently redefined the mandate of his new independent apparatus, expanding its remit. It is now the sole body charged with securing physical transfers of cash between the Central Bank's main branches and all operating commercial banks in Tripolitania, as well as the only apparatus tasked with security provision at commercial banks'

branches in Tripoli.⁸⁷ Unfettered control over the supply of cash aside, the Authority can also independently ratify contracts in exchange for security provision at specific sites. Tellish actively brokered such contracts with foreign companies such as Daewoo, which operates in western Libya. He also solicited training during meetings with foreign ambassadors (FSA, 2022b; 2023). Moreover, Tellish acted in concert with the ISA and the SDF to restrict foreign private security companies operating in the capital (Al-Wasat, 2023b). The perceived intent

from the move is to secure lucrative contracts in foreign currency from embassies and diplomatic missions, most of which are based in the capital.⁸⁸

The expanded territorial footprint of the SSA and its new-found clout over the executive also contributed to its consolidation and projection of influence within and beyond Abu Salim, and, in turn, the group's scaling of pre-existing financing mechanisms. Al-Hrari's ISA and the Ministry of Defence's 22nd Battalion both represented new structures through which SSA-linked cadre and networks could

enrol to secure a salary, enabling further consolidation in Abu Salim. Hrari's ISA, in particular, emerged as a key part of Ghaniwa's modus operandi for expansion. As a Qaddafi-era coercive security structure, the ISA has a broad remit that allows it to engage in a wide array of repressive activities. Since Hrari's takeover of the apparatus, it has gained notoriety for cracking down on civil society, targeting political activists, and orchestrating unlawful detentions. The ISA has also emerged as a vehicle to conduct outreach to eastern Libya, with Hrari increasingly coordinating arbitrary arrests and inmate transfers with the eastern-based branch of the ISA. Al-Khoja, a field commander within the ASCSD who mobilized with Ghaniwa to counter Haftar's offensive on Tripoli,⁸⁹ also relied on Ghaniwa's support for his appointment at the helm of the DCIM.⁹⁰ Khoja's fealty allows Ghaniwa to exert indirect influence over the migration ecosystem in western Libya writ-large, particularly given the centrality of the DCIM to migration management (Michael, Hinnant, and Brito, 2019). Though not a source of funding for the SSA as such, the flow of funds funnelled through the DCIM can affect the political economy and affluence of other groups in western Libya, safeguarding the SSA from external threats. To complete the picture, the SSA leader also conducted outreach to establish modest SSA branches in multiple other Libyan cities, such as Al-Khoms, Gheryan, Janzur, Nalut, Nesma, and Zwara. Though these are, to date, largely inactive, their establishment is evidence of Ghaniwa's influence extending well beyond Abu Salim.

The SSA's relations with civilians and authorities

Much like Abu Salim's political economy, the ASCSD-turned-SSA's relations with civilians and national authorities changed over time. The group's consolidation of power over Abu Salim, while gradual, was facilitated by adjustments to the group's modus operandi. The group's recruitment pools and approaches, publicized values, and proclivity to use violence all morphed over time, serving the end goal of dominating Abu Salim. The SSA Leader's clout also substantially shifted, as he became revered in Abu Salim. These changes all affected the relationship of the SSA—and chiefly, its leader—with national authorities. As the group rose to dominate Abu Salim, its leverage over successive governments increased. Because the SSA is now one of two main groups

dominating the capital, this relationship is more lopsided than ever, with the GNU effectively almost entirely dependent on the SSA's support there.

Opportunistic embrace of values and changes of heart

One of the main elements leveraged by Ghaniwa to shape his group's relations with authorities and the community is its values and brand. These were often opportunistically brandished and relinquished based on contextual developments. Over time, his group defined itself and its mission in various ways, often using the most expedient labels, adapted to current trends, to support consolidation. For instance, revolutionary legitimacy was only an important identity marker for the group in the early days following the revolution, when Abu Salim was perceived as the last 'bastion' of the Qaddafi regime. Ghaniwa also emphasized this revolutionary mantle to gain support within the context of broader national-level rifts, such as from the revolutionary camp within the context of the Fajr Libya operation. Yet, this revolutionary trademark was quickly and unscrupulously swapped for an anti-crime and policing brand at the dawn of the GNA era. An intricate set of public communication efforts around the ASCSD responding to security challenges was also developed, enabling Ghaniwa to garner political clout and legitimacy, both through state authorities and with local constituencies in Abu Salim. The brand once again opportunistically shifted in the lead-up to the political change that took place after the end of Haftar's offensive on Tripoli. The GNU's public relations efforts since then have focused mainly on stability, a narrative that the SSA also emphasizes through its own public relation efforts (Hakomitna, 2021; SSA, 2023).

Another tool in the group's arsenal for garnering legitimacy has also been its carefully tailored association with select constituencies over time. Some of the high-profile leaders linked to the SSA and its network are, to this day, originally from Kikla, including the head of the ISA Lutfi al-Hrari, as well as the Facilities Security Authority's Tellish.⁹¹ The core cadre of the original Ghaniwa revolutionary group was also from Kikla. Yet, owing to Kikla's modest politico-military relevance, as well as Abu Salim's sheer diversity, Ghaniwa's group never actually branded itself as a group from Kikla. Instead, Ghaniwa preferred presenting his group as one native to Tripoli, nurturing and capitalizing on positive per-

ceptions of Tripoli-based groups versus outside groups (such as those from Misrata or Zintan). The only exception to the rule was within the context of mobilization to Kikla, where it was militarily beneficial to Ghaniwa's group to emphasize its roots in Kikla. This served the dual goal of not only buttressing the group's revolutionary credentials, but also building its military clout thanks to support from the Fajr Libya coalition. When the conflict ended, the group quickly reverted to emphasizing its origins in Tripoli, highlighting the malleability of the group's defining features.

Violence and the underestimated use of repression

The extent to which Ghaniwa has instrumentalized violence and the fear of repression to facilitate consolidation is vastly underestimated. The perceived willingness to use violence has shaped relations with both civilians and local and national authorities. Moreover, the use of repression has also extended to within the hierarchy of Ghaniwa's group itself, sending a message to communities, allies, and authorities of the possible repercussions of encroaching on Ghaniwa's influence or attempting to temper it.

Some of the most extreme examples of Ghaniwa's willingness to use violence were witnessed during the heyday of the group's rise to dominance in the Abu Salim neighbourhood. Over the course of the armed clashes that the group had been involved in from 2016 to 2017 in Abu Salim and its vicinity, two ASCSD field commanders had risen to prominence, acting as deputy leaders to Ghaniwa. These were Khairi al-Kikli, known as al-Hankura, and Mohamed al-Mashay, known as Abuazza (Afrigatenews, 2017; Al-Marsad, 2016b). The two commanders had been at the forefront of the group's growth, and had therefore gained notoriety within the ranks of the ASCSD on the back of their military achievements. With the group's footprint increasing in the vast area of Abu Salim, the two commanders also had cadre and headquarters of their own—a dynamic that increased internal tensions with Ghaniwa himself.⁹² This was compounded by the fact Ghaniwa was comparatively older and lacked the combat experience accumulated by al-Hankura and Abuazza.

Internal tensions boiled over in 2017, with al-Hankura recruiting his own cadre and securing a separate affiliation through the Ministry of Interior's Diplomatic Security Department thanks to the TRB's

Tajuri.⁹³ Mobilizing on Ghaniwa's orders, Abuazza attacked al-Hankura's headquarters in Hay al-Intisar in the Airport Road, and ejected him from the vicinity of Abu Salim altogether.⁹⁴ Banished by Ghaniwa, al-Hankura was forced to find refuge with the TRB, becoming one of its field commanders.⁹⁵

The ASCSD's second-in-command, Abuazza, met an even more tragic fate in July of the following year. Having consolidated control over Abu Salim, Ghaniwa was intent on 'coup-proofing' his force and neutralizing any perceived threat to his efforts to centralize control over his cadre.⁹⁶ Suspecting that the TRB—which was by then the dominant armed group of the quartet in Tripoli—was seeking to support an internal change of ASCSD leadership by backing Abuazza, Ghaniwa was on high alert. He eventually moved against his own right-hand man militarily within Abu Salim itself. Injured, Abuazza was transferred to Abu Salim hospital, where he was subsequently killed (Libya News, 2018). By disposing of his closest and most reliable deputy, Ghaniwa had sent a message to allies and cadre that everyone was expendable.⁹⁷ This partly explains the fealty of Ghaniwa's cadre to him to this day.

Another example of Ghaniwa's supremacy over Abu Salim occurred in March 2021. His brother—Fathi al-Kikli—was kidnapped in Abu Salim and transferred to Kikla by two disgruntled ex-ASCSD members from Kikla—Ahmed Biala and Ayman al-Ahwal—who also resided in Abu Salim.⁹⁸ The two were retaliating against Ghaniwa's kidnapping of Biala's relatives, whom Ghaniwa had coerced into surrendering himself.⁹⁹ Negotiating an exchange, Ghaniwa secured his brother's return, but delivered Biala's brother's dead body (Lywitness, 2021). He also showed his domination by permanently displacing the Biala and al-Ahwal families from Abu Salim. Furthermore, in a ruthless display of power, Ghaniwa's SSA closed the main road of Abu Salim, slowly demolishing the houses of the Biala and al-Ahwal families over the course of a week for the locals to see.¹⁰⁰ At a time when the SSA's network straddled multiple institutions and affiliates, this show of force further reinforced the message that his use of violence would be all-encompassing and include defectors' families.

Ghaniwa's use of violence as a means of consolidation was not restricted to the internal hierarchy of his group, but also extended to local communities and authorities. In its consolidation phase, the ASCSD was notorious for kidnapping and torturing officials for ransom

or embezzlement, or to secure appointments within institutions.¹⁰¹ Abu Salim has also become known as an area where residents cannot file police reports involving any Ghaniwa-affiliated cadre, illustrating the impunity with which his SSA and affiliates operate. There are also secret prisons under the SSA's control where prisoners are held arbitrarily, at least one of which is suspected of being in the vicinity of Tripoli's zoo.¹⁰² This ecosystem of repression developed with the gradual establishment of an SSA hegemony over Abu Salim. Currently, only targeted repression tactics are used since the SSA's uncontested dominance over Abu Salim has had a stabilizing effect on the area itself.

Social engineering and socialization

Another strategy that underpinned the steady rise of the SSA is Ghaniwa's instrumentalization of demographics and social engineering of the make-up of his group. This enabled consolidation as well as expansion and was reflected in the differing recruitment pools and strategies adopted by the group over time. This changing *modus operandi* affected the group's social legitimacy and relations with local communities, particularly as the ASCSD and SSA increasingly enlisted Abu Salim youth within its ranks. This has led to a significant convergence of interests between Abu Salim residents and the SSA. Yet the make-up of the group—both in origin and in age—has shifted over time.¹⁰³

The impact of the conflicts experienced by the group is one undeniable factor in its demographic make-up; however, there is also an element of deliberate socialization. The initial nucleus that formed Ghaniwa's SSC unit in 2012 was predominantly made up of residents of Abu Salim with roots in Kikla. This communal dimension to the group was partly obfuscated by the sheer diversity of Abu Salim's demographic make-up, as well as the fact the SSC unit members were also long-time residents of Abu Salim. But their coalescence was also the by-product of Ghaniwa's institutionalization of his own social network at the dawn of the revolution, forming his group from a small group of kin that he mobilized alongside of.

The ethnic dimension of the group was further reinforced—though never overtly emphasized—following the Fajr Libya operation, with Kikla's internally displaced recruited into the group.

Ghaniwa slowly positioned himself and his group, however, as custodians of Abu Salim. This created a pull factor for residents of Abu Salim into the group, which helped support its expansion with recruits from the neighbourhood. Haftar's offensive on Tripoli in 2019 was a further turning point, with several young people—including minors—joining the then ASCSD to defend the neighbourhood.¹⁰⁴

The establishment of the lavishly funded SSA, coupled with the large number of Abu Salim's youth socialized by the large-scale conflict for which they had mobilized, expanded Ghaniwa's grip over Abu Salim. The SSA had the financial means and a legitimate cover to enlist its irregular and recently mobilized cadre, while also tapping into their networks to recruit kin and friends. Multiple rounds of large-scale recruitment ensued, with very young recruits added to the SSA cadre. This dynamic created a symbiotic relationship between the SSA and local residents—including families of SSA cadre whose livelihoods became increasingly reliant on SSA-disbursed salaries or funds, as well as residents whose quality of life was also perceived to be defended by the SSA.

Transactionalism, personality cult, and political prominence

Ghaniwa's strategic embrace of differing *modus operandi*, as well as the group's cultivation of relationships with local and national stakeholders, has been a key factor in the armed group's consolidation of power in Abu Salim and in Tripoli. Initially, the group relied on covert tactics and sought state support to strengthen its position. As successive governments failed to re-establish some degree of monopoly on violence, the SSA gradually adapted, shifting from dependence on the state to leveraging its own power to gain influence over the executive and its institutions.

The increased political prominence of the SSA, coupled with its stabilizing—but militarizing—effects on Abu Salim, bolstered the group's brand but also created a quasi-cult of personality around Ghaniwa himself. His political and military relevance served to strengthen his legitimacy, enabling the leader to become a central figure—almost a symbol for the densely populated neighbourhood's lower middle class. This heightened legitimacy allowed his group to gain the trust and support of locals, enhancing the leader's authority within the community.



'Ghaniwa' (seated centre in white t-shirt) visiting the Libyan Cup- and League-winning football club al-Ahli in July 2023.

Source: al-Ahli football club/Facebook

Tapping into popular sentiments and Libyan football fever, the armed group leader often publicly visits the headquarters of the famed Abu Salim-based al-Ahli football club, one of Libya's most decorated clubs (Al-Sadawi, 2023; Al-Azaem, 2023). In June of 2023, Ghaniwa-linked Tellish was even appointed general manager of the team (Nabd, 2023b). Known to be an ardent supporter of the club, Ghaniwa's SSA headquarters is a stone's throw from it. His publicity stunts further increased his popularity among youth in Abu Salim in particular. His idolization in Abu Salim was most recently visible when he returned from Hajj in July of 2023, with associates of his openly celebrating his return with fireworks in the neighbourhood (Fox Libya, 2023).

But with increased political prominence came increasingly complex challenges to contend with concerning the group's political and public image. To navigate the complex dynamics of power and governance, while representing his interests vis-à-vis national and international stakeholders, the SSA leader has cultivated a team of trusted political advisers to support his decision-making. This includes the SSA's head of public affairs, Abdelsalam al-Massoudi, who has been Ghaniwa's confidant since his armed group was first established (Al-Jamahir, 2013; Ein Libya, 2022). Beyond advisers, the SSA has also solicited the support of public relation companies to enhance its brand. Most notably, in November of 2023, the SSA, in partnership with the Arab-European

Center for Human Rights and International Law and the Arab-British Cultural Forum, hosted a conference titled 'Fighting Corruption to Consolidate Stability'. Attendees featured a wide palette of Libyan elites, including a member of the PC and senior representatives from the Central Bank of Libya, a testament to the SSA's political clout (LANA, 2023b).

This combination of political influence and transactionalism has not gone unnoticed in the Libyan politico-military space. One of its main by-products has been the SSA leader and his associates' ascendance as political interlocutors for national stakeholders, international organizations, and the UN. In many ways, this is a pivotal turning point in Libya's governance, security, and political future, and is even more astounding considering the fact the SSA has primarily leveraged territorial control in the capital—as opposed to control over any vital infrastructure—to build the networks through which it has garnered these disproportionate levels of influence.

Conclusion

The complex and multifaceted story of the SSA and its rise to dominate Abu Salim has paved the way for its engagement in unprecedented levels of state capture in Tripoli. This was enabled by a combination of predatory behaviours and proclivity for cronyism by Ghaniwa and his SSA. The SSA no longer needs to wield violence to negotiate arrangements between the armed group and

the executive, since its extensive networks within the state now de facto link the group to Libyan political elites and incumbents of key institutions, as well as foreign powers.

While the 2016–19 quartet's disintegration has had an oft-lauded stabilizing effect on the security situation in Tripoli, the scale of state capture, coupled with the expanded territorial footprint now claimed by remaining groups, poses significant challenges. First, the contemporary negative peace in the capital is largely predicated on precarious informal understandings between the remaining Tripoli-based groups. All militias in the capital have now asserted control over densely populated areas and procured heavy weaponry, which implies that the eruption of an internal conflict would result in large-scale displacement and urban damage. The likelihood of such a conflict is further exacerbated by the GNU's aversion to implementing any meaningful security sector reform efforts, as well as the persistent political impasse—itsself conducive to jockeying in the capital and its vicinity. While a military rout of the SSA in Abu Salim is currently considered too pyrrhic a victory for any actor due to the urban damage and displacement toll this would entail, this rationale could shift over time as conflict becomes the only means for the SSA's enemies to temper the group's influence. Nevertheless, even a military confrontation would not be sufficient to root out Ghaniwa and the SSA given their control of rents and key appointments and ministries.

Counter-intuitively, the disproportionate growth of the SSA is a double-edged sword for the cohesion of the group and its network. The centralization of the group's command was previously facilitated by Ghaniwa's monopoly over its resources, and his unbridled use of repression within limited geographic confines. It was also aided by the fact that the group's antecedent, the ASCSD, was the only institutional manifestation of Ghaniwa's network. The contemporary growth of the SSA network—particularly the establishment of multiple institutionally independent offshoots—and its separate chains of commands, widened geographic footprint, and diversified funding streams all represent new challenges for the group's cohesion. The SSA is more diverse and less homogeneous than the ASCSD, and features leaders whose alignment could diverge over time. More importantly, even if the group maintains cohesion, its increased efforts to capture the state will eventually clash with the interests of other players inside and outside the capital, a dynamic that could lead to an eventual flashpoint.

Beyond security concerns, the political prominence of the SSA and its leader's legitimacy presents political challenges. Formerly, conventional wisdom was that any new executive—whether formed by agreement or through elections—would have to negotiate its establishment in the capital with Ghaniwa and his group, offering some patronage structure or financial reward as an incentive. This is no longer the sole condition, however, since the SSA and its leader are now seeking to capture the state itself by securing senior posts and holding unfettered sway over institutions. Any new executive is therefore likely to further enable the Abu Salim-based group and its network's state capture. Moreover, while proposed elections are currently unlikely, a vote would do little to temper the SSA's influence. The group already put forth a candidate for presidential elections formerly scheduled for December 2021, overtly putting its political ambitions on display. SSA-endorsed candidates are likely to secure seats if parliamentary elections are also held, in part thanks to the group's legitimacy and superior financial means. All in all, regardless of Libya's political path forward, the SSA is likely to carve itself a role in its future.

Though never overtly acknowledged, many policymakers find solace in the contemporary illusory stability provided by the GNU—itself buttressed by the SSA. This is also partly why the momentum towards elections has been dashed significantly, while many old Qaddafi-era

deals and authoritarian practices have been revived. Yet the implicit hope of witnessing the birth of a new dictatorship is a chimera. While the GNU has, so far, managed to pacify the SSA and other armed groups with a footprint in the capital through patronage and funds, this strategy is highly contingent. It is doubly dependent on high oil prices, as well as sustained oil production and exports. Neither of these variables are under the GNU's control, and both could easily affect the negative peace in the capital—if not beyond it. As Libya's near past shows, armed groups can also adapt to periods of limited oil revenue; however, this comes at the cost of further cannibalizing the state, manipulating the economy, and ultimately widening inequality. Oil rents aside, while Ghaniwa's alignment with the current GNU prime minister, Dabaiba, has endured, this has largely been because of opportunity cost rather than adherence. Even in the unlikely scenario where funds are forthcoming, continued alignment is not a certainty. The SSA network has already shown a proclivity to sideline the self-serving elites competing for its support, dividing the spoils of appointments through dialogues with other networks.

The approach of the UN and many Western governments has also further empowered the SSA and its network (as well as other militia groups). This is primarily because most engagements with these networks are unconditional. The inclusion of armed group affiliates in political dialogues has also furthered their sway over Libya's future. In many ways, continued ad hoc engagement despite little meaningful direction has all but supported these networks' consolidation and state capture. This policy has normalized and institutionalized transactional arrangements between militia commanders in Libya, often at the expense of the country's long-term stability. Without serious efforts invested in course correction, Tripoli's medium-term prospects are either to become the theatre of a destructive conflict induced by the collapse of conflicting armed groups' contemporary *modus vivendi*, or for its state and security institutions to become the plaything of networks such as the SSA's.

Given the breadth of state capture that has already taken place, solutions are by no means straightforward. Even if a targeted effort to curb the SSA's influence were to materialize, the group could not only militarily weather the challenge, but also politically defy the government by brokering its own alliance. While the group's presence has played a stabilizing role in Abu Salim

and its vicinity, agreements for Tripoli-based groups to coexist peacefully are precarious and time-bound. The GNU and its PC seem to have adopted an ostrich policy towards these issues, implicitly acknowledging that they are in no place to assert any meaningful oversight or control over the SSA in the capital. Moreover, neither institution has shown any real inclination towards either reforming security in the capital, or brokering actual security arrangements between groups in Tripoli. Instead, they have preferred profligacy and expedience, leveraging patronage and financial incentives to co-opt remaining groups in the capital.

Tackling the group's political economy is also a policy fraught with challenges. It would require first an appropriate diagnosis of the problem, most notably acknowledging the breadth of the group's network and its multiple offshoots. It would also entail an unconventional and holistic approach to security sector reform, one that factors in advanced levels of state capture and therefore views institutional-level interventions as well as economic reforms as part and parcel of security sector reform efforts. In practice, financially targeting the SSA's contemporary levers of influence over the state would require scrutinizing different chapters of spending within the budgets of the Ministries of Interior and Defence, as well as allocations from the PC, the prime minister's Cabinet, and the Central Bank of Libya and affiliated commercial banks.

In the absence of domestic and international political will to move towards holistic approaches, ad hoc and temporary solutions can be envisaged. Ideally, these would be undertaken by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), with the support of Western governments and regional powers with sway in Libya. Even these time-bound solutions would require a significant shift in the contemporary UNSMIL mediation blueprint. Recently, the UN mission has uncritically and unconditionally engaged armed groups with little regard for their abuses or actions. This has nurtured a climate of impunity—one that should be redressed by the mission through better defined parameters of engagement with armed groups. Separately, the mission should also seek to introduce an underlying strategy and end goals for its engagement with armed actors such as the SSA and others. Shifting its position from a convenor to a mediator with an agenda would allow UNSMIL to regain credibility. In Tripoli, one goal for the UN's engagement should be to discuss security

arrangements and broader policy interventions that would stabilize the security situation while paving the way for holistic reform of armed groups—including the SSA—in the long run. ●

Acronyms and abbreviations

ASCSD Abu Salim Central Security Directorate

DCIM Department for Combatting Illegal Migration

GECOL General Electricity Company of Libya

GNA Government of National Accord

GNC General National Congress

GNU Government of National Unity

ISA Internal Security Apparatus

LAAF Libyan Arab Armed Forces

LPA Libyan Political Agreement

LPDF Libyan Political Dialogue Forum

LYD Libyan dinar

NFA National Forces Alliance

PC Presidency Council

SDF Special Deterrence Force

SSA Stability Support Apparatus

SSC Supreme Security Committee

TRB Tripoli Revolutionaries Battalion

UNSMIL United Nations Support Mission in Libya

USD United States dollar

Notes

- 1 Hybridity denotes the blending of civilian roles into security sector responsibilities, which encompasses the delivery of security as well as oversight. In practice, traditional state security organizations function in conjunction with a wide variety of armed groups that are not officially recognized by the state or operate in a semi-official capacity. Although some of these armed groups oppose the state, others collaborate or work in conjunction with state forces, thereby generating a 'hybrid environment'.
- 2 Author interview with a resident of Abu Salim, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 3 The town of Kikla is located in the Nafusa mountains.
- 4 Author interview with a long-time resident of Um Durman in Abu Salim, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 5 Author interview with an ex-member of the Mermaid Dawn Operation Room, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 6 Author interview with an ex-member of the Mermaid Dawn Operation Room, Tripoli, April 2023.

- 7 Author interview with the brother of a Kikli Abu Salim resident and Abu Salim Supreme Security Committee (SSC) unit member, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 8 Security pluralism is defined here as the coexistence of multiple non-state, quasi-state, and state actors within the confines of a select geographic area.
- 9 Author interview with an ex-member of the Abu Salim Military Council, Tripoli, May 2023.
- 10 Author interview with an ex-member of the Abu Salim Military Council, Tripoli, May 2023.
- 11 Author phone interview with an ex-member of the Suq al-Jum'a Military Council, Tripoli, June 2023.
- 12 Author phone interview with an ex-member of the Suq al-Jum'a Military Council, Tripoli, June 2023.
- 13 Author phone interview with an ex-member of the Suq al-Jum'a Military Council, Tripoli, June 2023.
- 14 Author interview with an ex-GNC official, Tripoli, March 2023.
- 15 By then, parallel and new post-revolutionary structures were generally associated with either revolutionaries or Islamists. In the case of the Abu Salim Military Council, Burki's personal background as a former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group member accentuated this perception.
- 16 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, Istanbul, May 2023.
- 17 Author interview with an ex-GNC official, Istanbul, May 2023.
- 18 Author interview with a Libyan local journalist and Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 19 Author interview with a Libyan local journalist and Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 20 Author interview with a member of the Suq al-Jum'a Military Council, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 21 Author interview with an ex-GNC official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 22 Author interview with a Zintani journalist, Istanbul, May 2023.
- 23 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, Istanbul, May 2023.
- 24 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, Istanbul, May 2023.
- 25 Author interview with a Suq al-Jum'a resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 26 Author phone interview with a Misrata Military Council affiliate, February 2023.
- 27 Author interview with a Tripoli resident from Kikla, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 28 See Al Jazeera interview showing Lutfi al-Hrari (00:24), a former member of Ghaniwa's SSC unit and the current head of the ISA, originally from Kikla (Al Jazeera, 2014d).
- 29 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 30 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 31 Author phone interview with a Misrata Military Council affiliate, February 2023.
- 32 Author interview with a Ministry of Interior official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 33 Author interview with a Ministry of Interior official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 34 Author interview with a Ministry of Interior official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 35 Author phone interview with a former Ministry of Defence official, March 2023.
- 36 Author phone interview with a former Ministry of Defence official, March 2023.
- 37 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 38 Author interview with a local Libyan journalist and Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 39 Author interview with Misrata Military Council member, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 40 Author interview with a former Ministry of Defence official, location withheld, March 2023.
- 41 Author interview with a Ministry of Interior official, location withheld, May 2023.
- 42 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 43 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 44 The SDF did not immediately side with the PC-aligned coalition, but a separate unit eventually joined the coalition in June of 2019.
- 45 Author interview with a confidential source, Tripoli, July 2019.
- 46 Author interview with a confidential source, Tripoli, July 2019.
- 47 Author interview with a former defence official, location withheld, April 2023.
- 48 This included, among other, the SDF's 2020 Unit, which later became the 444 Brigade; the Misratan Counter-terrorism Force; the 166th Brigade; the 111th Brigade; and select units from Zawiya (under Mahmoud Ben Rajab) and Zintan (under Osama al-Juwaili).
- 49 Author phone interview with a former GNA official, February 2023.
- 50 Author interview with a former defence official, location withheld, April 2023.
- 51 Author phone interview with a former GNA official, February 2023.
- 52 Author phone interview with a Libyan journalist, June 2023. Note that the 22nd Infantry Battalion, led by Ghaniwa associate Mohamed al-Ghrari, was renamed the 555th Infantry Brigade in January 2024.
- 53 Author phone interview with a Libyan journalist, June 2023.
- 54 Author interview with a Libyan intelligence official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 55 Author interview with a GNU official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 56 Author interview with a GNU official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 57 Mazen's house in Tripoli is in Hay Dimashq, a neighbourhood of Abu Salim (author interview with an Abu Salim resident, location withheld, April 2023).
- 58 Author interview with a GNU official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 59 Parliamentary and presidential elections were expected in December 2021 as part of the UN-brokered LPDF Roadmap. These elections never materialized, however, because of political jockeying between Libyan elites, and the candidacy of controversial figures such as LAAF

- Commander Haftar, GNU PM Abdulhamid Debaiba, and Seif al-Qaddafi, late dictator Muammar Qaddafi's son.
- 60 Author interview with a Libyan intelligence official, location withheld, April 2023.
- 61 Author interview with a Libyan intelligence official, location withheld, April 2023.
- 62 Buras had, by then, left the SSA and had been appointed head of the Presidential Guard. This decision was influenced by the fact Ghaniwa had centralized command over the flow of funds derived from the PC, disgruntling both Buras and Buzriba. Though the latter remained as deputy leader of the SSA, a separate branch of the SSA, directly overseen by the Buzriba family, was cultivated in western Tripolitania.
- 63 Author interview with a GNU official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 64 Author interview with a Libyan journalist, Istanbul, May 2023.
- 65 Author interview with a Ministry of Interior official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 66 Author interview with a GNU official, Tripoli, April 2023, and a Libyan intelligence official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 67 Author interview with a Ministry of Interior official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 68 Author interview with a Ministry of Interior official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 69 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 70 Author interview with a Misrata Military Council member, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 71 Author interview with a Libyan journalist, Istanbul, May 2023.
- 72 Author interview with a Libyan journalist and Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 73 Author interview with a Libyan journalist and Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 74 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 75 Author phone interview with an Abu Salim resident and Libyan journalist, June 2023.
- 76 Author phone interview with an Abu Salim resident and Libyan journalist, June 2023.
- 77 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 78 Author phone interview with an Abu Salim resident and Libyan journalist, June 2023.
- 79 Author interview with a Libyan journalist, Istanbul, May 2023.
- 80 While this detention centre was shut down in 2020–21 officially for maintenance, the closure was also due to the dire reputation the centre had garnered. The detention centre was reopened, however, in 2022, with the attendance of the GNU foreign and interior ministers, as well as the SSA-linked head of the DCIM, Mohamed al-Khoja.
- 81 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, location withheld, May 2023.
- 82 Author interview with a Libyan intelligence official, location withheld, May 2023.
- 83 Author interviews with a medical doctor, Tripoli, April 2022, and an Abu Salim resident, Tripoli, May 2023. Author phone interview with a Libyan journalist, location withheld, June 2023.
- 84 Author interview with a senior GNU official, location withheld, July 2023.
- 85 Author interview with a senior GNU official, location withheld, July 2023.
- 86 Author interviews with a Libyan journalist, Tripoli, April 2023, and an Abu Salim resident, location withheld, May 2023.
- 87 Author phone interview with a Libyan journalist, June 2023.
- 88 Author phone interview with a Libyan local researcher, May 2023.
- 89 Author interview with a Libyan journalist, location withheld, July 2021.
- 90 Author interview with a Libyan Ministry of Interior official, Tripoli, April 2023.
- 91 Author phone interview with a senior GNU official, July 2023.
- 92 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, location withheld, May 2023.
- 93 Author interview with a Libyan Interior Ministry official, location withheld, May 2023.
- 94 Author interview with a Libyan Interior Ministry official, location withheld, May 2023.
- 95 This stint was short-lived, with al-Hankura being assassinated in the lead-up to Haftar's offensive in February 2019.
- 96 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, location withheld, May 2023.
- 97 Author interview with a Libyan journalist, Istanbul, May 2023.
- 98 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, Istanbul, May 2023.
- 99 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, Istanbul, May 2023.
- 100 Author interview with an Abu Salim resident, location withheld, June 2023.
- 101 Author phone interview with an Abu Salim resident, March 2023.
- 102 Author phone interview with an Abu Salim resident, March 2023.
- 103 Author interview with a Libyan journalist, Tripoli, April 2023.
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