Divided it stands

ARMED AND CONFIDENT, MILITIAS ARE PUNCTURING LIBYA'S UNITY AND PUTTING A FRAGILE NATION AT RISK OF UNRAVELLING

BY ALASTAIR MACDONALD AND OLIVER HOLMES
TRIPOLI, DEC 16

Libya plans an election next year. Whether it gets there could well turn on incidents like the three-day battle along Highway 1 last month.

It began in the evening of Nov. 10, a Thursday. Two groups of armed young men from rival regions squabbled at a makeshift roadblock outside of the capital Tripoli. They were fighting over territory.

By Friday, chaotic rifle skirmishes had left at least two dead. By Saturday, they were using mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and Soviet-built Grad missiles. Maybe a dozen died.

Old animosities rooted in Libya's tribal past were fusing with newer anxieties about land and power, and the militias' turf war threatened to spin out of control. Think Arab Spring meets Mad Max.

Senior figures from the National Transitional Council (NTC), as Libya's caretaker leadership is known, met through the weekend. The country's elders pleaded for a ceasefire. One group brought in their prize weapon: a Toyota pickup truck fitted with a UB-32 multiple air-to-ground rocket pod, cannibalised from a MiG fighter jet.

And yet by Monday it was all over. Commanders of both sides embraced and pledged mutual respect. A month on, apart from a few local flare-ups, the country remains quiet.

An examination of the tensions gripping this heavily armed, thinly populated and potentially rich country suggests the struggle to keep Libya united will make Year Two of the Arab Spring as fraught as this year was.

Since late October, when Muammar Gaddafi was captured and killed and the NTC declared the country “liberated,” Libya has veered from peace and optimism to violence and potential chaos. Prime Minister Abdurrahim El-Keib, who left an academic career largely spent in the United States to help rebuild his homeland, succeeded last month in satisfying most of a bewildering array of competing interests to form a cabinet that will run the country until the NTC organises an election by July.
As the new government begins remaking the country after 42 years of one-man rule, Libyans and their Western backers alike want to know which Libya will emerge -- the country that nearly unraveled along Highway 1, or the one that held together in a tenuous truce.

"This is the real challenge," wartime rebel premier Mahmoud Jibril said in an interview last month. "Those arms on the streets, those armed people all over the place. This is a political vacuum which can be filled by any power ... which has weapons in its hands."

IN TRIPOLI AND IN Benghazi, the eastern city where Libya's uprising began last February, the lack of violence can seem surprising.

Markets are bustling, streets orderly. Some outsiders go as far as to compare the North African nation to Belgium, another fractious country that lately survived months without a formal national government.

At the same time, the risk remains of a future marred by the kind of violence that tore apart post-Saddam Iraq or made Somalia a land of warlords, al Qaeda zealots and misery. As one diplomat cautioned: "We still need to worry about the Somali option."

The battle on Highway 1 showed the stakes.

Accounts from both sides suggest anger boiled over after fighters from Zawiyah, about 30 miles west of central Tripoli, had extended their zone of territorial control around the city over the preceding months. The former rebels of Zawiyah claim a big share of credit for toppling Gaddafi.

Their expansion finally raised the hackles of farmers from the Wershifanna tribal lands around the Tripoli seaside suburb of Janzour. When they pushed back, trying to set up their own checkpoint, there was no one to stop the rapid and bloody escalation.

Eight months of civil war have left local communities with substantial private armies. Last week, Reuters correspondents counted 38 Soviet-built tanks, a couple of dozen field guns, rocket launchers and piles of ammunition at just a handful of militia bases in Misrata, a city east of Tripoli which withstood a long and bloody siege during the war against Gaddafi. The conflict has also imbued some, like the fighters from Zawiyah, with a sense of entitlement and a belief that other groups who may have hedged their bets or backed Gaddafi should play a lesser role in the new Libya.

"Some groups think that because they were the first to revolt against Gaddafi, that gives them privileges," said Mahmoud Shammam, who was spokesman for the wartime NTC executive, during the battle on Highway 1. "The others are nervous, because maybe they were slow to join the revolution or provided troops for Gaddafi. That's why it's a problem and getting bigger and bigger."

THE SPLITS IN Libya's motley, anti-Gaddafi rebel forces have existed from the start. At the height of the war in July, the assassination of the NTC's military commander Abdel Fattah Younes prompted fears among the rebels' Western and Arab backers that the coalition might rupture, leaving Gaddafi in power. Since the fall of Tripoli in August the cracks have widened, pitting regional barons backed by militias against one another in a fight for power and influence.

Wartime rebel premier Mahmoud Jibril stepped down once Gaddafi was killed and is now trying to rally secular, liberal support against Islamist opposition. He has urged his successor to ensure the central government controls the streets. But Prime Minister Keib, who is in no position yet to enforce that request, has resisted calls from Tripoli residents to set a deadline of next Tuesday for out-of-town fighters to quit the capital.

Tripoli's city council has threatened to block traffic on Dec. 20 if the militiamen, who typically roam the streets in pickup trucks mounted with machine-guns, have not left.

Many Libyans display an instinctive urge to keep all those internal frictions hidden from view. "Not in front of the foreigners!" cried one man when rival militias came to blows recently in the lobby of a Tripoli hotel.

But speak to individuals, and there very often comes a point when the conversation shifts from avowals of national unity to...
quiet confidences about the failings of other communities and the superiority of their own.

“We did not do this for Misrata alone, we fought to liberate the whole country,” one middle-aged engineer said of his city’s valiant resistance, which was key to undermining Gaddafi’s hold on Tripoli. Later: “We are different here in Misrata. We are educated. We know the world. We can show the others how to run the country. We won this right.”

While there is genuine delight among Libyans who meet fellow citizens from distant parts of the sprawling country, disdain for others is also widespread.

At a rally in Tripoli last week calling for fighters from other towns to quit the capital, 38-year-old Tripoli resident Abdurrauf bin Suleiman spoke for many: “They are not revolutionaries anymore; they are gangs,” he said. Others put it more bluntly, with comments like “We hate Misratans.”

While there is genuine delight among Libyans who meet fellow citizens from distant parts of the sprawling country, disdain for others is also widespread.

In places like the Western Mountains, a rugged plateau south of Tripoli, the anti-Gaddafi rebellion has fuelled even older disputes. Men from both Arab and ethnic Berber villages in the region fought alongside each other but often seemed at cross-purposes. Now that Tripoli’s authority is lifted, local animosities are starting to simmer.

The eastern region owns the lion’s share of Libya’s oil and gas reserves; in cities like Benghazi, which is also home to many of the original leaders of the NTC, there is a feeling that the east owns not just the petrochemicals, but the revolution itself. Some in Benghazi are pushing for greater autonomy.

EVEN SMALL TOWNS harbour big ambitions. Take Zintan, a straggling, overgrown mountain village of just 35,000 or so southwest of Tripoli, whose far-roving desert patrols caught Saif al-Islam, Gaddafi’s son, last month.

Zintan’s determination to be a player was apparent within hours of Saif’s capture. Gaddafi had survived barely an hour in the hands of vengeful Misratans in October. The Zintanis were at pains to say how relieved Saif was to find himself captured by them. Prime Minister Keib broke off negotiations over his cabinet to make the bumpy two-hour drive up into the mountains to pay homage in person at Zintan. Within days, Saif’s captors had parlayed their famous prisoner into having a Zintani named defence minister.

Such is the grip of Zintani fighters on Tripoli’s gateway to the outside world that some locals have joked about the main airport being renamed “Zintan International.” And the terminal has been a focus of tension as recently as this week, when the Zintan militia guards exchanged fire with a motorcade carrying one of Libya’s senior military leaders.

The prime minister is “having to listen to
a million different factions all saying they want a piece of the pie. Behind them stand the militias,” said George Joffe, a North Africa expert at Cambridge University. In particular, the people of mountain towns like Zintan, as well as Misrata on the coast, are “major problems, who will require their own particular way of being satisfied”.

Tensions between secular and religious leaders are certainly growing. But it is still difficult to know where local turf wars and personal grudges end, and ideologies begin.

In Tripoli, home to more than one in four of Libya’s six million people, the most serious confrontation is between Zintanis and forces led by Abdul Hakim Belhadj, an Islamist from Tripoli. Belhadj alleges the CIA handed him to Gaddafi to be tortured after he had fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan, an allegation U.S. officials do not deny.

The NTC endorsed Belhadj as its Tripoli commander when the city fell to rebel forces in late August. But some businessmen believe he wants to impose radical Islamist politics on Libya with the help of allies in the wealthy Gulf state of Qatar. Other rivals seem more offended at Belhadj’s claims of his central role in the rebellion.

“They have stolen the credit for the liberation of Libya,” complained Abdullah Naker, a commander from Zintan. Naker said he, not Belhadj, commands the greater forces in Tripoli -- more than 20,000 men.

“Where was Belhadj, when we were out fighting in the cold, sleeping in the open?” he asked in an interview at his heavily guarded compound. Naker said Belhadj had always kept his distance from the front and had been “sleeping in honey,” while Naker had done the real fighting.

A 39-year-old electronics engineer, Naker quit his job in the capital to join the uprising in his hometown of Zintan. When asked to explain what greater right he and his men had to a say in government, he reached for a laptop and used it to play a selection of videos from Facebook showing him supervising Grad rockets firing on the frontline. “I was there. On the ground,” said Naker. “Where was Belhadj?”

Now, he says, he wants to return to civilian life but only once the “thawwar” -- the revolutionaries -- are rewarded for their sacrifices with a major role in running the country. If not, he’s ready to fight against the government. “It can’t be just a matter of changing the name at the top from Gaddafi to Keib,” Naker said. “So if we find the same dictatorship, we will respond to it in the same way we did before.”

Belhadj declined to address Naker’s claims – or even mention his rival by name -- instead stressing the need for a united army and repeating the familiar mantra of Libyan brotherhood: “In this revolution, all Libyans marched together as one.”

But the tensions between groups spark occasional outbursts of violence. The most recent bloodshed was on Dec. 12, when fighters from Zintan fired rockets and artillery at a nearby village in a tribal dispute. At least four people were killed.

And there are other small but constant reminders that Libya is far from united.

Late last month, Belhadj was prevented from boarding a flight by the Zintani fighters who control Tripoli airport -- the same group who fired on the motorcade. When Belhadj held a parade at a Tripoli racetrack on Nov. 18, fighters from Misrata made a point of driving past, uninvited but visible, with anti-aircraft cannon mounted on their pick-up trucks.
“Proud to say we are Libyan”

BY CHRISTIAN LOWE AND TAHA ZARGOUN

AHMOUD ASKUTRI’S beach house is starting to resemble a home again; in the evenings after work, the businessman relaxes in front of the television with a cup of tea while his young son plays in the garden.

The only indications of the building’s recent use are the tanks parked over the road and the five shipping containers filled with ammunition in the backyard.

Askutri, 43, ran one of the makeshift brigades which fought for the nearby city of Misrata, the biggest and bloodiest battle in the eight-month conflict to end the 42-year rule of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Members of the Marsa brigade would muster at Askutri’s house every morning to collect their weapons and ammunition before heading to the front line to engage Gaddafi’s forces.

Askutri, who runs a construction company that specialises in making electricity pylons, did not fight himself but recruited rebel troops, organised them into one of Misrata’s most effective forces, smuggled in weapons and ammunition on rickety fishing vessels, and kept everyone fed and clothed.

Misrata was surrounded by Gaddafi’s most elite forces for months and endured bombardment with mortars, tank shells and Grad rockets. If the city had fallen, Libya’s revolution would likely have failed. But against all odds, Misrata held on and its forces went on to help take Tripoli.

THREE MONTHS AFTER the fall of the capital, Askutri uses a business trip he made to Turkey in November to illustrate why taking on Gaddafi was worth it.

“We have been under big injustice and pressure for 42 years so when we travelled outside Libya we were ashamed to say we are Libyan,” he said. In Turkey, though, he held his head high. “We are proud that we are Libyan, especially when you say that you are from Misrata.”

Askutri is cautiously optimistic about Libya’s future, though he senses change won’t come quickly. “How long did it take for things to get back to normal between Britain and Germany?” he asks. “It will take time. You cannot expect to fight against someone one day and then the next day give them a hug.”

He takes little interest in the political debate bubbling in Tripoli except to say he broadly backs the caretaker government. For him, the next most important battle is Libya’s economy.

“If we want things to get back to normal we have to provide a decent life for people,” he said.

Standing on a sandy plot of land overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, he sketches the future he helped fight for. “There are people in Libya who can work and who can produce so if you get freedom to work and freedom of opinion, then, without being biased in favour of my country, I am sure that Libya will be a jewel.”

Yet the battle did eventually end, thanks to a combination of personal engagement by the NTC leaders and the arrival of ‘neutral’ fighters they dispatched from elsewhere.

So, Libya isn’t Belgium, but it’s not Somalia, either. And that leaves some outside observers cautiously optimistic. As one Western diplomat put it: “You have to respect the slow-motion Libyan way.”

(With additional reporting by Christian Lowe in Misrata, Barry Malone, Marie-Louise Gumuchian and Taha Zargoun in Tripoli and Francois Murphy in Benghazi; editing by Simon Robinson and Sara Ledwith)

YET DESPITE THOSE real tensions, Libyans are also drawn together by the shared experience of taking on Gaddafi. What goes on behind closed doors in the NTC is relatively tame, said Suliman Fortia, a British-educated architect who represents Misrata on the Council: “It’s no worse than your House of Commons,” he joked.

The Berbers and the Tuareg of the desert complain about ethnic discrimination. But the major schism between rival branches of Islam, which ripped Iraq apart after Saddam Hussein, does not feature in Libya. And though radicals, or Salafists, threaten some, they appear to have limited support.

Many Libyans are still simply happy Gaddafi is gone.

“Security is fine. I go out of here with loads of cash on me and I don’t worry,” said Siraj al-Misuri, 26, sitting behind the counter of his gold jewellery shop in Tripoli’s market. “We are patient people. We trust the NTC.”

Even experienced foreign diplomats, who describe the Council as chaotic and frustrating to deal with, marvel at its ability to compromise. “So far, so good,” one diplomat said. “But the easy part is over. Now it gets difficult.”

UNDER A PLAN adopted by the rebels in August, rules must be agreed soon on how to elect 200 people to an assembly that will oversee the drafting of a constitution and full-scale elections by 2013.

How voting is to be organised – weighting the allocation of seats, say, to bigger cities or small towns -- will be a major hurdle. But the very fact that so many different groups want a say may actually make it easier for those at the top to pull power back to Tripoli.

“These are local militias. You can control your town. But you can’t control the entire country,” one Arab diplomat said.

As the battle raged off Highway 1 last month, tribal sheikh Mohammed al-Wershifanni said in an interview that negotiations were “going well” and that, as he put it, “we are all brothers.” Made over the din of machine-guns and mortars, his remarks sounded like a bad joke.

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A rapper finds his voice

BY MARIE-LOUISE GUMUCHIAN

WHEN THE Libyan revolution began in February, Mohammed Al-Houni wasted no time in venting his anger.

The 17-year-old student had long wanted to voice his frustration about Muammar Gaddafi's regime, but under the leader's repressive rule speaking out was impossible.

"Before the revolution, there was no chance to speak freely, to criticise Gaddafi or to sing what I wanted to sing about: corruption, theft," Al-Houni said while sitting in a recording studio in his hometown of Benghazi.

"Now I have sung about prisoners, the Abu Salim (prison) massacre, the liberation of Libya and the capture of Gaddafi."

Al-Houni, who goes by the nickname 'Dadee', is among a booming cadre of amateur rappers whose songs capture the anger and frustration Libyans felt under Gaddafi's rule. Just days after demonstrators took to the streets in Benghazi in February, rappers in the eastern city grabbed their microphones to call for freedom and change.

Their numbers have multiplied over the course of Libya's eight-month war and they say their songs, usually broadcast on local rebel radio stations during the conflict, helped motivate fighters on the front line.

"Music encouraged people, it was a big motivator in the revolution," said Al-Houni, who has recorded six songs since the uprising began. "We were fighting with our microphones."

In his first song "Between me and myself", Al-Houni addresses Gaddafi with lyrics like "The courage of the revolutionaries is the only thing that worries you."

In another line, "Intimidated by the Libyan people, without thinking, Muammar instead of doing what is good in Libya he destroys it today", he voices his anger with the former leader.

"People have tasted the freedom of being able to express themselves," said singer Samuel Gordon, who is of Ghanaian origin but was born and raised in Libya. "So many people are rapping now."

While Libya's rap scene began in Benghazi in February, rappers in the eastern city grabbed their microphones to blast the latest offerings to passers-by from makeshift stalls.

Sitting next to Al-Houni, 22-year-old Hamza Fawzi Zubi, who goes by the stage name 'Triple Z', said he started rapping weeks after the uprising began. Unable to continue with his medical studies during the conflict, he recorded song after song, one of which features a letter from a rebel fighter to his mother after he has been killed.

"I have friends, neighbours who died on the frontline," Zubi said. "One of them was just 17."

Zubi, who said he was part of a group of volunteers who guarded Ajdabiyah after rebels pushed Gaddafi forces out of the eastern town, has also recorded a song about Libyan resistance hero Omar Al-Mukhtar, who was executed by Italian colonial rulers in 1931.

With the number of songs swelling by the week, the rappers in Benghazi are organising themselves and plan to create a radio chart system that will allow listeners to rate them by popularity. There is even a music festival planned for next February.

"Music is like a drug. It's an amazing feeling to finally be able to speak about what we want," Zubi said. "I hope Libyan music goes beyond limits."

(Additional reporting by Taha Zargoun)
“My priority is my job”

BY FRANCOIS MURPHY

WENTY-ONE year-old Khaled Abd al-Khalq likes to think the new Libya will be fairer than the old one.

“Before, especially in construction, the businessmen with connections to the people around Gaddafi dominated the industry and made sure they had the biggest share of the cake,” Abd al-Khalq said.

“Now the country is changing. We hope we can do more business than before.”

Abd al-Khalq fought his way from the far east of the country to his hometown of Tripoli during the revolution. Now, he is back at work at his father’s small construction company.

“It changed everything,” he said in a shy voice when asked about the uprising that ended Gaddafi’s 42-year rule.

“Before the revolution we didn’t have any dreams at all. We were just living.”

In the old Libya, Abd al-Khalq quit his studies after high-school because he “didn’t like it”. Now he has signed up for university classes in management and is busy supervising the family firm’s construction sites.

Many of the construction workers his company employed were foreigners and left the country during Libya’s eight-month civil war. He has been working to bring them back and obtain the necessary immigration papers for those who need them.

“I’m still signed up to the brigade but there’s no use for it now. My priority right now is my job even though there’s no work at the moment,” he said, sipping coffee on a cafe terrace.

“We’re preparing the whole business so we’ll be ready for any work that comes.”

Much of Libya’s economy is at a standstill as the new provisional government focuses on basic needs such as ensuring security.

Libya’s numerous militias, such as the Capital Martyrs’ Brigade that Abd al-Khalq fought with, have yet to lay down their weapons. Many military leaders are jostling for positions ahead of elections scheduled for the middle of next year. But the most important thing is to make the country a fairer place, he said, particularly for business.