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## After the Fall

### Libya's Evolving Armed Groups

*By Brian McQuinn*



A Working Paper of the  
Small Arms Survey



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# List of abbreviations

<b>MMC</b>	Misratan Military Council
<b>MoD</b>	Ministry of Defence
<b>MoI</b>	Ministry of Interior
<b>MUR</b>	Misratan Union of Revolutionaries
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>NTC</b>	National Transitional Council
<b>RPG</b>	Rocket-propelled grenade (launcher)

## About the author

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# Introduction

## Background

The ‘February 17<sup>th</sup> Revolution’—as it is called in Libya—was preceded by small-scale protests throughout the country. Then, on 17 February 2011, mass demonstrations in Benghazi, Libya’s second-largest city, ushered in the uprising that would attract international media attention. In response, the government of Col. Muammar Qaddafi began a brutal crackdown that was reminiscent of the bloody tactics of the 1980s (Kirkpatrick, 2011). Demonstrations quickly devolved into armed conflict in Benghazi, Misrata, and the Nafusa Mountains.

On 17 March 2011, in view of escalating levels of violence, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1973, mandating member states and regional organizations to ‘take all necessary measures’ to protect civilians (UNSC, 2011, para. 4; UNDP, 2011). France, the UK, and the United States immediately enforced a no-fly zone and began military strikes against Qaddafi’s ground forces, which were threatening Benghazi (McGreal, 2011). NATO assumed responsibility for operations on 31 March 2011 (NATO, 2011, p. 1).

The fighting continued for eight months, ending on 20 October 2011, when Col. Qaddafi was captured and killed near his hometown of Sirte (Malone, 2011). His death brought an end to the armed struggle but not to the broader ‘revolution’, whose goal, as articulated by its young backers, was to establish a nation characterized by accountable leaders, economic development, and individual freedom (UNSC, 2012b).

After the fall of Tripoli in August 2011, a rebel victory looked increasingly likely, leading international news media to shift their coverage from war stories to investigations of the soon-to-be victors (Hubbard and Laub, 2011). Reports of human rights abuses in detention centres and small-scale skirmishes between armed groups soon followed (HRW, 2011b). Responsibility for these incidents was ascribed to ‘militias’, usually characterized as out of control and beyond state control (HRW, 2011a; CNN, 2012). Yet, by labelling any armed group a ‘militia’ or *katiba*,<sup>1</sup> this type of reporting obscured the distinctions among the

heterogeneous groups operating in the country (AI, 2012). Indeed, it simplified a complex and fluid security environment in which many armed groups were closely coordinating with local councils to provide security for communities. The High National Elections Commission, for example, relied on many of these groups to provide security during the National Congress elections in July 2011.

These simplified depictions—and the persistence of human rights abuses—led many international organizations to call for militias to ‘disarm or join regular forces’ (AI, 2012, p. 5). Such calls overlooked three key points: 1) many of these groups play important roles in providing security for local communities, 2) revolutionary forces do not recognize the legitimacy of the National Army or the Ministry of Defence (MoD)—both pre-revolutionary holdovers—and 3) no institutional National Army recruitment process existed (ICG, 2011; 2012; Stephen, 2012). As one brigade commander explained, ‘Why would I hand over my guns to the same people I was fighting three months ago?’<sup>2</sup>

As this *Working Paper* argues, distinguishing among different types of armed groups in Libya is critical to understanding the evolving political situation and devising effective international policy to support the ongoing transition. Such policy must also recognize that demobilization of combatants is directly tied to the creation of a legitimate national army and police force. Until substantial reform of the National Army and MoD is undertaken, it is unlikely that national demilitarization will make significant progress. Moreover, the ongoing jurisdictional disputes over which government department—the newly established Warrior’s Affairs Committee, the Ministry of Interior (MoI), or the MoD—is responsible for allocating the USD 8 billion set aside for demobilization only exacerbate the situation (ICG, 2012).

This report focuses on the armed resistance in Misrata, Libya’s third-largest city, with an eye to deepening and fine-tuning our understanding of the country’s armed groups and their aims. These fighting units began as micro-groups of uncoordinated street fighters and developed into organizations capable of deploying tanks and heavy artillery.<sup>3</sup>

Today Misrata boasts nearly half of the experienced fighters and weapons caches in Libya.<sup>4</sup> As a result, it has a disproportionate effect on the nation’s security, demilitarization, and demobilization.

## Research objectives and findings

The report's objectives are to:

- detail the number and nature of armed groups operating in Misrata with a particular focus on their objectives, formation history, and leadership structures;
- investigate how these groups are shaping the present security environment at the local level and how these dynamics relate to national security concerns; and
- document the progress and challenges in securing the vast array of weapons and ammunition controlled by these groups.

Its main findings include the following:

- The decentralized nature of the revolution continues to define the evolving security environment. This fragmentation is most clearly seen in the development of armed groups that can differ dramatically from city to city.
- Four distinct types of armed groups<sup>5</sup> are operating in Libya today:
  - **revolutionary brigades** emerged during the initial months of intense fighting but have since become closely integrated into local authorities and associations;
  - **unregulated brigades** are revolutionary brigades that broke away from the authority of local councils and are operating outside of their control;
  - **post-revolutionary brigades** emerged in cities or neighbourhoods as local protection forces in the security vacuum created by Qaddafi's retreating forces; and
  - **militias** are armed groups that range from criminal networks to violent extremists.
- Frustrated that neither the National Army nor the MoD was undergoing reform, revolutionary brigades from across the country joined forces to create a national army-in-waiting: the Libyan National Shield. Its four divisions—east, west, south, and central—report directly to the head of the National Army, Maj. Gen. Yousef al-Mangoush, who enjoys respect among brigade members while effectively heading two armies.<sup>6</sup> In the Misrata region, 7,000 fighters have been incorporated into the central division; some have begun to transfer their weapons to this new force.

- Revolutionary brigades control 75 to 85 per cent of the seasoned non-state fighters and non-state weapons. In Misrata, 236 revolutionary brigades registered with the Misratan Union of Revolutionaries (MUR),<sup>7</sup> accounting for almost 40,000 fighters; they control more than 90 per cent of the city's weapons.
- Based on inspection of weapons storage facilities in Misrata, revolutionary and unregulated brigades appear to exercise substantial control over their light and conventional weapons.<sup>8</sup> Yet local military commanders and civilian leaders suggest that inadequate storage facilities for weapons and ammunition present a safety risk. They also highlight the need for additional technical expertise in the construction of such facilities. Nearly all of the Misratan brigades' estimated 30,000 small arms are held by individual members.

## Methodology

The report is based on seven months of fieldwork, carried out between 18 May 2011 and 26 March 2012. Misrata served as the primary field site but research was also conducted in Benghazi, Sirte, and Tripoli. Visits to weapons storage facilities, which were carried out specifically for this report, took place in March 2012.

The research methodologies employed include participatory observation, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. In total, the author conducted more than 300 interviews with members of 21 separate fighting units, whose strength ranged from 12 to 1,042 fighters. Additional interviews were conducted with non-combatants, including civilian leaders, medical personnel, journalists, educators, humanitarian aid workers, and community organizers. The author made a special effort to interview women, as they played a crucial role in organizing logistical support for the front lines.

## Report structure

The report begins with a detailed typology that highlights the differences among the four main armed groups operating in Libya today. It continues with a description of the three stages of development for armed groups in Misrata; in so doing, it reviews the history of fighting in the city. It then examines the

proliferation of weapons during the fighting as well as the types of controls brigades exercise over their weapons. The report concludes with a review of its findings. The Small Arms Survey will also publish this *Working Paper* in Arabic. 📄

# Typology of non-state armed groups in Libya

As outlined in the introduction, the use of the term ‘militia’ or *katiba* (brigade) to describe all non-state armed groups in Libya obscures critical distinctions. Understanding these distinctions is key to developing effective international policy aimed at securing Libya’s transition.

During the field research for this report, three fundamental features—formation history, community linkage, and integration with local authorities—emerged as the most salient characteristics of the main armed groups operating in Libya. This section first discusses the importance of each of these features and its influence on group behaviour. It then presents a typology of the four kinds of armed group operating in Libya today: revolutionary brigades, unregulated brigades, post-revolutionary brigades, and militias.

## Three defining characteristics

### *Formation history*

A group’s formation history describes when and how a group became operational. It chronicles a group’s existence, including the fighting experience it acquired during the war. As described below, fighting groups in Misrata formed incrementally and under heavy military pressure from Qaddafi forces. As a result, these fighting units are intensely cohesive, possessing substantial combat experience both as individuals and as a group. Importantly, the leaders of this group type command the respect of their members because throughout the formation of these groups individual fighters could choose whom to follow. Consequently, groups formed around commanders they esteemed.

A defining factor in the group formation process is access to a safe haven. Like elsewhere in Libya, armed groups in Benghazi formed during the first few weeks of the conflict; unlike other groups, these units were able to operate from a safe haven after the French, UK, and US military forces intervened in the early days of the fighting (McGreal, 2011). This ability to withdraw during

engagements with Qaddafi's forces reduced military pressure on the groups operating along the eastern front. In contrast, groups in the west (such as in the Nafusa Mountains), Misrata, and smaller cities had no access to safe havens, which made withdrawal impossible. Consequently, these groups experienced greater military pressure, which amplified their cohesion and required them to develop combat experience quickly.

The changing military demands on the fighting units also shaped each group's development. As an example, when Qaddafi forces were pushed out of Misrata and front lines were established around the city, the brigades underwent rapid changes; small mobile street-fighting units transformed into organizations capable of monitoring and defending kilometres of front lines. This transformation required substantial changes in weapons selection, size of the fighting force, organizational structures, and military tactics.

### *Community linkage*

The behaviour and structure of a fighting unit was also defined by its linkage to a particular neighbourhood and social network. Communities provided the necessary financial and logistical support vital to a group's operations, especially in the early stages of the fighting.<sup>9</sup> All brigades interviewed for this report—revolutionary, unregulated, and post-revolutionary—possessed some form of executive committee made up of wealthy businessmen or respected neighbourhood leaders. These community leaders were already influential in their neighbourhoods or social networks before the revolution; their support, both financial and political, was critical in establishing the groups, for example with respect to purchasing weapons in Benghazi. For smaller groups, these committees were usually less formal; the leadership role might have been played by a wealthy family member.

### *Integration with local authorities*

The extent to which a group has accepted the authority of the local civilian and military establishment since the end of the fighting has determined its degree of integration with local authorities. As detailed below, the revolution in Libya comprised independent uprisings linked by a single goal: the removal of Qaddafi. This decentralization was mirrored in each separate uprising as fighting units



operated without a formal command structure but with some coordination. More specifically, the revolution took place under the auspices of local military councils, which did not control the fighting units, but did represent an overarching legitimacy.

As the uprising began, military councils formed in cities across the country. In Misrata, the Misratan Military Council (MMC) emerged at the end of February 2011 to prepare the defence of the city. It was led by individuals with military experience—either officers who had defected from the National Army or those who came out of retirement to join the council. The MMC served as the central military authority and was linked to the local civilian committees running the city, which later became known as the local National Transitional Council (local NTC).<sup>10</sup> Yet the MMC did not control the brigades or serve any command function. Rather, it facilitated communication between brigades by establishing radio control rooms, which soon became a central intelligence repository.

The MMC was also instrumental in organizing weapon and ammunition deliveries from Benghazi.<sup>11</sup> Brigades would travel to Benghazi to purchase weapons but the delivery of those weapons to Misrata was usually organized by the MMC. Later in the war, the MMC also organized weapon and ammunition purchases from beyond Libya's borders to augment brigades' independent efforts (UNSC, 2012a, p. 26).

Since the end of the fighting, the MMC and brigades have become significantly more integrated, as evidenced by the weekly coordination meetings held by brigade commanders, the MMC, and local NTC representatives. In Misrata, senior military officials estimate that six to nine revolutionary brigades have maintained their autonomy since the end of the fighting; as 'unregulated brigades', they are accountable only to family elders and financial backers.<sup>12</sup> Understanding a brigade's level of integration with the MMC is critical to predicting their behaviour, including efforts to formalize weapons control measures.

## The four types of armed group

### *Revolutionary brigades*

Revolutionary brigades emerged during the initial months of intense fighting but have since become closely integrated into local authorities and associations. Estimates suggest that revolutionary brigades account for 75 to 85 per

cent of all experienced fighters and weapons not controlled by the government.<sup>13</sup> In Misrata, this percentage is higher, at 94 to 97 per cent. Revolutionary brigades are intensely cohesive and exhibit strong allegiance to their leaders. Critically, they also possess significant combat experience—as individuals and, more importantly, as fighting units. This experience distinguishes them from post-revolutionary groups that emerged in cities after the collapse of Qaddafi forces. Revolutionary brigades are typified by the fighting groups that emerged in Misrata and Zintan.

The indiscriminate violence used by Qaddafi forces in Misrata led to the mass mobilization of city residents in the war effort (HRC, 2012, p. 15). Early declarations by prominent scholars and clerics, particularly Ali Sallabi and Sheikh Sadiq al-Gharyani, that the uprising against Qaddafi was a *jihad* (holy war) also endowed the insurgency with religious—and therefore moral—legitimacy (ICG, 2011, p. 11).<sup>14</sup> Brigade members ranged in age from 15 to 65 and included students, businessmen, medical doctors, and imams.<sup>15</sup> The majority of fighters in Misrata were from the city and its suburbs, although significant numbers of fighters also came from Benghazi and other nearby cities, including Tawergha. MUR registration records reveal that the fighting force in Misrata was composed of professionals (8 per cent), private sector workers (38 per cent), public sector workers (11 per cent), students (41 per cent), and unemployed individuals (2 per cent).<sup>16</sup>

A distinct feature of the revolutionary brigades was their consensus-oriented decision making, both within brigades and between brigade commanders, even when greater coordination emerged in the later stages of fighting. This was in part due to the egalitarian relationship between members of brigades. Yet the ‘command and consensus’ decision-making model continued even after commanders’ positions became formalized through a vote or group decision.<sup>17</sup>

**Formation history.** Revolutionary brigades in Misrata emerged when the front lines were established around the city. Since the end of fighting they have formed associations and unions across the country. These associations are becoming increasingly integrated and well coordinated. They were instrumental in the creation of the national army-in-waiting—the National Shield.

In Misrata, the brigades began as two- to five-person street-fighting cells and developed into organizations capable of monitoring and defending kilometres

of front lines. They were initially created through the amalgamation of smaller, highly cohesive fighting units with extensive combat experience. The formation process was fluid, with units undergoing continual fission and fusion as individuals and sub-groups settled into stable groups. Some brigades fractured into smaller groups when their leaders were killed or lost the trust of their members.

Generally speaking, the more intense and drawn out a group’s war experience, the greater its cohesion; likewise, the larger a brigade, the more developed its hierarchy. Brigades that counted more than 750 members were usually composed of three or four smaller brigades of 100–150 members that merged during the conflict. While the units fought under the same moniker, they operated independently. As a result, the hierarchy of these groups functioned more like a decision-making committee than a command structure. In the larger brigades, the commanders of sub-units reported directly to the brigade leader or his deputy, resulting in a flat leadership structure.

The MUR registered 236 revolutionary brigades by the conclusion of the war in October 2011; these ranged in size from 12 to 1,412 members. Six revolutionary brigades counted more than 750 members. Approximately 45 groups stabilized at 250–750 members; the remaining 185 groups never expanded beyond 250 members, with the majority counting fewer than 100 (see Table 1). As might be expected, the membership size influenced the nature and intensity of cohesion within each brigade and its sub-units.

Leaders of revolutionary brigades enjoyed strong loyalty and allegiance from unit members. The spontaneous and egalitarian nature of group formation meant

**Table 1 The 236 brigades by size of membership**

Brigade strength	Number of brigades	Percentage of brigades
>750	6	2.5%
250–750	45	19.1%
<250	185	78.4%

**Note:** Twelve brigades registered with the MUR without recording the number of brigade members. To estimate the number of brigade members, the 12 brigades were multiplied by the average number of brigade members in the remaining 224 brigades.

**Sources:** Unpublished MUR registration records as of 15 November 2011

that individuals gradually emerged as leaders as early fighting groups took shape. In the initial stages of the conflict leaders were often informal, encouraging consensus decision-making, an approach that persisted even as the status of leaders became more formalized, which resulted in close ties between leaders and their groups.

During the war some brigades developed codes of conduct for their fighters, which they reviewed with their members on a regular basis. Yet each brigade developed its own approach, with some going so far as to include rules of engagement in their code of conduct (to include bans on indiscriminate weapons fire on the front lines and other rules). During interviews for this report, commanders emphasized their commitment to treating prisoners humanely. Some commanders even invited imams to teach fighters about the Islamic principles for the treatment of prisoners.<sup>18</sup>

**Community linkage.** During the first stage of the war in Misrata, individuals and micro-groups with two to five members were engaged in the combat. Each fighter would return home in the evening to eat and rest. As fighting groups began to operate continuously, they became reliant on organized support from their families and communities. Highly sophisticated operations, largely organized and operated by women, began to support the fighting groups. During Ramadan, more than 15,000 brigade members received special food to break fast each evening.<sup>19</sup>

By April 2011 most fighting units had formed informal neighbourhood executive committees made up of wealthy businessmen and prominent elders to organize financial and logistical support.<sup>20</sup> The units initially viewed these committees as a means to secure the necessary funds to purchase weapons in Benghazi; with time, their growing reliance on them for financial and logistical support significantly strengthened community links. Yet the links extended beyond material support; indeed, the tight-knit social fabric in Misrata allowed a fighter's family to be apprised regularly regarding their son's condition and conduct. Fighters thus remained closely linked to their families and neighbourhoods even while at the front lines. That said, community influence weakened the longer brigades operated outside of their community.

**Integration with local authorities.** In the initial stage of the revolution, Misratans regarded any resistance to Qaddafi—armed or otherwise—by residents as

legitimate;<sup>21</sup> as a consequence, resistance was spontaneous and fragmented. As local military and civilian councils were established, the armed resistance became more explicitly linked to these bodies, even in the early fighting stages. While these councils did not control or even coordinate these fighting units, they supported them. In Misrata, for example, fighting groups registered with the MMC, listing fighters' names and the weapons they possessed.<sup>22</sup>

At the beginning of the conflict individual brigades relied solely on the resources of their extended families to procure weapons and ammunition from Benghazi. As the conflict progressed, the MMC began to organize ammunition and weapons deliveries from Benghazi and, later, airlifts from Sudan (UNSC, 2012a, p. 26).<sup>23</sup>

Since the end of fighting, the MUR has been facilitating the integration of revolutionary brigades into the MMC. This process involves the centralizing of control over light and conventional weapons and a weapons registration initiative for small arms. These steps reveal that revolutionary brigades accept MMC authority over brigade decisions—a position that is not shared by unregulated brigades. To date, 15 revolutionary brigades have commenced centralizing their light and conventional weapons in MMC warehouses as part of the integration process. These brigade commanders complain, however, that the process is slowed by a lack of safe storage facilities.<sup>24</sup>

The integration process involves weekly coordination meetings of a working group—including all the brigade leaders along with representatives from the MMC and the MUR. In keeping with the consensus-based decision-making model prevalent in the brigades, security policy in Misrata is heavily influenced by the decisions made by this working group. One such decision banned the use of vehicles equipped with machine guns within city limits; any deployment of these vehicles now requires written authorization from the MMC and MUR. This group also established standards for the storage and security of light and conventional weapons (see Box 1).<sup>25</sup>

### *Unregulated brigades*

Unregulated brigades are revolutionary brigades that broke away from the authority of local military councils in the later stages of the war. They underwent formation processes similar to those of revolutionary bridges and, as such,

### Box 1 **Security provision during municipal elections in Misrata**

On 20 February 2012, citizens of Misrata participated in the first free and fair election in 42 years. Related security arrangements relied on close coordination between national and local authorities on the one hand, and revolutionary brigades in Misrata on the other.

The local election commission in Misrata had only six weeks to organize the election for the 28-person local council. While no international monitors officially observed the election, informal reports from UN sources suggest the process was free and fair. Importantly, there were no reports of violence or voter intimidation.

The election took place three days after the one-year anniversary of the February 17th Revolution. Due to heightened security concerns relating to the anniversary and election, local and national authorities designed a ten-day security plan commencing on 15 February. Representatives of the MoI and the local NTC initiated the security plan but brigade leaders, through MUR representatives, contributed to the planning process. The plan included the establishment of a command room for coordination and detailed security arrangements for checkpoints and polling stations throughout the city. Figure 1 shows the deployment protocol and assignments for each brigade.

The document depicted in Figure 1 was hand-delivered to all brigade headquarters on 8 February 2012. Two commanders were interviewed to determine the process they followed once they received the document. Both commanders explained that they were familiar with the security plan prior to 8 February as it was discussed with brigade leaders during weekly coordination meetings. These meetings took place every Wednesday and served as a coordination mechanism for the 236 revolutionary brigades, the MUR, and the MMC.

Once the authorization was received the brigade leaders met with their field commanders to develop a plan to secure the polling stations assigned to their brigades (see line items 5, 7, 9, and 10 assigning the al-Nimer Brigade to four polling stations). The al-Nimer commander explained that the brigade was organized into five distinct platoons, each led by a field commander. In total, the five platoons totalled more than 600 fighters. This figure did not include brigade members who played non-combat roles (such as mechanics, logistics, and communications). The commander and his field commanders assigned a platoon to each of the four polling stations, leaving the fifth platoon in reserve should there be an emergency or should subsequent requests be received from the military council. The group's logistics team then produced a list detailing each brigade member's individual assignment.

Each field leader was assigned vehicles for transporting brigade members. The vehicles included both pick-up trucks equipped with light weapons and regular transport vehicles.

Individual members were required to sign out weapons prior to deployment. The commander explained that the process of signing out weapons was implemented after the end of the revolution, when brigade members decided as a group that all weapons, including small arms, would be secured at the brigade headquarters. Figure 2 provides an example of a sign-out form that includes a pledge of good conduct, illustrating that this practice was in place as of 11 November 2011. The commander explained that during the ten-day operation, platoon leaders were responsible for the implementation of the plan. They coordinated with the MMC control room and other brigades. At the end of the operation all weapons and vehicles were returned and stored. This process featured sign-in sheets and oversight by brigade leaders.

**Sources:** Author interviews with brigade commanders and the MUR; field visits to weapon storage facilities in March 2012; official correspondence between the MoI, the local NTC security committee, brigade leaders, and the MUR; internal brigade planning documents

Figure 1 Mol and MMC document assigning brigades responsibility for specific polling stations and checkpoints



Translation: 'We refer you to the table of deployment of the Misrata East Front-line Brigades to polling stations, specifying the brigade names and the location of deployment. You are responsible for securing these locations by sending (8) personnel and (3) vehicles, and for obtaining an identity card for this mission. Together with the head of the polling station, you will coordinate the modalities of work and the supplies and needs of the people on Monday, 20 February 2012. We urge you to carry out this mission with a civilized appearance in order to support our country's first step towards democracy. Respect the military uniform and raise public awareness through good manners and conduct, but remain firm to prevent any situation that may affect the success of the election process.'

Courtesy of al-Nimer Brigade commanders, Misrata, 24 March 2012

Figure 2 **Weapon sign-out form and pledge of good conduct**



**Translation:**

17th February Revolution

Free Libya

East Coast Brigade

Date: 25 November 2011

Al-Qa'qa' group

Subject: Pledge

In the Name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate I, the undersigned, (brigade member name), Identity Card No. (ID number), a member of al-Qa'qa' group of Misrata East Coast Brigade, have in possession a weapon type Kalashnikov, and number 76EK4290. I swear by Almighty God to use the weapon in my possession only to defend myself, my honour, and my country, not to misuse it or expose it or theft, nor to hand it over to anyone, no matter what the circumstances, unless the group asks me to do so.

Name: Brigade member's name

Signature

Certified by the group commander

possess a cohesive organizational structure and significant military capacity. Yet their leaders' decision to remain autonomous from local military councils changed important aspects of their structure and legitimacy. For example, some unregulated brigades refused to hand over detainees to the Ministry of Justice, choosing instead to continue operating detention centres. The lack of oversight explains in part why these types of brigades are responsible for a disproportionate number of human rights abuses in Libya (AI, 2012).<sup>26</sup>



## Box 2 **Controlling the al-Swehli Brigade**

On 26 February 2012 an explosion rocked the outskirts of Misrata, killing two and injuring five. The blast occurred when an ammunition depot operated by the al-Swehli Brigade was detonated. The circumstances surrounding the destruction provide insight into the limits on brigade actions and conditions necessary for a local military council to sanction a brigade.

The al-Swehli Brigade is led by Faraj al-Swehli, the great-grandson of Ramadan al-Swehli, a legendary figure in the armed resistance to Italian colonial rule. Many al-Swehli family members, who are both socially and economically powerful, support the brigade. Like other revolutionary brigades, it formed following the retreat of Qaddafi forces from the centre of Misrata. Its headquarters lies near the city's western gate, where many of its fighters, including many of its leaders, have historical roots. The brigade developed a positive reputation for its successful military operations during the uprising in Misrata. The legendary family name—when combined with their war record and control of the western gate—positioned them as a prominent revolutionary brigade.

Following the fall of Tripoli, Faraj al-Swehli established a Tripoli headquarters in the Women's Military College. Al-Swehli reportedly had as many as 200 combatants based in Tripoli, divided into two separate platoons, each led by a field commander.

Meanwhile, in Misrata, the brigade assumed responsibility for the western gate—the first checkpoint on the highway to Tripoli. The gate is the symbolic entrance to Misrata and is demarcated by an archway created by stacked shipping containers, T-55 tanks, and rows of flagpoles flying flags from dozens of countries. Control of this gate endowed brigade leaders with significant power as anyone entering or leaving Misrata did so at their discretion. In the months following the revolution the al-Swehli Brigade managed the western gate autonomously, rebuffing any oversight by civilian or military authorities in Misrata.

Over time, complaints began to emerge that the brigade was abusing its position. In the weeks following the end of the revolution, only individuals with identification cards specifying they were from Misrata were permitted entry into the city. Later, offended parties levelled allegations of corruption and arbitrary detention at the brigade.

To address the deteriorating situation, a six-person delegation from the MMC, the MUR, and the local NTC was sent to speak with the brigade leadership in September 2011, while the war was still ongoing. The MMC raised and discussed its concerns with Faraj al-Swehli, who, together with his lawyer, negotiated on behalf of the brigade. The meeting concluded with the decision that at the end of the war, the MoI would assume responsibility for the western gate. Yet, when the fighting came to an end in October 2011, al-Swehli remained in control of the gate. The alleged abuses continued, leading to escalating tensions with the MMC and neighbouring local councils. The situation continued to deteriorate until two incidents brought it to a crisis.

The first occurred at the end of February 2012, when two British journalists working for Iranian Press TV—Nicholas Davies and Gareth Montgomery—were detained by the Tripoli division of the al-Swehli Brigade. Faraj al-Swehli refused to release them, claiming they were spies (BBC News, 2012a). The detention attracted considerable negative news coverage from Arabic- and English-language news media.

The second incident took place on the following day, when al-Swehli personnel confiscated two Mol vehicles passing through the western gate in defiance of the MMC and Mol. When the brigade refused to release the vehicles, the MMC held an emergency meeting with the MUR. Following the meeting, MMC authorized approximately 20 brigades to assert control over the western gate.

At 11 pm on 26 February 2012, personnel drawn from more than 20 brigades seized the western gate. Reports from the brigades involved confirm that the al-Swehli Brigade complied with the action without armed resistance, although some shots were reportedly fired into the air at the beginning of the seizure. In the subsequent confusion, one of the ammunition storehouses caught fire and exploded, killing two and injuring five. There are conflicting reports as to the cause of the explosion. Some suggest that, in an effort to gain access to the stockpiles, brigade members shot off the locks, starting a fire that led to the explosion.

After the gate was seized, the MMC, MUR, Mol, and prominent members of the al-Swehli family held an emergency meeting. The discussion continued until 4 am, at which point it was decided that Mol personnel would be responsible for managing the western gate and the brigade would have ten days to hand over control. While some local media suggested that the brigade had been dissolved, interviews with brigade leaders one week after the incident showed that the brigade retained control over its vehicles and equipment. Within two weeks, however, the Mol was responsible for managing the gate.

This case highlights the ongoing influence of prominent community leaders on the power base of unregulated brigades. It also provides insight into the necessary circumstances for, and operational limits to, sanctions on powerful brigades by local military councils.

**Sources:** Author interviews with a senior brigade leader and MUR representatives; field visit to the al-Swehli headquarters in March 2012; internal al-Swehli Brigade planning documents

Senior military leaders in Misrata estimate that there are six to nine unregulated brigades—representing less than four per cent of the total number of operational groups in Misrata.<sup>27</sup> Of these, the al-Swehli Brigade is the largest, with more than 400 members registered with the MMC at the end of the war.<sup>28</sup> The remaining groups range in size from 50 to 270 members.<sup>29</sup> Sources familiar with the armed forces in Zintan estimate a similar proportion of unregulated brigades in that city: less than five per cent.<sup>30</sup> This means that, while these groups

could continue to undermine the security environment, thereby acting as political spoilers, their direct military threat to the state is limited.

Although unregulated groups take advantage of the security vacuum, there are limits to their actions. For example, on 26 February 2012 a military operation was authorized by the MMC and MUR to wrest control of the main western checkpoint into Misrata from the al-Swehli Brigade. This MMC action was a response to the al-Swehli Brigade's persistent abuses at the western gate, such as the confiscation of government vehicles and harassment of civilians. The operation, which was implemented by revolutionary brigades, left two dead and one of the al-Swehli Brigade weapon warehouses ablaze. This incident led to extensive negotiations between the MMC, MUR, and family elders connected to the brigade. These ended with a decision to transfer authority of the gate over a ten-day period. This case illustrates the limits of unregulated brigade power and the significant influence still exerted upon them by prominent family members and elders who support them (see Box 2).

**Formation.** In Misrata, unregulated brigades are similar to revolutionary brigades in almost every respect. They emerged in the early stages of the fighting, functioned within the local military council structure, and underwent similar formation pressures. They coordinated with other brigades during the war and operated within one of the three front lines—south, east, or west—after Qaddafi forces were pushed out of Misrata in May 2011. As a result, they are cohesive and their leaders enjoy strong allegiance from brigade members.

The critical distinction in the formation process is how unregulated brigades acted after the fall of Tripoli on 20 August 2011. A number of brigades established bases in the city to provide security and exert control over Tripoli. Since the uprising in the capital did not involve the sustained fighting experienced in other cities in Libya, the brigade commanders and MMC were deeply suspicious of Qaddafi supporters in Tripoli and the possible emergence of armed groups aligned with pro-Qaddafi neighbourhoods or interests. There was also significant concern that leaders such as Abdel Hakim Belhaj, a prominent Islamist who is deeply distrusted by Misratan commanders, would assert their authority in the power vacuum. Interviewed commanders explained that the presence of Misratan and Zintan brigades limited the military and political space

for these leaders and their affiliated groups to influence the transition process.<sup>31</sup> In the words of one commander:

*What did Belhaj do during the revolution? He arrived a few weeks before the fall of Tripoli and organized a few meetings. He is only interested in his own power—we don't trust him.*<sup>32</sup>

This distrust led brigade leaders and the MMC to retain a significant number of brigades in Tripoli.

Once established in Tripoli, many brigades diversified their activities and developed new sources of revenue. Some seized the property of senior Qaddafi loyalists, sold brigade membership to Tripoli residents, and engaged in extortion. The discipline created by fighting on the front lines gave way to almost unlimited freedom in Tripoli. Brigade leaders and their members dealt with this situation in a variety of ways. For some groups the newfound freedom was too appealing to return to their cities or begin devolving authority to their local military councils. The result was the emergence of unregulated brigades.

Leaders in Misrata watched these developments warily but made a cynical calculation: the harm perpetrated by these groups in Tripoli, in terms of both Misrata's reputation and the perceived security of Tripoli, did not outweigh the strategic value of sustaining influence over the transition in Tripoli and curbing the influence of emerging armed groups.<sup>33</sup>

**Community linkage.** Much like revolutionary brigades, unregulated brigades are integrated and supported by a specific community. The influence of community members on unregulated brigades varies, but even for brigades that are seen as especially unaccountable the influence is considerable. This feature of unregulated brigades has significant implications for engagement strategies.

An instructive example is the community response to actions taken by the al-Swehli Brigade, which was linked to human rights abuses after the fall of Tripoli (AI, 2012; HRW, 2011a–c). As discussed in Box 2, the brigade detained two British journalists in February 2012. In response to critical media coverage, the leader of the brigade, Faraj al-Swehli, held a press conference in Tripoli to present 'incriminating evidence' against the journalists (BBC News, 2012a). While the credibility of the evidence presented at the press conference was questionable—in particular, the 'Israeli-made' field dressings that had allegedly been

in the journalists' possession—the fact that Faraj al-Swehli felt it necessary to justify their actions publicly suggests that he may have perceived constraints on the brigade's actions. When asked whether the brigade's detention of the journalists was justified, residents of al-Swehli's neighbourhood referred to the evidence presented at the news conference and additional 'proof' they had heard from neighbours whose relatives had connections to the brigade.<sup>34</sup>

Community members were also asked about the al-Swehli Brigade's alleged attacks on individuals from Tawergha, a city blamed by Misratans for perpetrating crimes against them in the early stages of the war. While the reprisal attacks against Tawerghans were condemned by human rights organizations, residents of the al-Swehli neighbourhood felt that any reprisals against Tawerghans were justified (HRW, 2011a).<sup>35</sup> This example highlights that, while unregulated brigades operate in a lawless environment, they operate within the social expectations of their constituency.

**Integration with local authorities.** The key characteristic distinguishing revolutionary brigades from unregulated brigades is the extent of integration with local civilian or military authorities. While revolutionary brigades in Misrata continue to incorporate into the local MMC, unregulated brigades have retained their autonomy. Yet the break was not complete; even brigades that operate autonomously maintained an affiliation with the local MMC. During an interview, a leader of the al-Swehli Brigade explained that his brigade differed from the others in that it had a direct link to the MMC and thus did not need to participate in any coordination meetings or similar mechanisms. This view reveals that unregulated brigades arrive at decisions based on complex political calculations, having to balance perceptions of their constituency, which does not wish the brigade to break away from the MMC, while resisting MMC authority. This tension is an important feature of unregulated brigades and highlights their politically tenuous nature. As Box 2 demonstrates, this tension can lead to violence.

### *Post-revolutionary brigades*

The defeat of Qaddafi forces took place in stages, leaving security vacuums at each step. Towns and cities quickly organized military councils and armed groups to fill the void (ICG, 2012). Since they emerged after the fighting, these

groups are described as post-revolutionary. Unlike the groups that were formed during the war, post-revolutionary brigades took shape very quickly; consequently, the cohesion in these groups and the members' allegiance to their leaders is weaker than in revolutionary or unregulated brigades.

Given their limited experience of fighting as a group, their military capacity is significantly inferior to that of other brigades, as evidenced by the recent violence between Zintan revolutionary forces and post-revolutionary fighters from the Mashashiya tribe in neighbouring Shegayga (BBC News, 2012b; ICG, 2012). In the same vein, post-revolutionary forces lack access to the types of weapons stores that revolutionary and unregulated brigades amassed during the war.

Recent fighting in Zuwara illustrates the complexity of post-revolutionary groups and their role in many pre-existing communal conflicts.<sup>36</sup> Like many recent clashes in Libya, the recurring violence between the Berber city of Zuwara and its Arab neighbours al-Jumail and Reghdalin is driven by long-standing ethnic divisions and Qaddafi-era grievances (Gumuchian, 2012; ICG, 2012; UNSC, 2012b). As a result, tensions quickly devolve into communal conflict fought by amorphous groups on behalf of their city or ethnic group—rather than distinct post-revolutionary brigades with a defined leadership structure. Post-revolutionary brigades are nevertheless the nucleus of the fighting force, but group boundaries are too porous and membership too variable to constitute distinct fighting brigades. If this fighting continues, however, more cohesive fighting units are likely to emerge.

**Formation.** In cities that experienced sustained fighting, military councils and revolutionary brigades filled the security void left by retreating Qaddafi forces. But in many pro-Qaddafi or pro-government cities, there were no equivalent organizations.<sup>37</sup> To encourage the emergence of such groups, revolutionary forces often refrained from attacking a city so that local forces might revolt on their own (Chick, 2011). If this tactic failed, revolutionary brigades would remain in a city after the fighting or appoint 'pro-revolutionary' families to the military council controlling a particular city.<sup>38</sup> This approach often led to significant tension between revolutionary forces—and their surrogates—and the local residents (ICG, 2012). As a result, neighbourhoods quickly organized groups to protect themselves. In Tripoli, for example, dozens of military councils emerged in the days following the retreat of Qaddafi forces (ICG, 2011, p. 17). Even

senior commanders in Misrata were not sure who controlled what territory or how they related to each other.<sup>39</sup> This mayhem also led to a great deal of confusion among the international media as to the legitimacy of these organizations and their leaders.

**Community linkage.** Just like revolutionary and unregulated brigades, post-revolutionary brigades have strong linkages to particular communities through local leaders or prominent families. As a consequence, informal committee structures oversee the actions of each group. Moreover, a leader's authority depends largely on the relationship to prominent family members or city elders who support the group. As described in the Zuwara example above, a post-revolutionary brigade is solidly integrated into the social networks and family structures of its city (Gumuchian, 2012).

**Integration with local authorities.** As is the case with revolutionary brigades, post-revolutionary brigades have direct links to local power structures. Yet, in contrast to the local military and civilian authorities that emerged in communities that experienced sustained fighting, the ones that formed in cities that were spared such violence are fledgling, enjoying legitimacy in only a few neighbourhoods. As a result, most post-revolutionary brigades are focused on protecting distinct geographic communities, which, in turn, limits their political or military objectives. In cities such as Bani Walid, which have resisted the new government and thus come under increasing political and military pressure, a consolidation of local authorities is taking place (ICG, 2012). This process strengthens the legitimacy of post-revolutionary brigades and broadens their military and political objectives to match those of the civilian and military authorities into which they are integrated.

### *Militias*

Militias are a collection of armed groups that do not fall into any of the above-mentioned categories; they range from criminal networks to violent extremists. Unlike the three types of brigades, militias do not share a unique or unifying formation history. What all militias have in common is that they lack both the support of a substantial geographic community and integration with local community authorities. Consequently, they are more politically and socially isolated.

Despite the ubiquitous use of this term to describe armed groups in Libya, militias represent a small fraction of the groups operating in the country—perhaps less than two per cent. Similar to post-revolutionary brigades, these groups have no combat experience as a group. They have even more limited access to military weapons than do post-revolutionary brigades, generally because they lack close community linkages. As these groups have not come under sustained pressure from state authorities or other armed groups, their resilience has yet to be tested.

In cities that saw sustained fighting, the gradual emergence of revolutionary brigades and local military councils limited the space for other armed actors, which would not have been able to secure as much legitimacy in the eyes of local communities. Indeed, no sizeable militia groups are operating in Misrata; when asked why, a senior military leader explained, 'Because everyone in this city knows each other and what they are doing. If such a group existed, we would know about them.'<sup>40</sup> This view highlights a key feature distinguishing militias from other non-state armed groups operating in Libya: weak connections to local military or civilian authorities. Given the close-knit nature of Libyan towns and cities, any group with a significant presence or membership would have to operate with the tacit support of local communities.

Counter-terrorist specialists and international media reports have devoted significant attention to violent extremist groups operating in Libya (Isa, 2011, pp. 155–65; Lawrence, 2011; Robertson, Cruickshank, and Karadsheh, 2012). Yet, in comparison to conflicts such as the one raging in Syria, which has seen regular and coordinated suicide and car bombs, the operational capacity of the Libyan groups has, thus far, been limited (DeYoung, 2012). Since February 2012, however, attacks have been increasing in frequency, severity, and sophistication. Nonetheless, evaluating the long-term operational capacity of these groups remains challenging (Fitzgerald, 2011; ICG, 2011, pp. 11–12). 📌



# The development of armed groups in Misrata

This section considers the developmental history of fighting units in Misrata. It is based on more than 300 interviews and participatory observation from July 2011 to March 2012.<sup>41</sup>

The armed groups in Misrata were forged during the six months of intense fighting to liberate the city. Initially, fighting units formed spontaneously, as individuals wanted to join their friends who were protesting or later fighting. As one combatant explained:

*When they started firing the 14.5 mm gun over our heads on the second day of protests, I ran with Mohamed. I did not leave his side during eight months of fighting.*<sup>42</sup>

The initial fighting unit was made up of three to five individuals. This small size reflected the limits of transporting fighters by car. These micro-groups continually adapted to the changing circumstances through temporary alliances with other groups. As one fighter described the first few weeks of fighting:

*We would find ourselves taking cover with people we didn't know. So we would figure out where the firing was coming from and then come up with a plan together for encircling them.*<sup>43</sup>

These groups rapidly evolved over the subsequent months into defined organizations with distinct identities and the military capacity to mount coordinated attacks with thousands of fighters and hundreds of vehicles.

For the purposes of this report, the development of the fighting units is detailed through the following three stages: 1) initial success, 2) the occupation of Tripoli Street, and 3) the formation of brigades. While each stage represents a distinct phase in the fighting in Misrata, this depiction is a simplification of a complex and fluid situation. Nevertheless, this three-stage model can serve as a framework for describing the interaction between the conflict environment and the evolving structures of the fighting units.

Just as the revolution in Libya was decentralized, constituted by multiple, simultaneous—yet distinct—uprisings, so too was the armed rebellion in Misrata. This made the rebellion fluid and chaotic, presenting an unpredictable enemy to Qaddafi forces. As the armed resistance matured, coordination and organization improved, although this development was obscured—often strategically—by the highly decentralized nature of the fighting.

## Stage 1: initial success

The revolution in Misrata began on 19 February 2011, when a rumour spread that a protest would begin at the main mosque downtown following afternoon prayers.<sup>44</sup> Anticipating the protest, security forces cordoned off the streets surrounding the mosque, preventing protesters from assembling there. As a result, the initial demonstration began with only 30 to 40 protesters. One of these individuals described the moment: 'When we came out of the mosque and saw no one else waiting for us, we were sure we would not survive the hour.'<sup>45</sup> Unbeknownst to the protesters assembled at the mosque, multiple demonstrations began throughout the city as individuals blocked from meeting at the mosque began assembling in various locations.

Like the demonstrations in Benghazi, the protests began peacefully. Initially, security personnel did not use deadly force to break up the protests, choosing instead to intimidate and beat protesters. This led to running confrontations throughout the city as groups of protesters congregated, only to be scattered again by security forces. A significant proportion of the security forces were not in uniform, adding to the confusion and paranoia of the protesters. Approximately 35 protesters were injured in the initial melees.<sup>46</sup> The clashes continued throughout the night, with security forces maintaining control. During the night one of the injured protesters, Khalid Aboushahma, died of his injuries (HRW, 2011c; Rice, 2011).

With Khalid Aboushahma's death, the nature of the protests changed. In keeping with Islamic tradition, he was buried the next day, 20 February. Thousands of people attended the funeral and participated in the subsequent march from the cemetery to Martyrs Square in the centre of Misrata.<sup>47</sup> They were met by heavily armed military units in trucks mounted with 14.5 mm machine guns.

The security forces began by using the heavy machine guns to disperse the crowds by firing over people's heads. Protesters described how the deafening sound of the heavy weapons terrified many who had no experience with firearms.<sup>48</sup> The clashes between protesters and the security forces quickly turned deadly. While accounts differ, at least 13 protesters died and dozens were injured (BBC News, 2011). Hundreds of individuals were taken into custody, and many of them are missing to this day. Dozens of protesters detained that night were found six months later in Tripoli detention centres after anti-Qaddafi forces took control of the city.

Clashes between protesters and Qaddafi forces intensified during the night until a rumour circulated that Qaddafi had fled to Venezuela. Very soon afterwards all security personnel in Misrata retreated to bases on the outskirts of the city, abandoning their bases in the city. In the subsequent celebrations, Qaddafi-related buildings and bases were ransacked and set ablaze. As a result, forces gained access to a small cache of assault rifles and one machine gun.<sup>49</sup>

Qaddafi forces would not return to Misrata until 6 March 2011. In the intervening two weeks civilian committees formed to keep the city running. Khalifa al-Zwawy volunteered to head the local NTC. He would remain its leader until local elections on 20 February 2012 (Gatehouse, 2012). The military committee, which would later become the Misratan Military Council, was established by the civilian committee and was initially led by Mohamed bin Hmaida.<sup>50</sup> The members of the committee were selected based on military experience, meaning that most of them were either retired army officers or recent defectors. Despite the committee structures, much of the planning and organization was undertaken by hundreds of Misratans through daily discussions outside the city hall on Tripoli Street.

Early skirmishes with Qaddafi forces were small-scale until 26 February, when a more substantial battle between Qaddafi's Khamis Brigade and anti-Qaddafi forces began at the airport on the outskirts of the city. As people became aware of the fighting, they rushed to the airport unarmed in an effort to help. In other words, the majority of 'fighters' lacked weapons and experience.

As would be a recurring pattern in the fighting, at the core of this spontaneous force was a group of 20 fighters organized by the military committee. The fighting group had been charged with attacking the airport with their only

14.5 mm machine gun, which had been taken from one of the training facilities abandoned by Qaddafi forces. It was mounted on wheels, instead of on the back of a pick-up truck, which made it much less manoeuvrable. Twenty-six people died that day, including ten of the 20 combatants sent by the military committee. While the battle was not decisive, the first anti-aircraft gun mounted on a truck was captured from Qaddafi forces that day.

It was not until 6 March that a column of Qaddafi tanks, armoured personnel carriers, and approximately 20 pick-up trucks backed by 300 troops attempted to retake control of Misrata. Revolutionary forces had prepared for this possibility by placing thousands of Molotov cocktails along the rooftops of buildings overlooking the courthouse, Misrata's administrative nerve centre. The individuals responsible for planning the ambush explained that the roundabout in front of the courthouse was particularly effective because it did not provide much cover for the Qaddafi forces, given that it was encircled by apartment and office buildings. The Misratan revolutionary forces relied on Molotov cocktails, assault rifles, single-shot hunting rifles, and one machine gun.

Much like during the attack on the airport, there was a core element of organized fighters in what was otherwise an unregulated confrontation. Two pick-up trucks mounted with anti-aircraft guns met Qaddafi forces near the airport and exchanged fire. They quickly retreated and then separated near the city hall in order to draw some of the Qaddafi forces away from the main force and lure them into the narrow streets surrounding Tripoli Street. The main force, including the tanks and armoured personnel carriers, continued to the courthouse (BBC News, n.d.); they did not realize that about 150 fighters were waiting in ambush.<sup>51</sup>

The subsequent battle went on for hours, ending with Qaddafi forces retreating from the city, though not before two of the three tanks were destroyed and more than 50 soldiers were killed or captured.<sup>52</sup> Individuals who were present that day explain that the Qaddafi forces did not expect an attack and that the element of surprise was their most effective weapon. Indeed, the two tanks were destroyed within minutes of the ambush commencing because all of their hatches were open to promote ventilation.

Throughout this first stage the civilian committees overseeing Misrata became increasingly specialized, charging groups with different aspects of the city's

management (such as electricity and water supply). While there was some training and organization of military forces, it was ad hoc and not centrally controlled. Fighters who participated later described the battles as chaotic, with groups of friends arriving independently and organizing with fellow fighters as the battle progressed. Local commanders estimate that only about 350–550 combatants were active in Misrata at that time—a situation that would change on 26 March 2011.

## Stage 2: the occupation of Tripoli Street

On 26 March an overwhelming force of Qaddafi troops, backed by as many as 30 tanks and armoured personnel carriers, attacked Misrata from the south-east and the west: from Tawergha (southeast), from the airport highway (west), and from the coastal road (west). The attack scattered Misrata's defences. Within hours Qaddafi forces occupied and held large portions of the downtown area and surrounding neighbourhoods. The Qaddafi forces also took up positions on the tallest buildings in the downtown area. The neighbourhoods adjacent to Tripoli Street became the most contested battleground as fighters tried to displace Qaddafi forces.

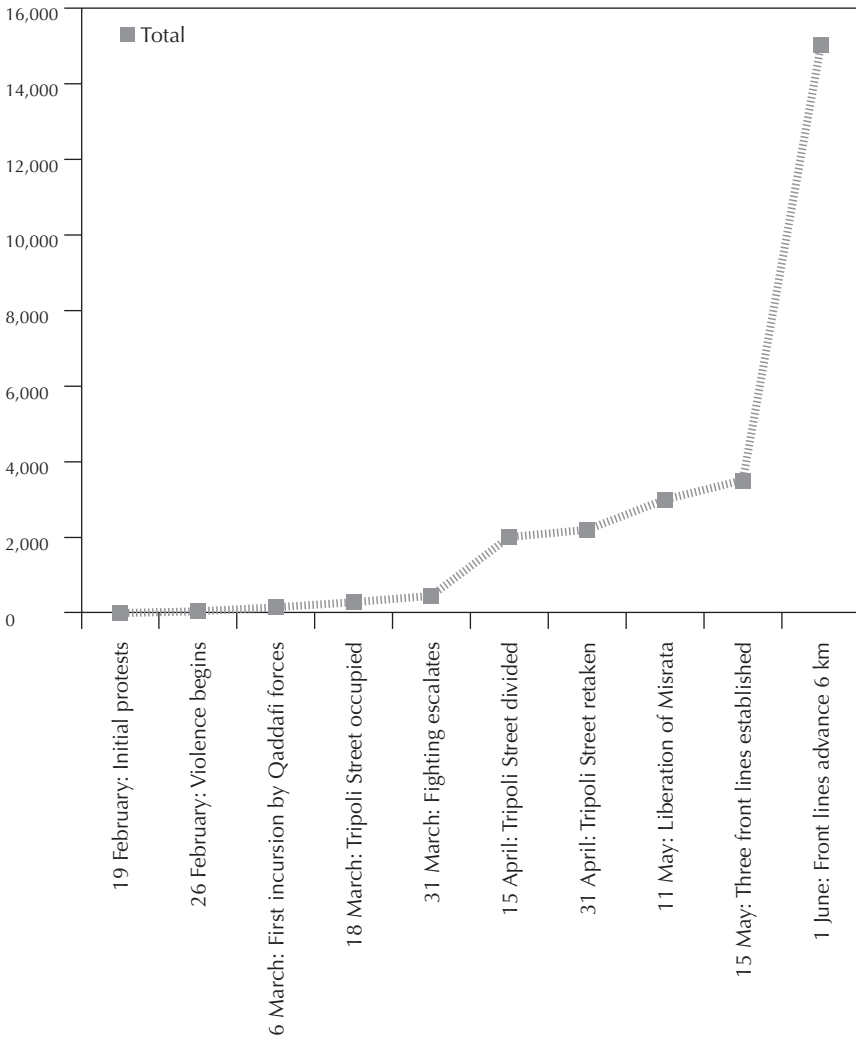
During this second stage of the fighting, the armed opposition was composed of micro-groups of three to five fighters. Unlike the previous stage, during which individuals went home at night, fighters became full-time combatants who no longer returned to their residences. After the mobile telephone network was disabled by government forces, anti-Qaddafi fighters would meet each morning at key waypoints near the front lines. This created the conditions for larger groups to coalesce around individuals who demonstrated leadership and bravery. When a commander who eventually formed one of the largest groups in Misrata, with more than 1,000 members, was asked how he formed his initial group, he responded: 'They would just follow me back to our base at night.'<sup>53</sup>

The most serious impediment to the growth of the fighting force was the lack of weapons. As one commander explained, 'For every fighter, there were four fans.'<sup>54</sup> Figure 3 depicts the number of small arms in the initial stages of the war.

By early April 2011, the MMC had established the first radio control centre. The control room did not deploy or dispatch fighting units; instead, it served as a communication bridge between units with radios and as a central reposi-

**Figure 3 Number of small arms in Misrata during the first and second stages of fighting, 2011**

Number of firearms



**Note:** The figures for small arms in Misrata are averages of estimates provided by eight senior commanders and MMC members, including the MMC member responsible for organizing weapon deliveries to Misrata.

**Sources:** Author interviews with commanders and MMC members, Misrata, October 2011

tory for intelligence. Initially, only a fraction of the fighting units had radios, yet the percentage increased as the war progressed, permitting the fighting units to coordinate more effectively.

The anti-Qaddafi forces suffered heavy casualties in March and early April. It was not until they began using shipping containers filled with sand to cut off supply routes for Qaddafi forces in the centre of town that the momentum began to change. This shift was aided by increased weapons shipments from Benghazi. Revolutionary fighters continued to make advances in the city centre throughout April and in early May. On 11 May, a fierce battle erupted at the airport (Chivers, 2011b). By the end of the day the revolutionary fighters had control of the airport and Misrata was under the control of anti-Qaddafi forces. Over the next three days front lines were set up in the west (Dafniya), east (Tawergha), and the southern service highway.

### Stage 3: the emergence of brigade structures

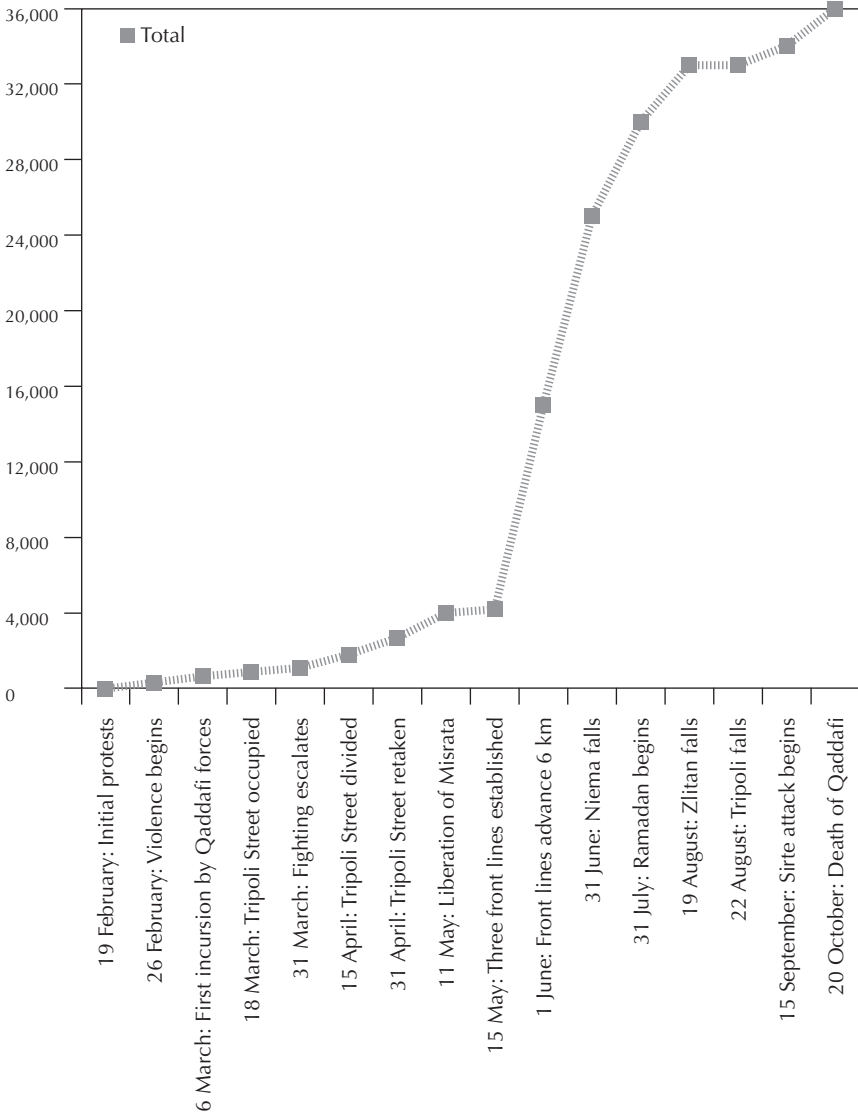
The liberation of the city centre and the establishment of the three front lines around the city required a radical transformation within the organizational structure of the forces in Misrata. Small autonomous fighting units, which had been so effective in street fighting, proved ineffective at monitoring and defending extensive front lines in the west, south, and east. Many of the smaller units merged into larger groups with defined hierarchies and managerial structures, prompting an organizational genesis of today's revolutionary brigades. Monitoring front lines also required more fighters, which called for more weapons. Over the next months, the number of both in Misrata would increase significantly (see Figure 4).

By the end of the war, 236 revolutionary brigades had registered with the MMC. Their strengths ranged from 12 to 1,412 members.<sup>55</sup> In total, nearly 40,000 brigade members registered with the MUR. This total comprised approximately 22,000 fighters; the other brigade members took on logistics, managerial, or support functions.<sup>56</sup>

As shown in Table 1, of the 236 revolutionary brigades, six emerged as 'super-brigades', comprising more than 750 members.<sup>57</sup> Approximately 45 brigades counted 250–750 members, typically with 150–250 serving as fighters and the

Figure 4 **Number of combatants in Misrata**

Number of fighters



**Note:** Estimates are derived from averages provided by senior MMC and MUR leaders.

**Sources:** Unpublished MUR registration records as of 15 November 2011; author interviews with commanders and MMC members, Misrata, October 2011



others taking on logistics and organizational functions. The vast majority of groups—approximately 185—remained small, with fewer than 250 members. In these smaller units, members were less specialized, playing both fighting and logistics functions.<sup>58</sup>

Throughout the uprising, the military council and leaders of the fighting groups formalized nascent organizational structures. The newly formed brigades were assigned to particular front lines—west, south, and east. Each front line organically developed decision-making and coordination mechanisms based on the number of brigades and the relationships of the brigade leaders. The southern front was the most integrated, functioning as a unified force. This was in part because it possessed far fewer brigades than the other two fronts. The eastern front had fewer brigades than the west, but the groups were generally much larger, accounting for two of the six ‘super-brigades’. While this made coordination easier, the more prominent brigades had disproportionate influence on decisions. Such was the case with the Harbus Brigade, which was led by Mohamed Harbus until his death; the brigade’s importance was in part a function of its size and military capacity—1,412 members and more than 300 vehicles.

Since the bulk of the Qaddafi forces were between Misrata and Tripoli, the western front line experienced the most sustained fighting. These fighting dynamics were reflected in the distribution of brigades: 146 in the west, 52 in the south, and 38 in the east. In coordination with the MMC, control rooms were established for each front line. Additional communication hubs emerged over the following months in the west to facilitate coordination between the 146 brigades operating there. Over time, these communication hubs became more integrated into the military council, but they did not take on command duties or control functions. The control rooms served as a central repository for intelligence, recording the Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates for each of the 236 brigades on Google Earth™. The location and size of Qaddafi forces were also plotted on these maps to aid front-line commanders in attack planning.

The communication hubs were also responsible for coordinating with NATO air support. During planned attacks the control rooms facilitated coordination between brigade leaders, establishing mobile bases along the front lines to allow for communication during attacks. Yet the degree of coordination

and planning for attacks was different for each front, reflecting the number of brigades and the personal relationships between brigade leaders.

On the western front line, which had 146 brigades, 15–20 brigade leaders would meet each evening to review the day’s events and discuss strategic decisions; this core group was composed of the leaders of the largest brigades and fighting groups with reputations of bravery as well as commanders who had earned the respect of their peers. Smaller brigades were rarely involved in the decision making before attacks. Instead, they would be resupplied with ammunition and informed that there would be a ‘push’ in the morning.<sup>59</sup> This meant that during planned assaults a core group of brigades implemented a strategy within the uncoordinated advance of the remaining 120+ brigades. On occasion, leaders of the smaller brigades would threaten not to participate in an attack unless they were involved in the planning. Such a move was usually a hollow threat as it was inevitably overruled by the rank-and-file members of the brigade who would nonetheless join the advance out of a desire to participate and to avoid being seen as cowards for remaining behind. 🗨

# Weapons proliferation

This section provides an overview of the weapons stockpiles held by revolutionary and unregulated brigades in Misrata. It presents estimates of small arms, light weapons, and conventional weapons holdings while also reviewing the history of internal regulations and controls exercised over these weapons systems. After reviewing the findings of weapon inspections, it concludes with an assessment of the control measures, highlighting future challenges.

The data in this section is based on 14 interviews with brigade commanders, multiple visits to weapons storage facilities, and six ‘inspection visits’ in March 2012, authorized by the head of the revolutionary bridges in Misrata and the leader of the MUR, Salem Joha.

## Small arms and light weapons

Senior leaders explained that, at the beginning of the uprising, the fighters in Misrata possessed fewer than 50 small arms—the majority of which were antiquated single-shot hunting rifles (Chivers, 2011a).<sup>60</sup> Brigade leaders described the scarcity of weapons as a result of extremely strict controls on gun ownership, which made possessing an unauthorized firearm a capital offence for individuals and their families. In stark contrast to that state of affairs, revolutionary brigades in Benghazi, Misrata, and Zintan now control Qaddafi’s vast arsenal of conventional weapons, and almost every household in Misrata today possesses at least one assault rifle.

In the first weeks of the war, almost all weapons acquired by the opposition were captured in skirmishes with Qaddafi police or military forces. These included the weapons abandoned by security forces on 20 February 2011, the second night of protests in Misrata. As described above, the first light weapon, a 14.5 mm machine gun, was found in a training base in Misrata. On 26 February, this weaponry was augmented by the capture of a 14.5 mm anti-aircraft gun mounted on a pick-up truck at the airport. While commanders report pur-

chasing light weapons in Benghazi, they explain that the vast majority were captured from Qaddafi forces throughout the conflict. It should be noted that there is a perception in Misrata that individuals personally profited from this arms trade, which has bred resentment.

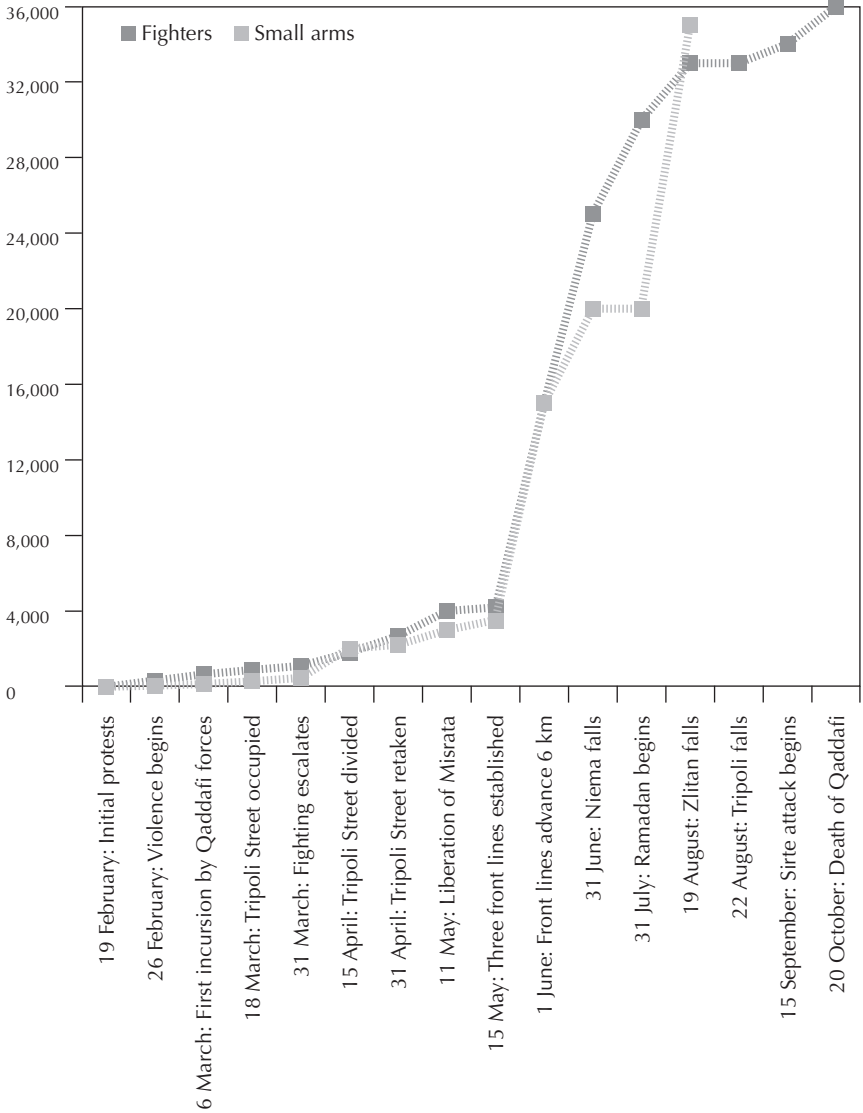
Shipments of small arms and light weapons began to arrive in the first week of April 2011, when various retrofitted fishing boats such as the *al-Hariss* began delivering weapons and ammunition scrounged from abandoned Qaddafi bases in the east.<sup>61</sup> But it was not until after Qaddafi forces had been pushed out of Misrata that significant quantities of small arms and light weapons arrived.<sup>62</sup> The emergence of the brigade structures to defend kilometres of front lines surrounding the city required many more fighters. In turn, the new recruits required substantial acquisitions of weapons. As Figure 5 illustrates, there was a significant spike in small arms holdings after fighters took control of Misrata.

Brigade commanders determined that the majority of small arms used during the war were AK-47s, with estimates ranging from 75 to 90 per cent of all firearms.<sup>63</sup> FN FAL assault rifles and PK machine guns accounted for the remainder. They explained that the FN rifles were not widely used because the ammunition, whose calibre differs from that of the AK-47, was more difficult to obtain. Handguns were rare as they were almost twice the price of assault rifles; despite the widespread availability of weapons near the end of the war, they were scarce for much of the fighting. In addition to weapons used for fighting, heads of households also purchased weapons to secure their family compounds. The relative wealth of Misrata, combined with the scarcity of weapons, caused prices for assault rifles (such as AK-47s) to reach up to USD 3,500.<sup>64</sup>

By June, chronic ammunition shortages—rather than a dearth of firearms—curtailed the progress of anti-Qaddafi forces.<sup>65</sup> Ammunition was generally obtained by boat from Benghazi, although senior commanders also alluded to air shipments from Sudan.<sup>66</sup> This information was later corroborated by findings from the UN Panel of Experts on Libya, which cited evidence that Sudan violated the arms embargo with deliveries of firearms and ammunition (UNSC, 2012a, p. 26). The shortage of ammunition was compounded by the indiscriminate firing of inexperienced fighters who were recruited to fill the ranks of the newly established front lines around the city. This lack of experience also led to an increase in casualties, as new recruits were eager to prove themselves brave in battle.<sup>67</sup>

Figure 5 **Number of small arms vs. number of fighters, 2011**

Number of small arms/fighters



Sources: Author interviews with senior brigade leaders, Misrata, September–December 2011; MMC fighter registration figures recorded during the fighting

As Figure 5 reveals, the initial number of fighters in Misrata was limited by the availability of small arms but, by the end of July 2011, the number of brigade members reached a saturation point despite the increasing availability of weapons. Brigade commanders note that after June, when revolutionary forces took control of army stockpiles in Zlitan and then Tripoli, the number of small arms became very difficult to determine.

As anti-Qaddafi forces pushed closer to Tripoli, victory in Zlitan furnished them with access to hundreds of Soviet-era T-55 tanks, Grad rocket launchers, and stockpiles of small arms and light weapons ammunition. With the fall of Tripoli, the stockpiles of weapons and ammunition grew exponentially; columns of trucks transported munitions back to Misrata and Zintan for weeks afterwards.<sup>68</sup> Senior commanders admitted that after the fall of Tripoli they no longer had an accurate count of the total small arms and light weapons in Misrata, largely because each brigade transported materiel back separately. Moreover, most brigades have not conducted a systematic accounting of their arsenal, preferring instead to speak in terms of the number of shipping containers full of ammunition or armaments. Conservative estimates put the total small arms in Misrata at more than 30,000.<sup>69</sup>

As discussed above, the majority of light weapons possessed by brigades were captured from Qaddafi forces. Initially, the light weapons were limited to 12.7 mm machine guns, 14.5 mm anti-aircraft guns, and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs). These holdings were later augmented by 20 mm, 23 mm, and 33 mm anti-aircraft machine guns affixed to pick-up trucks or commercial vehicles.

Another weapon that was critical to immobilizing tanks in the initial street fighting was the 106 mm recoilless rifle, usually mounted on modified vehicles. The shortage of RPG launchers in the first few weeks of fighting meant that groups of fighters would share them. As one fighter explained, 'If we needed an RPG for an operation, we would ask one of our friends if we could borrow his. He would either give it to us to use or come with us.'<sup>70</sup>

In the first two stages of fighting, fewer than 20 anti-aircraft machine guns were in the hands of anti-Qaddafi forces.<sup>71</sup> This number significantly increased once the brigade structures were established to maintain the three front lines around Misrata. Once both sides had established front lines, sometimes only a few hundred metres apart, the high-calibre anti-aircraft guns and mortars

Table 2 **Anti-aircraft machine guns in Misrata based on brigade size**

Brigade size	Number of brigades	Range of guns per brigade	Min	Max
>750	6	112–175	672	1,050
250–750	45	21–40	945	1,800
<250	185	4–8	740	1,480
<b>Total</b>	<b>236</b>		<b>2,357</b>	<b>4,330</b>

Sources: Author interviews with senior brigade commanders and MUR representatives, Misrata, 18–24 March 2012

proved especially deadly as the terrain was made up of open farmland interrupted only by tree-lined service roads. At that point in the fighting the anti-Qaddafi units were experienced only in street-fighting tactics; they did not construct protected positions to guard against mortar and artillery rounds and were thus left exposed to attack (Stephen, 2011).

By the end of the war, all brigades, irrespective of size, operated light and heavy machine guns affixed to pick-up trucks; the quantity and calibre were principally correlated to a group’s size and secondarily to its ability to capture weapons systems (or buy them). These weapons included a small number of 33 mm anti-aircraft machine guns deployed by three of the ‘super-brigades’, which had workshops sophisticated enough to maintain them. Table 2 provides a conservative estimate of the anti-aircraft machine guns (14.7 mm, 23 mm, and 33 mm) in Misrata based on the average number of light weapons possessed by each size of brigade.

The totals in Table 2 represent the range of anti-aircraft machine guns operated by Misratan brigades by the



Open-air ammunition storage facility.

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end of the war. Since the fighting ended and heavily armed vehicles have been banned within city limits, most of these vehicles—and their weapons systems—are collecting dust in storage. By March 2011, brigades only maintained a small fraction of their weaponized vehicles for emergency deployments authorized by the MMC. Some brigade members removed the machine guns from vehicles so that they could be used for transportation. While these weapons are not technically demobilized, a return to full capacity would require substantial effort and maintenance, especially since the mechanic workshops that were tasked with maintenance have been dismantled.

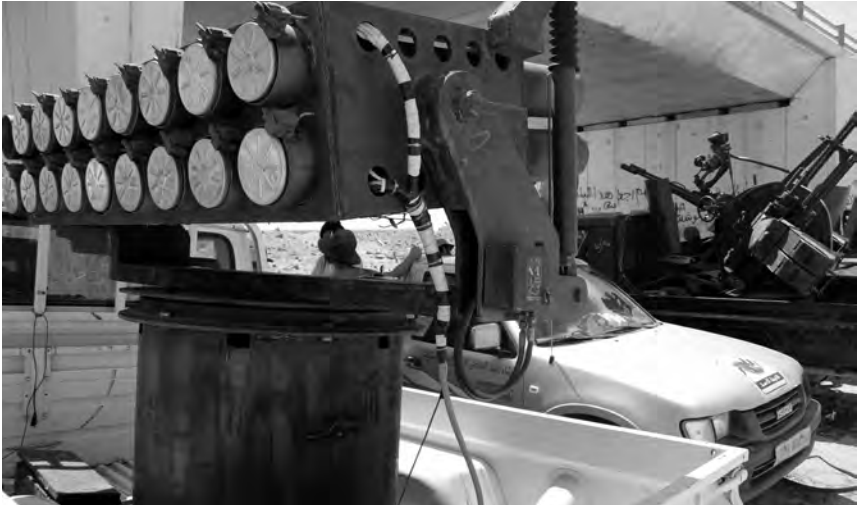
## Conventional weapons

Unlike small arms and light weapons, conventional weapons were obtained solely from captured Qaddafi equipment. In the initial stages of the fighting, anti-Qaddafi forces would burn tanks they captured, fearing they might later fall back into the hands of Qaddafi forces. Once brigade structures had been established, former military personnel (usually retired) were recruited to refurbish tanks abandoned by Qaddafi forces. Yet it was not until the capture of Zlitan in August 2011 that anti-Qaddafi forces obtained a significant number of T-55 tanks. By the end of the war, 820–1,125 tanks were in Misrata, almost all of them Soviet-era T-55s.<sup>72</sup> This figure may be deceptive as the number of qualified tank crews is limited.

The deployment of long-range artillery and rockets by anti-Qaddafi forces did not commence until the perimeter around Misrata was established. To minimize the risk of friendly fire, the artillery was controlled by one specialist brigade headed by Salem Joha, a colonel who defected at the beginning of the revolution and who would later be appointed head of the revolutionary brigades. The portion of the brigade responsible for artillery was divided into four separate units, each maintaining six to eight heavy artillery pieces. Accordingly, there were 24 to 32 operational artillery pieces in Misrata.

Ground-to-ground rocket launchers, such as the BM-21 Grad, a Soviet truck-mounted 122 mm multiple rocket system, were the primary conventional weapon available to the anti-Qaddafi forces. Qaddafi forces used these rockets to bombard Misrata throughout the war. Initially their range was limited to 20 km so





A Grad rocket launcher made in Misrata. © Brian McQuinn

the priority for anti-Qaddafi forces was to extend front lines far enough to prevent attacks on the city. Later in the war, Qaddafi forces to the east of Misrata acquired rockets with an extended range. This led the brigades on the eastern front to mount a coordinated attack, supported by NATO, to extend the front lines to Tawergha.

As of November 2011, brigades in Misrata controlled an estimated 100 to 150 rocket launchers. This figure does not include the vehicle-mounted rocket launchers fabricated in Misrata; these jury-rigged systems include a range of contraptions, such as mini-Grad rocket launchers and helicopter air-to-ground rocket pods mounted on pick-up trucks.

## Internal regulation

In Misrata, weapons stockpiles are controlled by either revolutionary or unregulated brigades. Revolutionary brigades possess the vast majority, namely 92 to 97 per cent, of the stockpiles, leaving only a fraction under the control of unregulated groups.<sup>73</sup> Yet the leadership of both revolutionary and unregulated brigades maintains tight control over the operation of light and conventional weapons.<sup>74</sup> In addition to the weapons and ammunition controlled by the

brigades, individual brigade members, almost without exception, possess at least one assault rifle.

Due to a ban on carrying assault rifles, which fighters respect, weapons are generally stored at home.<sup>75</sup> Interviews reveal that numerous Misratan civilians who are not involved in brigades bought weapons for personal security during the fighting. As a consequence, every household in Misrata—irrespective of ties to brigades—may be estimated to have at least one assault rifle.

In January 2012, the imams in Libya forbade the sale of small arms and light weapons.<sup>76</sup> The extent to which this ban has curtailed the practice is unknown. It has, however, forced the trade underground. Anecdotal evidence suggests that buying weapons has since become more difficult, as corroborated by an increase in the price of assault rifles.<sup>77</sup> Evidence of large-scale weapon sales by brigades to groups outside of Libya has thus far been limited (UNSC, 2012a, pp. 26–28).

## Inspection visits

In an effort to help document the controls exercised by revolutionary brigades over their weapons, senior Misratan military leaders agreed to allow inspection visits to stockpiles held by six brigades. The six visits were conducted on 15–22 March 2012. The inspection sites were randomly selected from the 236 brigades registered with the MUR. Inspections took place immediately after the random selection was made so that brigades would not have time to prepare.<sup>78</sup> Stratified sampling was used to ensure brigades of each size were visited. This approach permitted a preliminary assessment of the assumption that larger brigades had established more formal controls over their weapons.

To gauge whether unregulated brigades were operating differently from revolutionary brigades, a leader of the prominent al-Swehli brigade was interviewed in Misrata. The interview was conducted at their headquarters at the western gate of Misrata on 28 March 2012.

### *Inspection findings*

In general, the control of light and conventional weapons was similar across the different brigades. There were, however, noticeable variations in the formalization of the procedures. Of the six revolutionary brigades, the larger ones had

established more sophisticated control mechanisms, such as weapons sign-out sheets. Yet there were also variations among the larger brigades.

One of the medium-sized brigades was in the process of transferring its light and conventional weapons to a centralized facility managed by the National Shield.<sup>79</sup> It was one of about 15 revolutionary brigades that were scheduled to participate in the process of centralizing light and conventional weapons in March 2012.<sup>80</sup> During the six visits, senior brigade leaders explained that a key limit to the number of groups participating in the handover was the availability of adequate storage facilities.

The representatives of each brigade reported having 24-hour armed security for all weapon stockpiles. Only the three larger brigades were able to produce documentation of duty schedules dating back three months; for two of the brigades the duty roster included a sign-out sheet for the weapons used while on duty. The smaller brigades explained that stockpile guards were always on duty but that written records were not kept; one such brigade used a wipe-board for recording weekly guard duties. During all six inspections, at least four armed security personnel were on duty. In each case, at least another dozen unarmed brigade members were present at the facilities, as the brigade headquarters usually served as the social hub of the brigade.

During the six inspections, all storage facilities were, with one exception, secured with locks (such as padlocks). The storage facilities were either shipping containers or commercial warehouses. Each brigade had a designated person who was responsible for overseeing the facilities; this member was the only person to possess keys to the locks. In two cases the inspections were delayed as the inspection team waited for this person to arrive with the keys.

The only brigade that did not have all materiel secured had one warehouse under construction. While the remainder of the brigade's storage units were locked, the materiel stored in the warehouse under construction was piled up against the outside wall of the facility. The brigade leader explained that the building was being refurbished to store conventional weapons munitions (such as Grad rockets and surface-to-air missiles) and the materiel was being stored beside the warehouse until the renovations were completed. Most of the facilities did not appear to be in regular use; some doors had rusted closed while others were ensconced behind a build-up of dirt.

During one inspection the keys to a padlock could not be located, so the lock was pried off. While this process took some time, it highlights that the safeguarding of these weapons depends on the capacity of the brigade leadership to maintain control over the stockpiles. This discipline has been maintained to date, but commanders repeatedly stated during the inspection visits that maintaining control over stockpiles had become a burden and that they would prefer to centralize them under MMC or MoI authority.

All six brigades require authorization from brigade commanders for the use of vehicles equipped with machine guns. These brigades were all able to produce examples of written authorization from the MMC for the deployment of these vehicles.

For the three larger brigades, this documentation was accompanied by internal planning documents that assigned specific tasks to sub-units within the brigades. This documentation often included the names of individual fighters assigned to each group and task.

The brigade leaders and storage managers explained that the existing storage and control arrangements were phased in following the end of fighting. They added, however, that accounting for the ammunition and weapons stockpiles began with the emergence of the brigade structures in May 2011. As an example, all six brigades had a specific person designated to procure weapons and ammunition from as early as April 2011. In addition to monitoring the ammunition levels, these individuals also arranged purchases from Benghazi or brigade allocations from MMC-procured shipments.

### *Small arms and light weapon control*

Brigade commanders exerted varying degrees of control over small arms possessed by individual fighters. Two of the three larger brigades registered the weapons possessed by its members, including serial numbers and makes. These records only pertain to weapons obtained from the brigade during the conflict. Weapons obtained by individual combatants, either through private purchase or during fighting, are deemed outside the authority of brigade commanders. Brigade leaders produced documentation of the registration process (see Figure 6).

Only one of the brigades required its members to store their weapons in brigade facilities. Brigade members could access their weapon only if the facility manager received verbal consent from the member's commander. The brigade commander explained, "The war is over, there is no reason to have guns anymore. If someone needs his gun then they have to explain to me why."<sup>81</sup> This degree of control was the exception, however.

The research team visited the holdings facilities for small arms to verify the procedures outlined by the leaders. The small arms were stored in locked shipping containers in the compound. Small arms that were purchased or captured by individual members were stored in a separate location. Each weapon was individually tagged with a description of the weapon, including its serial number and its owner. This system was devised so that should the government implement a buyback programme, individual members would be reimbursed for the weapons they had purchased. Figure 6 shows an example of the tagging system.

In the three larger brigades, detailed procedures were established for the use of small arms and light weapons in authorized military operations. This included

Figure 6 **Assault rifles individually labelled with brigade member's name**



Courtesy of brigade commanders, Misrata, 24 March 2012.

written documentation of all military council requests dating back to December 2011, such as deployment plans and signed pledges by each brigade member for the correct use of small arms (see Figure 2). The declaration form used by the three larger brigades had similar language. A MUR representative explained that samples had been distributed by the MMC in an effort to formalize controls over weapons.<sup>82</sup>

The three smaller brigades did not have written records of the weapons assigned to each individual. Two of these brigades did possess detailed lists of the weapons controlled by the brigade (such as the number of RPGs and assault rifles). The representatives of these groups explained that because the group was so small—it had fewer than 30 members—everyone was responsible for his own weapons.

All brigade commanders noted that, during the fighting, small arms were the responsibility of individual fighters; light weapons were the responsibility of local commanders, who would delegate the operation and maintenance of specific vehicles to a particular team of three to five fighters. For larger brigades, procurement of ammunition was assigned to the executive committee that managed the logistics for the group; small brigades usually assigned this task to a specific person.

### *Future challenges*

Brigade commanders identified a spectrum of existing and potential challenges in the control of weapons. The two most urgent are: a) the construction of safe storage facilities for the existing stockpiles, and b) the strengthening of existing controls.

In connection with these points, a number of brigade commanders expressed concern over the lack of adequate long-term storage facilities for weapons stockpiles. As noted above, the transfer of light and conventional weapons by 15 brigades to a centralized facility managed by the National Shield and the MMC has been limited by the availability of adequate warehouse space. Commanders pointed out that sub-standard storage facilities pose a serious hazard to brigade members and nearby communities in the medium to long term. While progress is being made, the scale of warehouse space required to safely store the stockpiles is daunting.

At this writing, revolutionary brigades remained cohesive and their leaders still commanded the respect of brigade members. This situation will deteriorate over time as brigade members return to regular life and groups break down into smaller cliques. This is especially the case for smaller brigades, whose organization is less formal.

As a consequence, support for the integration of revolutionary brigades into local military councils and unions of revolutionaries is critical. Moreover, an effective integration process will reduce the number of brigades drifting away from MMC influence and will further isolate unregulated brigades. Given the quantity of small arms and light weapons stockpiles, even a small change in the percentage of unregulated brigades would have a significant effect on the security landscape. Further integration of revolutionary brigades would permit the initiation of a registration programme for all weapons that are privately held by brigade members.

Senior brigade leaders have shown great unease regarding the quantity of assault weapons in the community, but the present political situation limits their ability to appeal for weapons to be turned in. Complicating the situation further are rumours of a government weapons buyback programme, which encourage individuals to hold on to their guns. Yet, until faith in the government and the national army increases, small arms holdings are not likely to change. The successful elections in July 2012 were a significant step in establishing a government with a mandate for reform. Nonetheless, security sector reform will be an important test for the fledgling assembly. 🗳️

# Conclusion

The fragmented and decentralized nature of the revolution continues to define the evolving security environment. In this context, differentiating among the non-state armed groups is critical to effective international policy on the transition in Libya. While national dynamics such as the reform of the MoD and National Army are critical to long-term demobilization efforts, local security initiatives are trumping national policy.

The National Shield, a self-proclaimed army-in-waiting, is composed of former brigade fighters. Critically, the force reports directly to the head of the National Army, Maj. Gen. Yousef al-Mangoush. This choice by revolutionary brigade leaders is in keeping with a broader trend of integrating into local authorities, thereby fulfilling quasi-state security functions. In the same vein, former revolutionary brigade members are being recruited into the MoI's law enforcement force—the Supreme Security Committee. As part of the MoI, this force has continued the close collaboration with the MUR and MCC. The development and implementation of the local election security plan discussed in this report is an example of this collaboration.

In Misrata, 236 revolutionary brigades registered with the Misratan Union of Revolutionaries, accounting for nearly 40,000 members. In comparison, there are relatively few unregulated brigades—probably six to nine—and even fewer militias. The proportions of group types are similar to those found in other cities, such as Zintan, where fighting began in the early stages of the revolution. There are no post-revolutionary brigades in Misrata as these emerged only in cities that did not experience sustained fighting during the uprising.

This report estimates that revolutionary brigades control 75 to 85 per cent of all fighters and weapons in Libya; in Misrata, this percentage is higher. Based on inspection of weapon storage facilities in Misrata, this report finds that there are substantial controls over light and conventional weapons by revolutionary and unregulated brigades. Yet civilian and military leaders highlight the safety risks of inadequate storage facilities for weapons and ammunition, emphasizing the need for additional technical support.



Controls on small arms stand in stark contrast to those on light and conventional weapons. While a fraction of brigades require the central storage of small arms, the vast majority delegate this responsibility to individual members. Nonetheless, in Misrata the ban on carrying assault rifles has been respected, highlighting the influence of the local community on brigade members. Despite the government's pledge to earmark USD 8 billion for demobilization programmes, implementation delays are breeding discontent among fighters, weakening their commitment to participate in the transition and their willingness to follow local civilian and military leadership (Al-Shaheibi, 2012). Until the newly elected government resolves jurisdictional disputes between the newly established Warrior Affairs Committee, the MoI, and the MoD, this situation is not likely to change.

The goal of the revolution, as articulated by its men and women, was not simply to depose of a regime, but rather to establish a nation with accountable leaders, economic development, and individual freedom. Yet security concerns continue to dominate the political landscape in Libya. Understanding the unique trajectory, objectives, and capabilities of non-state armed groups is critical to gauging which groups will continue to present a threat to stability and which are playing an active role in securing the country's future. 🏹

# Endnotes

- 1 In Libya, *kata'ib* (singular, *katiba*) was the designation for Qaddafi's army units that were headed by a colonel. During the fighting, the anti-Qaddafi forces appropriated the term to describe any group of insurgents, irrespective of group size. In English-language reporting of the war it is most commonly translated as 'brigade(s)'.
- 2 Author interview with leader of the el-Mercer Brigade, Misrata, 29 November 2011.
- 3 This development trajectory is also mirrored in other regions, such as Zintan (author interview with an informant close to the Zintan military council, Tripoli, 18 March 2012).
- 4 Combatants exhibit varying degrees of fighting experience, even within a fighting unit. This point was repeatedly highlighted in author interviews with brigade leaders in Benghazi, Misrata, and Zintan.
- 5 This report uses the terms 'fighting unit' and 'armed group' interchangeably.
- 6 See ICG (2012).
- 7 The MUR formed after the war as a veterans association, bringing all the fighting brigades and their leaders under one umbrella. The leadership of the MUR overlaps with that of the rebel movement in Misrata. The MUR has emerged as the voice of the revolutionaries and is included in key local security decision-making bodies.
- 8 The definitions of small arms and light weapons used in this report broadly follow the guidelines set out in the *1997 Report of the Panel of Governmental Experts on Small Arms* (UN, 1997). Small arms include revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, assault rifles, sub-machine guns, and light machine guns; light weapons include heavy machine guns, hand-held under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, recoilless rifles, portable launchers of anti-tank and anti-aircraft missile systems, and mortars. This report also examines larger weapons, such as 33 mm anti-aircraft guns and artillery pieces.
- 9 Author interviews with leaders of brigades and the Misratan Military Council (MMC), Misrata, July–November 2011.
- 10 In early March 2011 civilian committees were established to administer the city, including the electricity and water supplies. They became more organized over the following month. After the declaration of the National Transitional Council, the local civil committee adopted the same moniker. This declaration was an act of solidarity but did not reflect organizational ties. This report thus distinguishes between the Misratan NTC (local NTC) and the NTC. Khalifa al-Zwawy led the local NTC from March 2011 until local elections were held in February 2012.
- 11 Author interviews with more than 20 different senior brigade and MMC members, Misrata, May 2011–March 2012.
- 12 Author interviews with senior Misratan military officials suggest that there are only one or two militias operating in Misrata. Unregulated brigades were registered with the MMC during the war and are included in the total figure of 236 brigades.

- 13 Estimates of strength and holdings in this *Working Paper* relate to the situation as of March 2012 and are calculated based on author interviews with military commanders across the country. They include brigade members serving under the National Shield but exclude National Army soldiers and their weapons as these are, by definition, state-controlled.
- 14 Author interviews with front-line fighters, Misrata, July–August 2011.
- 15 Author interviews with MUR leaders, Misrata, October–November 2011.
- 16 Unpublished MUR records of brigade registration as of 18 December 2011.
- 17 Author interviews with members of 21 different brigades, Misrata, July 2011–March 2012.
- 18 Author interviews with brigade leaders, Misrata, October–November 2011.
- 19 Author interviews with leaders of a women’s group that sourced and prepared meals for brigades, Misrata, 15 October 2011.
- 20 Author interviews with brigade leaders and executive committees of six brigades that emerged in the early stages of the war, Misrata, July–December 2011.
- 21 Author interviews with civilians, Misrata, July 2011.
- 22 Examples of group registration provided by the MMC and brigade commanders and reviewed by the author.
- 23 Senior commanders and fighters interviewed by the author regularly referenced trips to Benghazi to acquire ammunition and weapons. Some weapons were purchased by brigades; others were provided by the Benghazi military authorities after having been seized from Qaddafi military stockpiles in the east. Two senior military commanders responsible for arms shipments mentioned shipments from Sudan (author interviews, Misrata, 28 November 2011 and 29 February 2012); these reports were later confirmed by the final report of the UN Panel of Experts (UNSC, 2012a).
- 24 Author interviews with three brigade commanders during six inspection visits, Misrata, 14–16 March 2012.
- 25 See the section on weapons proliferation, below.
- 26 Author assessment based on the brigades named in both confidential UN reports and public statements by international human rights organizations; see also HRW (2011a–c). Human rights abuses have also been blamed on fighters who were recruited by Qaddafi forces from Tawergha. Specifically, the narrative of the war in Misrata includes claims of rape and other abuses committed by these fighters during the conflict; as a consequence, Misratans hold the residents of Tawergha collectively responsible for these actions. This view has led to systematic and persistent extra-judicial detentions and reprisals as Misratan brigades track down those deemed responsible (HRW, 2011c).
- 27 Author interviews with senior commanders, Misrata, March 2012.
- 28 Unpublished MUR registration records as of 15 November 2011, confirmed through an author interview with one of the two commanders of the brigade, Misrata, 18 March 2012.
- 29 Author interviews with a senior MUR member who is responsible for brigade registration, Misrata, 19 November 2011, 5 December 2011, and 14 March 2012.
- 30 Author interviews with anonymous sources, Tripoli, 20 March 2012.
- 31 Author interviews with senior MUR and brigade leaders, Misrata, November 2011 and March 2012.
- 32 Author interview with a brigade commander who was present during the fall of Tripoli, Misrata, 18 December 2012.
- 33 Author interviews with senior brigade, MMC, and MUR leaders, Misrata, December 2011 and March 2012.

- 34 Author interviews with residents of the al-Swehli neighbourhood, western Misrata, 5 March 2012. The interviews were semi-structured and the participants were not randomly selected.
- 35 Author interviews with residents of the al-Swehli neighbourhood, western Misrata, 6 March 2012.
- 36 For a detailed examination, see ICG (2012).
- 37 The dichotomy between pro- and anti-Qaddafi supporters employed by many journalists and analysts belies the complexity and varied relationships many communities have to the previous government; see ICG (2012).
- 38 Author interviews with brigade members and leaders, Misrata and Sirte, October 2011.
- 39 Author interviews with senior MMC and MUR leaders, Misrata, October 2011–March 2012.
- 40 Author interview with a senior MMC leader, Misrata, 15 March 2012.
- 41 For figures or accounts with fewer than five witnesses, sources are provided in the endnotes.
- 42 Author interview with a participant in the 20 February 2011 protest, Misrata, 27 October 2011.
- 43 Author interview with a fighter from the Shalgam Brigade, 15 August 2011, Misrata.
- 44 There were smaller protests in Misrata prior to this date, but they did not succeed in inciting larger protests.
- 45 Author interview with a participant in the 19 February 2011 demonstration, Misrata, 21 August 2011.
- 46 This figure is an average based on interviews with protesters and medical personnel, Misrata, July and August 2011.
- 47 Accounts differ as to the number of participants in the post-funeral actions. They range from 10,000 to 40,000 protestors. Author interviews, Misrata, July–December 2011.
- 48 Author interview with a participant in the 20 February 2011 demonstration, Misrata, 20 August 2011.
- 49 Author interviews with participants in the 20 February 2011 demonstration, Misrata, July–December 2011.
- 50 Author interview with an MMC spokesperson, Misrata, 3 December 2011.
- 51 Author interview with a commander of revolutionary forces after the war, Misrata, 11 December 2011.
- 52 Author interviews with four witnesses regarding the events at the courthouse on 6 March 2011, Misrata, July–December 2011.
- 53 Author interview with the leader of the el-Mercer Brigade, Misrata, 20 December 2011.
- 54 Author interview with a brigade leader, Misrata, 18 December 2011.
- 55 Unpublished MUR registration records as of 15 November 2011.
- 56 Author’s analysis based on random samples of fighter-to-auxiliary personnel ratios in 15 brigades using a stratified sampling method to account for different group sizes.
- 57 Unpublished MUR registration records as of 15 November 2011.
- 58 Author interviews with members of nine different brigades with fewer than 150 members, Misrata, July 2011 to March 2012.
- 59 Author interview with leaders of the western front and individual fighters from dozens of brigades, Dafniya and Misrata, August–December 2011.
- 60 Author interviews with participants in the initial battles with Qaddafi forces, Misrata, July–December 2011.
- 61 Author interview with a member of the MMC who was involved in the initial arms shipments from Benghazi, Misrata, 18 December 2011.
- 62 Author interviews with brigade commanders, MUR, and MMC leaders, Misrata, March 2012.

- 63 Author interviews with brigade leaders and MMC senior leadership, Misrata, 18–24 March 2012. As the sample was not randomized, estimates are anecdotal.
- 64 Author interviews with civilians who purchased rifles for protection and not to fight, Misrata, 29 July 2011 and 6 August 2011.
- 65 Author interviews and observations, Misrata, July 2011 to August 2011.
- 66 Author interview with a senior MMC leader responsible for weapon shipments, Misrata, 22 March 2012.
- 67 Author interviews and participatory observation on the western front, July 2011–August 2011.
- 68 Author interviews with brigade members and commanders, augmented by participatory observation, Tripoli and Misrata, August–September 2011.
- 69 Estimates provided by commanders in November 2011 with respect to the situation as of June 2011 are seen as relatively accurate; they imply that each armed brigade member held one weapon, for a total of roughly 30,000 units. Estimates by the head of the MUR and revolutionary brigades suggest that, after the fall of Tripoli, the holdings rose to two or three times this figure. This report uses the more conservative estimates. In this context, it is important to distinguish between the total quantity of small arms in Misrata brigade stockpiles and the actual number of weapons in circulation. Author interviews with a focus group of senior commanders, Misrata, 18 December 2011.
- 70 Author interview with one of the first fighters on Tripoli Street, Misrata, 23 August 2011.
- 71 Author interviews with senior brigade commanders, Misrata, 18 December 2011.
- 72 Author interviews with senior leadership from the brigades, the MUR, and MMC, Misrata, December 2011 to March 2012.
- 73 These figures are based on the estimate that six to nine unregulated brigades are operating in Misrata. They assume that the percentage of weapons controlled by these groups is proportional to their total number of members. Super-brigades thus control a disproportionate portion of weapons.
- 74 Author's assessment based on six inspection visits to brigade stockpiles and interviews with brigade commanders, including of unregulated brigades, Misrata, March 2012.
- 75 Author's observations, Misrata, November 2011 to March 2012.
- 76 Author interviews with civilians and brigade members, Misrata, March 2011.
- 77 Author interviews with civilians who bought assault rifles, Misrata, December 2011.
- 78 The stratified sampling was generated by drawing up three separate lists of brigades based on size of membership: >750, 250–750, and <250. Each brigade was then given a unique number. Random samples were generated for each list through an online randomizer ([www.randomizer.org](http://www.randomizer.org)) according to the following parameters: one from the >750 list, two from the 250–750 list, and three from the <250 list. All six selections were made on 14 March 2012. The selections were revealed one by one on the morning of scheduled visits.
- 79 Author interview with brigade leaders during an inspection, Misrata, 17 March 2012.
- 80 Author interview with senior leadership of the revolutionary brigades in preparations for the six inspections, Misrata, 13 March 2012.
- 81 Author interview with a brigade commander, Misrata, 26 March 2012.
- 82 Author interview with a MUR representative, Misrata, 24 March 2012. For a detailed example of how these brigades participate in military operations authorized by the MMC and MUR, see Box 1.

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