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IN MILITIAS WE TRUST: Libya's Conundrum*

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Uthman Mleghta, commander of the powerful al Qaaqa brigade from the Nafusa Mountains town of Zintan, rejects being described as a qatiba (militia). On a recent foreign NGO's visit to his heavily guarded headquarters in Tripoli, Mleghta presented his "group's" activities, including a newly launched print newspaper and an education programme for Libyan youth.

But his visitors were more interested in al Qaaqa's security role. Al Qaaqa is responsible for, among others, controlling the border pass with Tunisia, guarding certain oil fields and the protection of some high profile Libyan politicians. When asked about al Qaaqa's well-armed fighters, Mleghta matter-of-factly answered "we are the army".

The rapid disintegration of Muammar al Gaddafi's armed forces and police meant that the militias born out of the revolution were the only ones equipped to fill the security vacuum left behind. This scenario led to a number of the cities or towns seeing their militias play key roles in the revolution, gaining significant influence.

Zintan, the small town in the Nafusa mountains where al Qaaqa hails from and where Saif al Islam Gaddafi is being held, went from being politically insignificant to being awarded the Defence ministry portfolio of the last transitional government, assigned to Zintani commander Osama al-Juwali.

Today, many foreign commentators portray Libya as a country in chaos overrun by uncontrolled militias. The death of US Ambassador Chris Stevens after the attack on the US consulate in Bengasi in September served to consolidate this image.

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Indeed insecurity is on the rise in the east, where a spell of attacks has targeted high-ranking security officials and international objectives in Bengasi. And this year has seen serious conflict in Beni Walid over tribal tensions and in desert towns such as Kufra and Sebha over the control of lucrative narco-trafficking routes through Libya's porous southern borders. With growing tensions and shifting alliances in the Sahel after the military intervention in Mali, these conflicts could flare up again.

But much of the country is safe and reasonably well functioning especially in view of the power vacuum left behind after the collapse of Gaddafi's 42-year regime. In Tripoli and other cities and towns, many militias have assumed roles like patrolling neighborhoods and directing traffic with responsibility. Tripoli is today a bustling Arab city where the streets are full of small businesses and young Libyan men and women mingle freely in packed coffee shops.

This said, most militias, in fact, resist any kind of government control and many have justly gained bad reputations for looting and torturing or even killing civilians. In June, Human Rights Watch estimated that there were still some 4,000 illegal detainees in the hands of militias in both formal and secret detentions centers. Most concerning are these groups' increasing ties to Libya's economy and politics, through their control of strategic points such as airports, oil fields, national borders and even international hotels in Tripoli.

Throughout the last year, Libya's transitional authorities –weakened by their lack of democratic legitimacy- have struggled dealing directly with these militias. But since November, Libya has a government born out of July's democratic elections.

One of the first important decisions the new government has made has been to dissolve the Supreme Security Committee, a body set up by the Interior Ministry to bring militias under some kind of centralized control, or at least, coordination. By all accounts, the Committee failed and was used by Islamist elements to infiltrate the security forces.

Abdulrazag Elaradi, a former National Transitional Council from the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, argues that despite the risks that militias present, Libya will persevere "because soft power has won out". The collective sacrifices from the revolution have instilled a sense of responsibility whereby dialogue has served to prevent serious conflict, or at least quell it. One experienced international aid worker spoke of an incident in which two opposed militias exchanged blows while holding weapons in their other hands.

But many Libyans seem concerned. On the 28th of December, some 2,000 people protested in the streets of Bengazi demanding militias to disband or join the army. The protest came after the drive by shooting of Faraj al-Dreisi, the city's police chief.

The government is now developing a renewed plan to integrate revolutionaries into the nascent Libyan security forces. Generous stipends will again be on offer. To what extent the government will succeed is very much in question. Militias respond to local interests and have varying religious and political affiliations, as groupings such as the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated Revolutionary Brigades Coalition in the east of the country reflect.

Transitional authorities' and militia's claims throughout the last year that armed groups would come under the control of the state once a legitimate government was in place will now be tested. The question that remains is whether these militias will hand in their weapons once, and if, the security forces are

strong enough to secure the country (as the militias claim) or whether the armed groups will hold on to these weapons until they feel their principal interests and objectives are secured (as some others suspect).

Libyans' sense of pride and responsibility has ensured relative stability until now. However, if the second scenario emerges and militia commanders refuse to disarm and continue to consolidate their power through exploiting their growing political and economic ties, Libya's hope of becoming one of the Arab Spring's few success stories could quickly dissolve. How militias react to upcoming sensitive decisions concerning Libya's constitution drafting process should be a revealing indicator of the way things could go.