MILITARIZATION AND MILITIA-IZATION: DYNAMICS OF ARMED GROUP PROLIFERATION IN EGYPT AND LIBYA

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the drivers behind some of the different types of proliferation of armed groups in power and politics that have taken place in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011. Based on thick empirical description and analysis of the highly distinct ways that armed groups have proliferated in Egypt and in Libya since 2011, the paper pinpoints two key dynamics: first, a process of "militarization of contention" in which regime-orchestrated repression drives forth a transformation of contentious politics from non-violent to armed forms of action. Second, a process of "militia-ization of politics" in which warfare, foreign interventions and the weakness of nascent state institutions drives forth a process in which armed actors are allowed to consolidate and expand their influence politics without necessarily sharing ideology or political agendas. The paper ends by drawing a number of policy-oriented conclusions with the aim to inspire international and local actors who seek to engage in tackling these threats and challenges.

INTRODUCTION

The protest movements that brought down entrenched autocratic rulers in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011 and provided inspiration for other protesters in Bahrain, Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen were predominantly peaceful in nature and enacted by non-armed mass movements. A few weeks into the protest movement, however, armed groups proliferated in Libya as a result of the militarization of the conflict between the regime and its opponents and direct international military intervention. From 2012, armed groups also emerged and expanded into several other states, and by 2013 they had come to play prominent roles in the domestic power struggles and political competitions across the region, although the contexts in which they evolved and the influence they exerted varied considerably.

While the human suffering and socio-economic stagnation that accompany the contemporary proliferation of armed groups may appear similar across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the dynamics and their specific configurations differ from case to case, as do the aims, goals and ambitions of the armed groups as well as their relations with the local and national state apparatuses with which they interact or operate. While some armed groups have been at least formally integrated within state institutions, others appear bent on fully or at least partially destroying or replacing the incumbent regimes through the use of violence.

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The present paper identifies two distinct dynamics at play in the different types of proliferation of armed groups and in their increasing presence in different political and power systems in the MENA region. Rather than providing a comparative overview of all the relevant cases in the contemporary MENA region, it provides thick empirical description and analysis of two selected cases where armed groups have proliferated since 2011, to very different extents and under very different structural circumstances: Egypt and Libya.

The analysis of the Egyptian case shows that the single most important dynamic behind the proliferation of armed groups across the entire spectrum of ideology, strategy, tactics and geographical implantation since 2011 has been regime-orchestrated repression. The analysis also shows that the process through which armed actors have proliferated is best understood as a transformation of contentious politics. In this paper we refer to this process as the "militarization of contention".

The analysis of the Libyan case, meanwhile, shows that here warfare, foreign interventions and the weakness of nascent state institutions have been the key drivers in the proliferation of armed groups since 2011. Although regime-orchestrated repression did play a role in the militarization of contention early on in the uprising, armed actors were allowed to consolidate and expand their influence over Libya's politics by taking advantage of institutional weakness and by allying with actors pursuing common interests, while not necessarily sharing the same ideology or political agenda. In this paper we refer to this process as the "militia-ization of politics".

In its final section, the paper attempts to draw a number of policy-oriented conclusions with the aim to inspire international and local actors who seek to engage in tackling the threats and challenges emerging from the current proliferation of armed groups in the MENA region.

1. MILITARIZATION OF CONTENTION IN EGYPT

In the years following the toppling of President Hosni Mubarak in January 2011, Egypt witnessed both the emergence and the subsequent disappearance of several forms and repertoires of contentious politics. From 2011 until 2013, the predominant repertoire of contention was peaceful and mass-based. Millions of Egyptians participated in thousands of more or less organized or spontaneous protest marches, demonstrations, rallies, sit-ins, strikes, street festivals and other public performances. On numerous occasions, such events developed into episodes of collective violence including street battles between protesters and the authorities, fighting between opposed factions of protesters, and sexual harassment and assault. Yet the majority of the thousands of events served as peaceful tools to push for political concessions to be given or decisions to be taken.

In the wake of the military coup led by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in July 2013, this picture began to change. From then on, an explicitly violent, revolutionary repertoire of collective action came to dominate contentious politics in Egypt. Hence, the first three years of Sisi's presidency saw more than 700 members of the Egyptian security forces killed in acts of violence committed by armed non-state actors (Awad and Hashem 2015: 5). In comparison, only half that number of casualties was observed among the Egyptian security forces during the ten-year insurrection led by the Islamic Jihad and Jamaat Islamiyya in the 1980s.

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This radical transformation of the repertoire of contentious politics occurred in two ways. Firstly, the number of both protests and protesters fell significantly. The risks for protesters increased considerably due to the indiscriminate repression launched by the new military regime of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in July 2013 against the former supporters of Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the gradual expansion of the target group for repression to include other segments of protesters and activists. In particular, the security forces' killing of more than 1,000 peaceful protesters while clearing Nahda Square in Giza and Rabaa al-Adawiyya Square in Heliopolis on 15 August 2013 sent a message that protests by the Muslim Brotherhood's supporters would no longer be tolerated, and that the security apparatus was willing to cross the line and use mass violence against protesters – a step that until then had been avoided. In the wake of interim President Adly Mansour's promulgation of the so-called "protest law", which from late 2013 criminalized all spontaneous protests, the overall number of street protests dropped further (Holmes and Baoumi 2016). As illustrated by the protests by tens of thousands of Egyptians against the trading of the two Red Sea islands Tiran and Sanafir with Saudi Arabia in spring 2016, the inclination to use protests as a tool to pressure the executive had not disappeared. But as the same example also illustrates, the tight control exercised by the security apparatus had by then rendered protests less influential than they had been in the years immediately following the toppling of Mubarak (Grimm 2018).

Secondly, the transformation of the repertoire occurred as a result of the proliferation of armed groups in Egypt after 2013. Analytically, we can break down this process of the militarization of contentious politics into three distinct sub-processes: the "creation" of new revolutionary groups, the "expansion" of existing Salafi-jihadi groups and the "radicalization" of existing non-violent or moderate Islamist groups.

1.1 CREATION OF REVOLUTIONARIES

The emergence of newly created groups with a revolutionary ideology began shortly after the military coup in July 2013 and the clearing of Raba'a al-Adawaiyya and Nahda squares in mid-August of the same year. The new, armed revolutionary groups carried names such as "Molotov", the "Revolutionary Resistance Brigade", "Arson" and the "Execution Movement". In their propaganda materials they presented themselves as the armed continuation of the Egyptian revolution of 25 January 2011 and insisted they would take "revenge" on the regime of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi for stealing the Egyptian revolution.[2]

The limited information we have about these groups suggests they were not created as paramilitary wings of other groups. Rather, they were armed and revolutionary in their making. Several of these groups appear to have had shifting ideological orientations (El-Sherif 2014). While references to "Islam" appear regularly in their propaganda texts, their slogans and ideas suggested a rather eclectic position encompassing both secular and Islamist orientations, and they rarely made use of Salafi-jihadi concepts and framings. Typically, they condemned the Sisi government and criticized the Muslim Brotherhood's attempts to collaborate with the Egyptian state. But they were

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2 See, for example, the Facebook page of ExecSquad (https://www.facebook.com/execsquad) and the founding statement of Revolutionary Punishment group released on 25 January 2015 (https://youtu.be/rcXxsOs3tUQ).

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also critical of the political quietude of the Egyptian Salafist groups. According to their propaganda materials, the route to a better future is through armed revolutionary action. Neither the Muslim Brotherhood's party politics nor the Salafists' missionary activity were accorded great importance. Rather, they seemed focused on destroying the regime and killing its supporters.

Among the more active of these groups was Revolutionary Punishment (*Iqâb al-Thawri*). The group announced its existence in 2015 on the fourth anniversary of the 25 January revolution. Already in June the same year, the group announced on its online blog that it had carried out some 124 operations, killing a total of 157 members of the Egyptian security forces and wounding 452 others while destroying twenty-four vehicles, starting sixty-nine fires and acquiring a large number of weapons (El3Qab 2015). Although the group had carried out activities in sixteen of Egypt's twenty-seven provinces, a closer analysis of its activities revealed that it was most active in Giza and in Fayyum west of Cairo, where Islamist movements and groups have traditionally mobilized strong support (Awad and Hashem 2015). Furthermore, Revolutionary Punishment appeared to be a technologically and organizationally rather sophisticated group. Its operations included simple drive-by shootings and remotely detonated bombs as well as more complex ambushes and attacks on members of the Egyptian security forces.

Not all the groups that emerged in the months after the military coup in 2013 displayed the same level of sophistication as Revolutionary Punishment. In August 2014, for instance, the privately owned Egyptian newspaper *al-Masry al-Youm* published a video recording of a man wearing a balaclava standing in front of a group of eight or ten hooded young men carrying semi-automatic rifles. In the video the leader of the group threatens the Egyptian state, its police and its military and accuses it of mistreating the Egyptian people at Raba'a and Nahda squares. In particular, he dwells on the sexual assaults allegedly committed by the security forces on Egyptian women who were present at the pro-Brotherhood demonstrations. The video, which appears to have been shot on an open street in broad daylight in a lower middle class residential area (later identified by the security services as Cairo's Helwan suburb), is strikingly amateurish: while the young man voices his threats, the cameraman coughs and gives instructions to the rather undisciplined masked men while unmasked civil inhabitants in the neighbourhood observe the filming with curiosity.[3] Based on the numerous clues embedded in the video, the Egyptian security forces infiltrated and arrested the members of the group – now referred to as the Helwan Brigade – shortly after the video was released. Immediately afterwards, Egyptian media and experts loyal to the regime used the video as an illustration of the amateurism of the insurgents and proof of the professionalism of the Egyptian security forces, while critics of the regime suggested it was a fake recording made by the security apparatus itself (Eskandar 2014). As with many other events related to the security situation in Egypt, we can neither prove nor disprove these allegations. If the video is authentic, however, it seems to confirm some deeper sociological points made by journalists and observers at the time regarding mobilization for violent collective action (Awad and Hashem 2015): that the use of violence was becoming increasingly banal; that armed resistance was no longer a tool used exclusively by a small minority of ex-military and police officers with professional training; and that by August 2014, "ordinary" untrained Egyptian citizens would also take up arms against the regime.

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3   See *The First Appearance of the Helwan Brigades: "We Are Tired of the Muslim Brotherhood's Peacefulness"* (in Arabic), 14 August 2014, https://youtu.be/-OQMPeJk60U.

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In the course of the fieldwork undertaken by the MENARA team in March 2018, interviewees across the spectrum of experts, political activists and government employees expressed common concerns about – and, for some, outright fear of – the potential for violent collective action enacted spontaneously by masses of impoverished Egyptians with little to lose. As one interviewee put it: "last time [in 2011] protesters behaved well – they even returned and cleaned up. Who knows how they will behave next time. It is highly likely that we will see brutal violence and rioting."[4] Yet none of the March 2018 interviewees expressed concerns that the urban-based revolutionary groups, which had emerged in 2013, 2014 and 2015 constituted a threat to the regime or to them personally. Opponents of the regime described it in dystopian and Orwellian terms as a machine that is far too strong and consolidated to be challenged with arms in hand. Supporters of the regime, on the other hand, emphasized the threat that such groups posed to the public, but dismissed the possibility that the urban revolutionary groups would be able to challenge the regime.

1.2 EXPANSION OF THE SALAFI-JIHADISTS

The expansion and mutation of existing Salafi-jihadist groups began well before the military coup in 2011. Yet the military coup in 2013 played an important role in mobilizing supporters of these groups. Indeed, the majority of the violent attacks against the Egyptian security forces reported after the coup in July 2013 were committed by Salafi-jihadists.

Some of these groups seem to have been created alongside the revolutionary groups after the military coup in 2013. During 2014, for instance, the densely populated areas in the Egyptian Nile Delta and along the Nile Valley saw small pockets of armed Salafi-jihadists emerge for the first time in decades. The most prominent of these new urban-based jihadist groups was the Al-Qaeda-inspired Salafi-jihadist group known as "Soldiers of Egypt" (*Ajnad Misr*), which was created in 2014. Before the Egyptian authorities dismantled the group in mid-2015, Soldiers of Egypt carried out a number of attacks in Giza and in Cairo, predominantly targeting civilian guards and police officers guarding public offices, government personnel and buildings (Ajnad Misr 2015, Awad and Hashem 2015). Other like-minded groups were reported to be operating in the Western Desert near the border with Libya.[5]

The most significant increase in Salafi-jihadi activities and numbers, however, had already begun in 2011 and took place in the Sinai Peninsula. Since the 1978 Camp David peace agreement and the subsequent Israeli withdrawal in 1982 the Sinai Peninsula, with the exception of the coastal areas of the Red Sea, had been administered by the Egyptian authorities primarily as a military buffer zone facing Israel and the Gaza Strip. A number of small jihadi groups had taken advantage of the geographical and tribal proximity of the Bedouin population in the Sinai to neighbouring Gaza to find shelter and support in the rugged interior of the Sinai Peninsula during the 1990s and 2000s, and occasionally managed to stage terrorist attacks against the peninsula's southern tourist resorts. However, the revolts and insurgencies that had mobilized broad support among the Sinai's Bedouin population had primarily been aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions or political representation of the peninsula's inhabitants (Goodman 2012).

4   Interview by the authors with Egyptian opinion-maker (male), Cairo, March 2018.

5   "Sisi Mourns Death of Over 20 Soldiers in Farafra Checkpoint Attack", in *Mada Masr*, 20 July, https://madamasr.com/en/?p=5796.

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When the revolutionary mass mobilization began in Egypt in late January 2011, the northern provinces of Sinai became one of the first areas in Egypt to see jihadists emerge in the forefront of the struggle against Hosni Mubarak. In the wake of the Egyptian police killing of a rock-throwing young man during a small protest taking place in one of the main cities on the peninsula, Sheikh Zuweid on 27 January 2011, a spree of armed attacks against the police occurred across northern Sinai. In late summer 2011, a number of Salafi-jihadi began to emerge. Carrying names such as Al-Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula and Supporters of Jihad (*Ansar al-Jihad*), these new groups sought to recruit supporters from among the disenchanted Bedouin population in Sinai as well as the growing number of experienced jihadists who had sought refuge on the peninsula after escaping Mubarak's prisons during spring 2011. While some had escaped during the prison breaks from Al-Marg and Abu Zaabal prison compounds already in late January 2011, others came to Sinai after being pardoned by Field Marshal Tantawi of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) during spring 2011 (Sabry 2015).

The first significant uptick in jihadist activism in Sinai occurred in the late summer of 2012 when a new Al-Qaeda-inspired group, Supporters of Jerusalem (*Ansar Beit al-Maqdis* or ABM), was created. In late July the group launched their first direct attack on the Egyptian military in Sinai, assassinating two soldiers in Sheikh Zuweid (previous attacks had targeted police, government personnel and infrastructure). A few days later, the group successfully destroyed the pipeline carrying Egyptian-produced natural gas through Sinai to Israel. Over the following months, ABM would grow into the most potent Salafi-jihadi group in Egypt, focusing its attacks on the Egyptian military and on Israeli targets in and around the Sinai Peninsula – a strategy that it continued to pursue throughout Mohammed Morsi's one year in office, as witnessed, for example, by the killing of sixteen Egyptian soldiers at an Israeli border crossing post in Rafah in August 2012 (e.g. Gold 2014).

The second significant uptick in jihadist activities in Sinai came in the wake of the military coup against President Morsi. Two days after the coup, on 5 July, ABM launched synchronized attacks against the security forces at six different locations across Sinai (Sabry 2013). The violent clearing of Rabaa al-Adawiyya and Nahda squares by the military on 14 August 2013 spurred a new round of attacks across Sinai in late August. By late autumn 2013, the security forces in Sinai were experiencing almost weekly attacks – predominantly in the form of simple drive-by shootings, nightly assaults on security posts, events of sabotage and, in a few rare cases, assaults on military bases. ABM also organized attacks outside Sinai, including a bomb attack against a police station in Mansoura in the Delta in December 2013, an attack against the military intelligence offices in Anshas in Sharqiya province and four attacks in Cairo in January 2014 – including a powerful car bomb outside the police headquarters in Attaba (Al-Sharif and Fick 2014).

The third change in jihadist activities in Sinai came in November 2014, when ABM severed its formal links with Al-Qaeda and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State under the name "Province of Sinai" (*Wilayat Sinai*) (SITE Intelligence Group 2014). In its founding declaration, the Province of Sinai referred to President Sisi and his supporters as "tyrants" (*tawaghiit*) and "apostates" (*murtaddun*).[6] From then on jihadist activities in Sinai would take on an increasingly local,

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6   A video (in Arabic) is available in the SITE Intelligence Group website: http://sitemultimedia.org/video/SITE_AJ_Pledge_IS.mp4.

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Egyptian flavour, with the struggle against Israel and world imperialism gradually receding into the background. In this spirit, the Province of Sinai killed scores of Sinai inhabitants suspected of collaborating with the regime. It executed alleged "spies" and killed employees of the state administration, including several judges. In alignment with its mother organization and as a further indication of its increased domestic focus, the Province of Sinai also made considerable efforts to seize and hold territory in Sinai, among other things by creating de facto no-go zones for the Egyptian military in north-eastern Sinai by using mobile checkpoints (Gold 2016). In 2015, the group also launched several attacks on major cities in Sinai, including Sheikh Zuweid, a town of 60,000 inhabitants, possibly in an attempt to imitate the occupation of Mosul by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (TIMEP 2015).

When the MENARA team conducted its fieldwork in Cairo in March 2018, interviewees expressed various degrees of concern about the potency of the Islamist insurgency and generally regarded Islamist terrorism as a security threat to be reckoned with. Most of the interviewees also expressed disbelief in the media coverage of the conflict in Sinai, pointing out that state censorship rendered the reporting from Sinai untrustworthy and propagandist in nature. Nevertheless, the same interviewees expressed belief in the regime's claim that the ongoing fourth military campaign in Sinai entitled the "Comprehensive Operation" (*al-Mua'mila al-Shaamila*), which had been launched a few months before the field mission took place, was successful and had uprooted the insurgents.

1.3 RADICALIZATION OF MODERATE ISLAMISTS

Alongside the expansion of revolutionary and jihadist groups in Egypt after the July 2013 coup, a broader radicalization of existing moderate, pragmatic and legalist non-violent political groups was taking place. Arguably the most significant of these processes of radicalization took place within the Muslim Brotherhood, which by 2013 had become the single most important civil political actor in Egypt (Brown and Dunne 2015). The Muslim Brotherhood had gone through a series of transformations since its creation in 1928. The organization had survived massive state repression of its members by President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s, in part by going underground and establishing a paramilitary branch. In the 1970s, the Brotherhood had accepted an invitation from President Anwar Sadat to enter into the formal political arena as a counterweight to the socialists and Nasserists. This had required the Muslim Brotherhood to distance itself from the use of political violence and embark on a decades-long trajectory of gradual integration into legal political contestation within the regime-controlled political institutions. Under President Mubarak, the organization had continued to use its limited role in Egyptian politics, as a tolerated but still illegal organization without proper party structures, to develop an organization capable of the mass mobilization of voters. These voters could endorse its candidates whenever and wherever they were allowed to compete in local and parliamentary elections as independents or on the electoral lists presented by the legal political parties.

The toppling of the Mubarak regime in February 2011 initially seemed to confirm that the Brotherhood's long-term strategy had been a success. In June 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood was allowed by the post-revolutionary Egyptian authorities to establish a legal political party, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). In the ensuing parliamentary elections in late 2011 and early 2012, the FJP came out victorious, winning a third of the votes cast. Following a series of disqualifications

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of its top candidates by the Egyptian electoral authorities, the until then little known member of the leadership of the Brotherhood, Mohammed Morsi, narrowly beat one of Hosni Mubarak's former ministers, Ahmed Shafiq, in the presidential election in June 2012. Although the FJP-dominated parliament was dissolved by the Supreme Court shortly after its inauguration, and although the electoral victory in the presidential election was ensured only by the lukewarm support of anti-Mubarak and anti-establishment voters, the election was interpreted inside the Brotherhood as proof not only of its right to rule Egypt, but also of the wisdom of the strategy of political inclusion and legalization pursued by its leadership since the 1970s.

The military coup in 2013 turned the latter assessment upside down. In the wake of the toppling of the Morsi government and the subsequent massacres at Rabaa al-Adawiyya and Nahda squares in mid-August 2013, the strategy of pragmatically cooperating with the authorities while gradually grooming the Brotherhood to become a legal and formal competitor for political power seemed like a failure to a growing number of the organization's supporters. In the eighteen months following the military coup, elements in the group's leadership that had escaped repression carried out a strategic evaluation, concluding that the repression had left the organization deeply divided internally (El-Sherif 2014).

On one side stood a minority of members who continued to support the pragmatic approach aiming towards renegotiation, re-legalization and re-entry into formal politics. This group generally supported an approach that included compromising with the Sisi government and accepting that Morsi could not return to the post of president in return for continued inclusion in the political process.

On the other side stood the majority of members who favoured taking a more confrontational stance towards the regime. This faction was especially strong among the younger members of the Brotherhood who, as a consequence of the indiscriminate repression of the existing leadership of the organization, had gained increasing influence over the strategic orientation of the group and its cadres. They believed that the Brotherhood's predicament had been caused by its collaboration with the regime and with the military high command. Some also argued that the same was true of the Salafist Noor party, with whom the Brotherhood had teamed up during Morsi's presidency. Whether this was motivated by a longing for revenge or by a strategic assessment of the potency of insurgent violence, they seemed to agree that the preferred tactical orientation of the group should be to seek the destruction of the military regime. As this faction within the Brotherhood gained ground, observers noted by 2015 that although the group did not officially support terrorism, it appeared to have adopted a more tolerant attitude towards it than it had done at any point since the 1970s. As noted by some observers, the exiled leadership's condemnations of violence enacted or endorsed by the group's own youth cadres or supporters were becoming less prompt. Instead, the leadership seemed to an increasing comprehension of the violent and revolutionary inclinations of its fringes and seemed increasingly to refrain from condemning it (Brown and Dunne 2015).

During the fieldwork undertaken in Cairo during March 2018, interviewees expressed doubts about the Muslim Brotherhood's capacity to return to politics anytime soon. Most interviewees, including critics of the Sisi regime, believed that the Brotherhood had squandered the opportunity provided by the 25 January 2011 revolution with its reckless approach to governing and its subsequent

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endorsement of violence. Others who had been closer to the organization – or perhaps secretly supported it – expressed bewilderment and saw the betrayal by the military and the secular elites as responsible for what they saw as the dire conditions of Egyptian politics.

2. MILITIA-IZATION OF POLITICS IN LIBYA

Because the Qaddafi regime fell as the result of a civil war and foreign military intervention, and because of the weakness of the transitional political institutions established in 2011–12, armed actors immediately played a major role in Libya's security sphere and in the new political scene. Yet their role has continuously evolved and increased since 2011, to the point that they have become central actors in Libya's new power networks, holding determining influence over the two competing centres of political power: the Government of National Accord (GNA), established in Tripoli, and the House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk. Because of differences in terms of social structures, political trajectories and interactions with foreign actors between the western and eastern parts of the country, however, this evolution has followed divergent paths.

In the west, the webs of common interests among leaders of certain armed groups, some politicians, technocrats and businessmen means their focus has been on self-preservation (albeit at the expense of potential competitors) rather than the promotion of a particular political project.

In the east, the militarization of governance has been made possible by the mobilization of key constituencies around the "anti-terror" and "anti-militias" narratives, as well as by the control and distribution of resources by the Libyan National Army (LNA) General Command. While these do not constitute a political project, they may well continue to form the core of a strategy for power expansion.

2.1 INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESS AND THE LEGACY OF THE CIVIL WAR

In Libya, the proliferation of armed groups started soon after the protests against Qaddafi broke out in February 2011, as the regime attempted to repress dissent and external actors provided military support to Qaddafi's opponents. As early as March 2011, the nature of the initially peaceful mobilization changed. Armed opponents of the regime (essentially armed groups with a local dimension or ideological underpinning) faced not only Qaddafi's security apparatus, but also other civilians who had taken up arms to defend the regime. Militarized contention was therefore coupled with a civil war that cut through Libyan society and contributed to the proliferation of armed groups and weapons across communities and throughout the country (Cole and McQuinn 2015).

Armed groups formed during the war were characterized by strong localism and fragmentation. Yet they emerged out of the war with significant military might and legitimacy. In contrast, the National Transitional Council (NTC) and the transitional governments that ruled the country after August 2012 lacked the capacity to centralize authority and provide law and order across the country. They therefore continued to rely on local armed groups to provide security (Collombier 2017), with the latter using their significant military might and legitimacy to influence important

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political decisions.[7]

In the absence of a serious reconciliation project supported by the transitional authorities and the international community, the fault lines that divided Libya after the 2011 war were almost automatically transferred into the new political arena, while other divisions (re)emerged. The civil war had already led to a clear division of the country and society between "victors" and "losers" (respectively the pro-revolution and pro-former regime cities, communities and armed groups). Soon after the war, a new fault line rapidly appeared between the civilians who had joined revolutionary brigades and the former regime military defectors who had joined the rebellion.[8] On top of this, armed groups had an essentially local dimension and were deeply fragmented along lines that followed divisions and rivalries between families, tribes and cities, as well as between the east and the west (Lacher 2011).

The decision to prioritize the organization of parliamentary elections in the first phase of the political transition, in July 2012, played a key role in cementing divisions and further polarizing Libya's new power map. Yet it also played a role in pushing these multiple local power centres to gradually coalesce into broader alliances (Lacher 2016). As the elected General National Congress (GNC) was set to become the site where major decisions would be made and where the shape of the new state would be designed, groups and factions competing for power concentrated on controlling it and excluding their rivals so as to become the dominant force. The GNC immediately became the centre of competition between newly formed rival political coalitions that coalesced around the Muslim Brotherhood and the National Forces Alliance (NFA). It proved to be extremely weak and dysfunctional as a locus for managing such a fierce competition for power.

Armed groups were able to capitalize on the weakness of the GNC to pursue their own agendas. The most powerful local armed groups, allied with political factions often emanating from the same cities or communities,[9] started using their military might to impose specific political aims that they felt would serve their common interests (Lacher 2016), including pressuring members

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7   The fact that the transitional political authorities were forced to outsource the provision of security to local armed groups, for what they hoped would be a limited period of time until the new central institutions were consolidated and gained control of the military force, helped to reinforce the power and autonomy of local armed groups, but also played a major role in the formation of the features of the nascent political life and the relationships that were established between armed actors and politics.

8   On the one hand, some of those who had fought against Qaddafi and considered themselves "genuine revolutionaries" now focused on "safeguarding the 17th February revolution" and preventing individuals and forces that had been associated with the former regime from exerting influence over the new political system. On the other hand, concern rapidly rose among those who had joined the revolution after having been associated with the former regime about the rising influence of the Islamists. This divide was particularly obvious in eastern Libya, where the deep mistrust between the main armed actors on the ground, i.e. Islamist armed groups and former military personnel, was quick to turn violent. Members of Islamist armed groups were reportedly involved from 2012 onwards in the assassination of dozens of former security officials, notables and civil society activists in the cities of Benghazi and Derna.

9   Soon after the elections, the GNC was divided into two main rival camps. The first one included Muslim Brothers, Salafists and representatives from cities and neighbourhoods that had been strongholds of the revolution, such as Misrata, al-Zawiya, Suq al-Juma', Tajura and the Amazigh (Berber) cities of the Nafusa Mountains. The other was led by the NFA and drew on the support of particular tribal constituencies and military forces. It mostly included representatives of cities or tribes that had supported the regime or abstained from fighting it, such as Sirte, Bani Walid, Tarhuna and al-Aziziya. In eastern Libya, these networks also had links with former army officers and with the tribal leadership of the federalist movement (Lacher 2013, 2016).

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of the GNC into making highly divisive decisions. Among the most significant of these were the authorization of the October 2012 military intervention against the town of Bani Walid, considered a stronghold of the former regime, and the adoption of the Political Isolation Law in May 2013.[10] The law led to the resignation of several high-level politicians from the NFA and altered the balance of power in favour of the Islamist-led coalition. This resulted in political deadlock and institutional paralysis within the GNC, highlighting the significant impact of actions in the security sphere on the nature of political competition.

With the resulting deadlock, competition between rival coalitions intensified and gradually shifted outside the new political institutions. In a clear example of the growing dominance of military conflict over political competition, former army general Khalifa Haftar in February 2014 announced the dissolution of the elected GNC in a televised speech designed to encourage armed groups opposed to the Islamist-led coalition to move against the elected body. This did not meet with much support. A few months later, however, continuing violence in eastern Libya, and Benghazi in particular (caused by a mixture of Islamist militancy, tribal feuds and criminality), provided more favourable ground for constructing a military coalition to lead an operation that aimed at changing the balance of power. Haftar launched Operation Dignity in Benghazi in May 2014 with the objective of ridding the eastern city of Islamist and jihadist militias. The operation was born of a deep disenchantment on the part of former military officers, notably those from the east,[11] with the GNC's collusion with Islamist armed groups and its perceived lack of support for the army and its fight to re-establish security in Benghazi.

The opposition between the two rival camps seemed to be grounded in their support for two conflicting political projects: one of Islamist inspiration, and one more liberal and nationalist-oriented. However, within each camp the ideological and political visions were not so clear-cut. Rather, competition for control over the new institutions played a key role in the forging of alliances between forces that were not always ideologically inclined to collaborate.[12]

Although institutionalized political competition did start in 2012–14, in this period contention was not limited to the political sphere and involved different forms of competition between armed actors allied with rival political groups. Yet the result was the formation of two broad, heterogeneous coalitions around the major political parties rather than the militarization of a clear-cut political conflict.

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10 The law was aimed at vetting citizens to decide whether or not they could hold public office on the basis of the relationship they had with the Qaddafi regime. The law passed in May 2013 ended up effectively banning anyone who had held an official position from September 1969 from holding public office or a senior position in the administration for a period of ten years. Armed groups from Misrata and Islamist forces within the GNC, led by the Salafists, were particularly instrumental in forcing the law through (Collombier 2017).

11 Haftar's supporters initially included a few hundred members from disaffected army units and eastern tribes in Benghazi.

12 For example, while the Islamist movement was strong among local notables and the youth in the western mountainous city of Zintan, armed groups from the city sided with Haftar. This was at least partly the consequence of the strong social and business connections that linked major political and military forces in Zintan to dominant figures in the NFA.

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2.2 INSTITUTIONAL DIVISIONS AND THE CLIMAX OF MILITARIZED POLITICS

Polarization and militarization of contentious politics reached new heights in 2014, with a significant escalation of violence between the armed groups of the two broad coalitions that had emerged in the previous two years. The election of the GNC's successor, the House of Representatives, just a month after the launch of Haftar's Operation Dignity in June 2014 provoked the collapse of the process of political transition envisaged in 2011 and the emergence of rival political institutions. Each military coalition was now linked to a separate "national" administration. The newly elected HoR and its government, dominated by the so-called "liberal" camp and by supporters of General Haftar, was established in the eastern city of Tobruk.[13] The "revolutionary" or "Islamist" camp within the GNC refused to step down despite severe election losses and maintained the body elected in 2012 in Tripoli, with the support of hard-line armed groups and politicians from Misrata and their allies gathered in the Libya Dawn coalition.[14]

Military confrontation escalated between rival political and military coalitions fighting for legitimacy and for recognition (including from the international community) of their respective "national state institutions" at the expense of their rivals.[15] Significant support provided by external powers from the region (Egypt and the United Arab Emirates for the Dignity coalition; Qatar, Turkey and Sudan for the Dawn coalition) reinforced the local actors' view that political victory could be achieved by military means.

Although the conflict remained complex and multi-layered, it was often framed as an "Islamist versus liberal" competition. The local actors themselves propagated politics-based narratives. Libya Dawn's leaders made extensive use of the narrative of the February 2011 revolution and mobilized around the necessity to protect it against a possible counter-revolution and the return of the former regime's repressive apparatus. In contrast, in their efforts to attract and mobilize supporters, Operation Dignity and its leader, Khalifa Haftar, used the fight against Islamist and jihadist armed groups, referring to them en masse as terrorists, and the need to prevent Islamists from hijacking the 2011 revolution.

In reality, the competing political projects behind the narratives mobilized by both sides lacked cohesion. Because of the divisions and the ineffectiveness of political institutions, alliance-building became increasingly important for both sides to increase their power and influence on the ground. While united around common, broadly defined objectives, the two rival coalitions

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13 A number of newly elected members of the HoR aligned with the "revolutionary" camp and refused to sit.

14 This coalition launched the military operation Libya Dawn in Tripoli during the summer of 2014. The Dawn coalition, allied to the Tripoli-based GNC, was dominated by politicians and armed groups (Islamist and non-Islamist) from Misrata and largely financed by the city's business elite. It included elements from Tripoli, al-Zawiya, Janzur, Zuwara and the Nafusa Mountains (notably Gharyan and Kikla). The military offensive targeted Zintan's armed groups in Tripoli and aimed at evicting them from the international airport and other strategic locations under their control (Lacher and Cole 2014). In response, armed groups from Zintan and Warshafana allied themselves with Operation Dignity against Libya Dawn, and the fighting soon attracted forces from all across Libya. In September 2014, Libya Dawn was in control of Tripoli.

15 Because it was born of the June 2014 elections, the HoR and the al-Thini government prevailed and gained international recognition.

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were highly heterogeneous in terms of composition, interests and ideological backgrounds.[16] In the west, the social context in which Libya Dawn operated was historically highly fragmented between rival cities and communities. The coalition reflected this diverse social reality, though it was clearly dominated by Misratan politicians and armed groups. While Operation Dignity could rely on military support from eastern tribes and former army officers, a loose tactical alliance also linked Haftar to the federalist current and the NFA.[17] The polarization between the two political narratives also facilitated the return of politicians close to the former regime, who supported the Haftar-led coalition. Early on, the launching of Operation Dignity had resulted in a reshaping of alliances in Benghazi, with different stripes of Islamist and jihadist groups, usually hostile to one another, forming coalitions: Ansar al-Sharia, armed groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as members of other revolutionary armed groups with different political and ideological views gathered within the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council (BRSC) and fought side by side against Haftar and his local allies.

The political framing of the struggle also employed a national frame of reference, and the conflict between the two major coalitions reverberated across Libya, especially in the west and south (Collombier 2016a).[18] Historical rivalries and competition over influence and resources between local communities and armed groups were actively politicized and resulted in military confrontations involving forces allied to one or the other of the two national coalitions. Direct military confrontation between the two main rival coalitions and its impact accentuated the pre-existing trends of "localization" of security and "militia-ization" of society as local communities and their leaders had to renew efforts to ensure their own protection (Collombier 2017).

While the narrative remained political, military might was increasingly mobilized in order to seize control of Libya's economic and financial resources, including the hydrocarbons sector, strategic sites and key infrastructure such as airports and border crossings, and Libya's economic and financial institutions (ICG 2015). Operation Libya Sunrise, launched at the oil terminal of Sidra by Misratan forces with the support of the GNC in December 2014, marked a turning point in this regard, and resulted in direct military confrontation between Misratan and pro-HoR forces. Clashes continued over energy infrastructures even after the Misratans ended the siege of Sidra and withdrew in March 2015. Similarly, from the end of 2014, the pre-existing conflicts between minority Tebu and Tuareg communities in southern Libya – especially around the control of smuggling routes and energy infrastructures – were increasingly instrumentalized by the northern coalitions and framed in terms of the national divide between Dignity and Dawn. Tebu and Tuareg armed groups allied themselves to forces respectively from Zintan and Misrata and entered into

16 Both the Dignity and Dawn coalitions were hybrid structures comprising regular army units, registered armed groups that formally depended on the ministries of defence or interior (and therefore received salaries from the government) but were actually largely autonomous, tribal militias, and units or elements with civilian backgrounds who decided to join the fight for ideological reasons.

17 The federalist movement announced its presence in Libya during the Conference of the People of Cyrenaica (the name used to designate the historical province of eastern Libya) organized in Benghazi in March 2012. It demanded the establishment of a federal governing structure based on the country's 1951 constitution. The movement's structure and relationships with Libya's major political and military players have undergone many developments since 2012.

18 EUI team's interviews with social leaders and civil society activists involved in crisis resolution efforts in southern Libya, the Nafussa Mountains and Tripoli, February 2016; EUI team's phone conversation with activist involved in reconciliation initiatives in Obari, June 2017; EUI team's discussions with teacher from Sebha, Tunis, April 2018.

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direct military confrontation for the control of oilfields (in particular the two giant oilfields of al-Sharara and al-Fil, in the Murzuq basin), leading to a serious deterioration of the security situation in the cities of Obari and Sebha, and major displacement of the population.

This conflict also spilled over into the institutional level, with rivals fighting for control of the Central Bank of Libya (CBL), the National Oil Company (NOC) and the Libyan Investment Authority (LIA) as a way to access state funds (ICG 2015).[19] The change in the nature of competition away from institutional politics, and in particular the conflicts over economic institutions and resources (ICG 2015), dramatically affected Libya's overall economic and financial situation, as it combined with endemic corruption and dwindling revenues from falling exports and energy prices. This resulted in a reduction of government resources available to armed groups,[20] which helped to reconfigure the relationships between political actors and armed actors. This had a direct effect on the nature of competition and contention.

Despite deepening institutional divisions and the spillover of the conflict outside of increasingly irrelevant elected institutions between 2014 and 2016, the rival coalitions continued to use broadly defined political objectives to frame the conflict. In reality, as their alliances with politicians working from inside the institutions provided fewer benefits, the armed groups increasingly focused on gaining independent access to resources in order to maintain their military capacities and therefore their influence over decision-making.[21] This became extremely important from the end of 2014 onwards, as the UN-led political dialogue triggered new political dynamics that changed the map of alliances and power on the ground.

2.3 ARMED ACTORS IN NEW POWER NETWORKS

The political dialogue initiated by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) in September 2014 had a dramatic impact on Libya's political and security situation, as it contributed to a significant de-escalation of the military conflict on the ground and designed a new political map.[22] Yet the UN's objective of breaking apart the two main rival coalitions and building a new "coalition of the moderates" that would be supportive of a political agreement and a national unity government was only partially reached. In western Libya, the balance of forces between factions and communities proved favourable to the signing of the Skhirat Libyan Political Agreement (LPA)

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19 After the election of the HoR, the new parliament and the government of al-Thini argued that they were the legitimate authority to control these institutions. Yet as the institutions remained in Tripoli, they had no actual control over them, in contrast to the GNC. Competition rapidly escalated at the end of 2014. While the CBL continued to pay salaries and subsidies across the country and across the political divide, they would not disburse other funds to the eastern authorities. The government of al-Thini reacted by creating a parallel CBL administration in November 2014, but it had no access to CBL accounts. The competition between the two governments also resulted in the creation of rival managements for the LIA, and led to legal disputes.

20 The height of government funding for armed groups was between 2012 and 2014.

21 EUI team's interviews with local activists familiar with security actors in Tripoli and the Nafusa Mountains, Tripoli, March 2018.

22 The UN-led political dialogue aimed at solving the institutional crisis and forming a national unity government, as well as reaching a comprehensive ceasefire. It initially gathered representatives of the main factions that had been competing within the political institutions (in particular the GNC and the HoR), but did not include representatives of the armed groups.

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in December 2015.[23] In contrast, the members of the Dignity coalition and major constituencies in the east were unified in their opposition to a political agreement perceived as biased in favour of Misrata and the Islamists, which contributed to the consolidation of Haftar's authority and power in the region.

Instead of allowing for the reunification of the national political institutions as intended, the UN-led dialogue therefore led to the emergence of two rival power centres after 2016: the Presidential Council (PC) of the GNA, born of the LPA and led by Fayez Sarraj, which was established in Tripoli in March; and Khalifa Haftar and the General Command of his self-styled LNA, who gradually expanded their authority over the east of the country.[24] Power networks were rearranged around these two new "executive" authorities, recognized as the "government" in place, and therefore as the political authority, by a significant portion of their respective constituencies. However, the authority of the two power centres emanated from different sources and translated on the ground in very different ways, especially in the relationship each maintained with armed groups. Sarraj, who was appointed to a position created by the LPA, took a large part of his authority from the legitimacy conferred on him by the international community. Yet he lacked the military might that would have given him actual power on the ground, which meant that he had to negotiate with the armed groups from the very moment the decision was taken to establish the Presidential Council in Tripoli. In contrast, Haftar, who created his own position as the LNA commander in chief and enjoyed real power on the ground, devoted significant efforts to reinforcing his legitimacy domestically and internationally from the very moment he launched his Operation Dignity in 2014 (Collombier 2016b).[25]

These developments have accentuated the shift of political authority outside of the political institutions within which competition would be organized and managed. Even when they still formally play a central institutional role, as in the case of the HoR,[26] elected political institutions (parliaments) have become peripheral to the competition for power.[27] Similarly, the influence of

23 The decision by some influential forces from Misrata – including major figures from the business community – to back the political dialogue left the Dawn coalition deeply fragmented and weakened. As it became mostly irrelevant on the ground, the overall dispersion and diversity of the political and military forces in the west of the country resulted in a balance of forces between factions and communities which proved favourable for the signature of the Skhirat political agreement in December 2015. This was despite the fact that the core group of Libya Dawn hardliners refused the agreement and remained active in Tripoli, organized around the remnants of the GNC and its new prime minister, Khalifa al-Ghwell. In contrast, the UN mediation efforts never achieved such outcomes with the Dignity coalition. While the military and political coalition remained heterogeneous, it was indisputably dominated by General Haftar, with wide – although not unanimous – support and adhesion from members of the HoR and the traditional social (tribal) structures. The perception by eastern constituencies that UNSMIL and international mediation efforts were biased in favour of political and military forces led by Misrata and the Islamists in western Libya further reinforced local opposition to the political agreement and consolidated Haftar's position as the major political and military force in the east.

24 Until the military operation launched by the LNA and its local allies against Derna in May 2018, the city was the only one to remain outside Haftar's control (Salem 2017, 2018).

25 The PC of the GNA and the LNA General Command implemented different strategies of legitimation, addressed to both domestic constituencies and international actors. The fight against the Islamic State in Sirte in the case of the GNA, and the "fight against terror" as well as the management of the revenues drawn from control of oil infrastructures between September 2016 and June 2018 in the case of the LNA, proved key to the respective strategies of the two "executives".

26 The prerogatives of the HoR as the provisional national legislative authority were confirmed by the Libyan Political Agreement signed in December 2015.

27 The HoR is technically a key political stumbling block to the LPA. However, decision-making in the east has gradually

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political parties and movements is now essentially limited to backstage and unofficial channels (for instance, through the funding of specific armed groups). Instead, power networks were gradually rearranged around the two new power centres, through a complex web of relationships of mutual dependency in which the armed actors ended up dominating the political ones.

The LPA in fact empowered certain armed groups in Tripoli. Efforts to ensure that the Presidential Council could gain local legitimacy by operating from Tripoli required negotiating security arrangements with some of the main armed groups controlling the capital at the time.[28] When the PC of the GNA was established in Tripoli in March 2016, the armed groups that controlled the city were forced to choose sides. Most of them eventually committed to backing it, expecting that proximity to the new political authorities would best serve their interests. Others remained loyal to the GNC-aligned government (Lacher 2018) until they were ousted by pro-GNA forces in 2017. This cemented a new balance of forces in the capital, characterized by the dominance of a small number of armed groups originally from Tripoli,[29] which also took advantage of the fact that the bulk of Misratan armed groups were at the time fighting with the al-Bunyan al-Marsus operation against the Islamic State in Sirte.

As of summer 2018, a "militia cartel" (Lacher 2018) formally placed under the authority of the GNA was completely dominating the security landscape at the city level. To the extent that the political positions of the forces in this "cartel" are known, they are highly heterogeneous. Indeed, the support they have provided to the GNA seems to have been motivated to a large extent by access to power and resources, rather than particular political views. The blurring of distinctions between state and non-state, private and public interests as well as legitimate and illegitimate activities is clear in the armed groups' economic role: they have become involved in the diversion of public funds – notably through exerting pressure on managers of major commercial banks, misusing Letters of Credit and playing a direct role in cash distribution circuits – which allows them to finance themselves (Lacher 2018).[30] As elsewhere across Libya, armed groups in Tripoli have taken advantage of their military might on the ground to join wider profiteering networks that include businessmen, politicians and members of the state administration, which the "authorities" are powerless to stop. These armed groups have also taken advantage of the weakness and dependency of the political authorities to gain unprecedented influence over state institutions, for instance through the role they now play in appointments to key positions in the state administration and state-owned companies.[31] Overall, they seem so far to have prioritized protecting their economic

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shifted towards the LNA General Command, with Haftar being able to influence the elected body's agenda and at least partly control HoR members' movements with travel restrictions.

28 In particular the Halbus and part of the Mahjub brigades of Misrata, as well as Islamist brigades such as the Special Deterrent Force (Rada) led by Salafist Abdulraouf Kara.

29 The Tripoli Revolutionaries' Brigade headed by Haythem al-Tajouri controls central and western Tripoli, while Salafist figure Abdulraouf Kara's Special Deterrence Force dominates the eastern part of the city, including Mitiga International Airport. In the south of the capital, including the Abu Sleem neighbourhood and the Airport Road (leading to the international airport, which was partially destroyed during the clashes of summer 2014), Abdulghani al-Kikli ("Ghneiwa") is in control. All three groups are formally part of the GNA's Ministry of Interior. In the south-west of the city, the predominantly Amazigh Mobile National Forces and the Janzur Knights Brigade are working under the authority of the GNA's Ministry of Defence.

30 EUI team's discussions with activist well-connected with local security actors, Tripoli, March 2018.

31 EUI team's interview with a Libyan political analyst and journalist, Tripoli, March 2018.

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interests and consolidating their influence over the political establishment rather than playing a direct political role.[32]

The balance of power in the east of the country has also shifted in favour of armed actors, as Haftar and the General Command of the self-styled LNA have become the main player (to the detriment of the HoR) and gradually imposed militarized governance over the region (Wehrey 2017).[33] This was made possible by Haftar's ability to make tribal alliances and absorb armed brigades and civilian volunteers into the LNA.[34] Distribution seems to have played at least some role in the LNA's expansion strategy, however, which means that Haftar's ability to act as a distributor is contingent at least in part on the foreign support networks he has built up, as well as the economic and/or security context which enables him to maintain a monopoly on such distribution.

In contrast to the west, where no clear political project seems to be guiding the actions of the armed groups allied with the GNA, in the east the "fight against terrorism" has remained both a major objective and a mobilization tool for the LNA, as was recently illustrated by the military campaign in the eastern city of Derna (Salem 2018), as well as the regular strikes conducted in desert areas to the south of Sirte and in the south.[35] Whether or not this security-focused alliance would hold together in the case of a return of institutionalized politics remains to be seen, especially given that increasing restrictions on freedom of speech and movement and the strong political role played by tribes have contributed to the limiting of political debate.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that the rise of armed groups in Egypt and Libya since 2011 has essentially been the product of two main dynamics: regime-led repression on the one hand and warfare and state erosion on the other hand.

In Egypt, the regime-led repression has generated a trend that we refer to as the "militarization of contention". Here the indiscriminate repression orchestrated by the incumbent President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi since July 2013 has served not only as an independent dynamic pushing previously peaceful collective actors towards adopting militarized forms of contention, but also as a factor that has strengthened other pre-existing dynamics of militarization such as ideological orientation, political disappointment and socio-economic conditions. Although regime-driven repression alone cannot explain the entire growth of armed groups in Egypt since 2011, the analysis suggests that it is the most important individual dynamic.

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32 EUI team's interviews, Tripoli, March 2018.

33 This included the replacement of elected municipal councils by military governors.

34 One example of such alliances has been the Magharba tribe's change of allegiance from Ibrahim Jadhran to Haftar in August 2016, which allowed the LNA to take control of the oil terminals in the Oil Crescent. This tactic seems to have involved targeting individuals who can bring armed actors into the LNA, such as Sheikh Salah Atyush exerting social pressure on his Magharba tribesmen.

35 For instance, on 20 June 2018, a LNA statement claimed that the LNA Air Force had destroyed several armed vehicles in the al-Hunaywah area, 40 kilometres south-east of Sirte, the day before.

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In Libya, civil warfare (involving foreign military interventions) combined with the weakness of the nascent political institutions contributed to the emergence and empowerment of a multitude of armed actors and generated a dynamic of "militia-ization" of politics. Nascent institutional politics between 2012 and 2014 encouraged the constitution of alliances between armed groups, politicians and political parties around specific objectives, and gradually allowed the former to increase their influence on decision-making. Despite the political narratives mobilized by the main rival coalitions, however, doing politics essentially meant competing for power and resources rather than promoting a specific political project. As institutions became divided by mid-2014, participation in institutional politics through elected bodies lost its appeal and competition became militarized: armed groups increasingly focused on gaining independent access to resources in order to maintain their military capacities and therefore their influence over decision-making in key areas. The failure of international efforts to reunify Libya's institutions since 2015 and the emergence of two rival power centres, respectively in Tripoli and in eastern Libya, have further increased the importance of power networks organized around the pursuit of material and financial interests in which armed actors have come to play a key role.

The analysis has also shown that the two main dynamics underlined in the two cases are not as independent as they may appear at first glance. In practice they are simultaneously at play in both cases: although Libya's militia-ization of politics has been pushed forward predominantly by warfare and the weakness of institutions, regime repression did play a role in the creation of Libya's first militias in early 2011. Likewise, Egypt's militarization of contention is primarily the result of regime-orchestrated repression, but the inability of the state apparatus to effectively control the means of violence in parts of Sinai and the Western Desert continues to provide room for armed groups to gain a foothold.

Similar dynamics have also been at play elsewhere in the MENA region. Many of the dynamics highlighted in the Libyan case can also be observed in countries such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen, where armed conflicts and state erosion have contributed – although in different ways and to different extents – to the emergence and growing influence of armed groups over politics and to the development of war economies that have significantly reshaped and complicated the power map (Collombier 2018). In countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Turkey and Morocco, where regimes have prevailed or re-emerged as credible centres of political decision-making, regime-led repression, marginalization and exclusion since 2011 have also pushed some segments of collective actors towards militarized forms of contention.

WHAT TO DO?

The proliferation of armed groups across the entire MENA region is, of course, primarily a threat to MENA populations, societies, governments and states. The uptick in violence that accompanies the proliferation of armed groups poses obvious and urgent security threats to the lives and well-being of the inhabitants in the region, as does the stagnation or even collapse of economic, political and social development processes that often follows the emergence of armed groups.

From a longer perspective, however, the challenges and threats arising from the proliferation of armed groups are not limited to the MENA region. They also potentially threaten the security and

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stability of neighbouring countries and members of the broader international community. What can be done, then, to contain the threats and challenges that arise from the different types of proliferation of armed groups in the two countries under scrutiny in the paper and in the broader MENA region?

In Libya, the challenges posed by the militia-ization of politics and, more broadly, by the major role gained by armed actors in the new power networks that dominate Libya's political and economic spheres requires a multilayered strategy.

The continuing intervention of external actors in the civil war in support of rival parties has contributed to feeding and extending the conflict in Libya, as it has encouraged the view that victory can be achieved by military means. Curbing the power of armed actors and pushing them to participate in genuine political dialogue would require that more credible international action is taken to control and impede external actors from continuing to provide arms and support to local factions.

Armed actors have also gained increased financial autonomy over the past two years through their direct involvement in both legal and illegal economic and financial activities, taking advantage of institutional divisions and economic dysfunction. While the line between Libya's formal and criminal economies has become dramatically blurred, curbing the power of armed actors would also require that a genuine dialogue is pursued around economic rehabilitation with those Libyan economic elites that might benefit more from long-term recovery than from a further deepening of the crisis.

Similarly, a return to institutional politics, that is, competition for power (and rotation in power) within legitimate and recognized political institutions, could be encouraged by supporting consensus-building around new institutions and institutional rules (including a constitution) between the major political players rather than by prioritizing electoral competition. Elections without prior agreement on the institutional framework would result in the establishment of an additional irrelevant political institution and would further discredit politics and political processes.

These overarching principles also apply to other countries in the MENA region where militias have gained increasing influence in politics in correlation with warfare and the weakening of state apparatuses. From Syria and Iraq to Yemen, the continuation of regional and external military intervention, the financial independence of the armed groups as well as the weak and illegitimate character of state institutions must be addressed in order diminish armed groups' influence over politics.

In Egypt, repression alone will not do the job. Policy-makers within and outside the country are likely to obtain better results if they distinguish between types of armed groups. Rather than conceiving of all armed groups as identical parts of a body of "terrorists", Egyptian and other authorities facing militarized contentious actors and armed groups in general could potentially improve their results by distinguishing between those armed groups that are sternly bent on destroying the regime and killing its supporters, and those armed groups who are seeking more limited goals such as revenge, retribution, justice, or the pardoning and reintegration of specific political actors

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into legal politics. While accepting that the authorities in the MENA countries need to handle the first type of armed groups primarily with military and police means, they could potentially make progress on disarmament and demobilization by reaching out to the latter type of armed groups with suggestions for peace talks and negotiations.

The Egyptian case also suggests that exclusion of non-armed challengers and contenders of the regime is a poor long-term strategy. While the authorities may have a need to prosecute contentious political actors, movement leaders and others actively providing ideological and logistic support to armed groups and who seek to destroy the regime with violence, authorities in the region could potentially increase their popular legitimacy by reaching out to leaders and members of non-armed movements and groups that oppose the current government, but remain open for dialogue and compromise. Integrating such non-armed contentious actors would potentially deprive the armed groups from an important mobilizing base by simultaneously injecting life into non-armed contentious politics and bestowing increased legitimacy upon non-armed opposition polices more broadly.

These general principles are also – albeit to varying degrees and in different ways - in other MENA-countries where incumbent regimes are currently restoring their ability to govern through mass repression of competitors and opposition. From Bahrain to and Saudi-Arabia and further throughout the MENA-region, incumbent regimes will benefit from further refining their distinctions between different types of armed groups.

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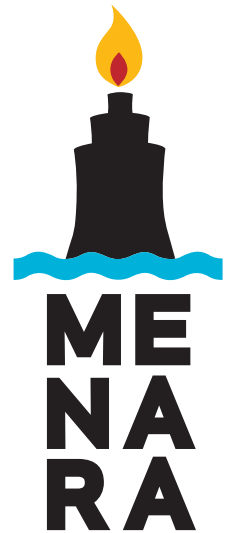
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Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA) is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

MENARA maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

MENARA is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.