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Policing the police

The EU's struggle to strengthen the Libyan security sector

More than ten years after the ousting of Gaddafi, the Libyan police under the Ministry of Interior are still struggling to effectively carry out their duties across the country. Drawing from 25 interviews conducted with experts, Libyan police officers, civil servants of the Ministry of Interior, and EU officers between June and August 2022¹, our research found four main obstacles facing the Libyan police force in Western Libya. These are: i) the proliferation of armed groups; ii) divisions within the ruling elite; iii) administrative mismanagement in the security system; and iv) the presence of alternative conflict-resolution mechanisms. It also emerged that each area comes with its own challenges. Against that background, this policy brief calls for a change in EU policies. We suggest that EU member states align on specific and measurable goals and take a more adaptive and incremental approach. More specifically, the EU could consider identifying a set of measurable and achievable objectives and adapting its policies to the different contexts in which it operates, tailoring its priorities and timescales to different locations.

Introduction

More than a decade after Muammar Gaddafi's fall, Libya's security sector can best be described as dysfunctional. Libya counts a myriad of armed groups that vie for power and influence, the state lost the monopoly on the use of force long ago, and police and security organisations are more often than not poorly managed. Various efforts have been made to improve the security architecture in Libya – including by the European Union (EU). The EU, for instance, established the European Union

Integrated Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in Libya in 2013. EUBAM currently focuses on assisting the Libyan authorities in building a state security structure and efficiently managing borders. The national Libyan police force is one of the pillars targeted by EUBAM, but despite considerable efforts, major improvement has failed to materialise. The Libyan police, however, deserves continued attention for two reasons. *First*, a professional, well-functioning police force provides security and justice for the population, and would be a prerequisite in the transition from military to civilian life when the time comes. *Second*, the topic of (strengthening) the Libyan police force is less political than that of, for instance, armed groups, and thus more accessible for the EU to work on.

¹ Amanda B. Kadlec conducted the in-person and remote field interviews in Tunisia and Libya on behalf of the Clingendael Institute, which informed the publication content.

With these two reasons in mind, this policy brief seeks to address the external constraints that affect the Libyan police and explore how the EU could assist the Libyan government with those challenges. Because the country is de facto divided between rival administrations in the East and the West, and the EU has the strongest grip in the latter of the two regions, the research focused primarily on potential cooperation with the internationally recognised Government of National Unity (GNU), which controls part of West Libya. The first of the four sections in the policy brief dives into a historical introduction to the Libyan security infrastructure, and the second discusses the structural and external constraints that challenge the functioning of the Libyan police in West Libya. The third section explores the ten-year EU effort to help (re)build the Libyan security sector, with a focus on the Libyan police. And finally, in section four we reflect on how the EU could potentially rethink its approach.

Powerless officers: the police in the context of recent Libyan history

The police force was part of the security infrastructure of the Gaddafi regime, albeit not a relevant one. Police were never well paid, well respected, or well resourced under his regime, whose tighter circle of internal security held the real power.² Moreover, the Libyan police under Gaddafi had a disproportionately large number of high-ranking officers but relatively few agents, resulting in a shortage of active patrolling officers on the streets. When protests erupted just before the civil war in 2011, the police forces were among the first responders,³ mostly siding with the status quo out of convenience or restrictions.

2 Fiona Mangan and Christina Murtaugh, *Security and justice in post revolution Libya* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 2014), 8-9.

3 Peter Cole and Fiona Mangan, *Policing Libya: Form and function of policing since the 2011 revolution* (Washington: USIP, 2014), 7.

When the civil war erupted, officers gradually disappeared from the streets of rebel-held territories and some of them returned to office only at the end of the conflict.⁴ Armed groups quickly filled the void. At that time, international powers wanted to avoid the mistakes of Iraq, where the security infrastructure was entirely disbanded.⁵ Also the newly formed Libyan authority – the National Transitional Council (NTC) – did not want to dismantle the previous security infrastructure. The result: the Libyan police force remained a fragmented institution, mostly organised at hyper-local level directorates. The NTC decided that most of the police officers who served under Gaddafi could maintain their former positions, but they would be trained again under international supervision to ensure law-abiding practices. At the same time, the NTC government recruited new officers to promote discontinuity from the previous regime. Most of them came from the Supreme Security Committee (SSC), which was formed in an effort to institutionalise the former anti-Gaddafi armed groups. In December 2011, the SSC officially became a new state security institution overseen by the Minister of Interior (MOI); the SSC numbered 130,000 members in a country of around 6 million citizens to preserve internal security.⁶ At the end of 2012, the Libyan authority implemented a radical U-turn in their security sector policy and began to disassemble the SCC gradually. From 2012 to 2014, 80,000 SSC members joined the Libyan police force.⁷ The process resulted in the emergence of poorly trained police, and a force in which former fighters turned into officers but often maintained links

4 Mangan and Murtaugh, *Security and justice in post revolution Libya*, 19.

5 Naji Abou Khalil and Laurence Hargreaves, *Perceptions of Security in Libya: institutional and revolutionary actors* (Washington: USIP, 2015), 6.

6 Murat Aslan, *Security sector reform for Libya a crucial step towards state building* (Ankara: Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), 2020).

7 Hamzeh Shaheedi, Erwin Van Veen and Jalel Harchaoui, *One thousand and one failings: Security sector stabilisation and development in Libya* (The Hague: The Clingendael Institute, 2020).

with their tribal, religious or informal armed groups. Broadly speaking, the police force faced two challenges in regaining grip on the country. The first was the assassination campaign conducted by unknown perpetrators targeting several individuals in the area of Benghazi, including police officers.⁸ The second was the isolation law which prevented individuals connected to the previous establishment from obtaining public positions, which affected the composition of the Libyan police.⁹

The various bouts of political tensions as well as the civil war from 2014 to 2020 had a continuing impact on the Libyan police in three crucial aspects. First, two competing authorities obtained control over two parts of the country. The first being the Tripoli-based General National Council (GNC), which became later the General National Accord (GNA), controlling most of the West. The second being the Tobrouk-based House of Representatives (HoR), first controlling the Eastern part of the country and then gradually acquiring control over some areas of the South and West the moment the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) reached the door of Tripoli. In this context, the security condition deteriorated with armed groups in the West regrouping around the competition between the LAAF and GNA, and some even changing allegiance by siding with General Khalifa Haftar. The de facto division of the country resulted in a paradoxical situation for police officers in the East, appointed and paid by the Ministry in Tripoli while operating in an area controlled by the Tripoli-based government's main enemy: General Khalifa Haftar. Second, the police faced growing difficulties in competing with powerful armed groups while carrying out their duties. As political contenders ultimately relied on the support of armed groups to maintain power, they directed resources away from the police to provide favoured armed groups with the best equipment and training. In other words, armed groups gradually outnumbered and

outgunned the Libyan police. Third, political leaders increasingly gave institutional positions to armed groups that acted as security providers, and their members, to strengthen their loyalty.

Libya entered a new political phase in June 2020, when all meaningful exchange of fire between forces linked to the Tripoli-based GNU and those loyal to the Tobruk-based HoR ended.¹⁰ This new phase has been characterised by short, intermittent clashes between the coalition of armed groups that support the GNU prime minister Abdelhamid Dbeibah and those loyal to Fathi Bashagha, the prime minister of a parallel, HoR-appointed, Haftar-aligned executive called the Government of National Stability (GNS). Very little changed for the police, however: it still experienced difficulties in fulfilling its duty towards the Libyan population and in asserting itself vis-à-vis local armed groups.

Contested authority: the Libyan police today

Despite the current relative calm, the overall security conditions of Libya have not improved much. According to the Global Organized Crime Index, Libya has the 20th highest crime rate.¹¹ The report stresses that '*organised crime in Libya has largely been linked to the proximity of militia groups and criminal actors to the political class*'. The document argues that unaccountable armed groups and informal organisations engage in a plurality of outlawed activities, mainly smuggling of illegal goods, human trafficking, and black marketing of fuel. Against this background, this study looks at the external constraints which undermine the Libyan police performance in fighting crime. We conducted 25 interviews with experts, Libyan police officers, MOI employees, and EU officers between June and August 2022 with respondents located in al-Jufra, Ghat, Misrata, Khoms, Tripoli and Zawiya. The research did not focus on the East due to difficulties accessing this

8 Mohamed Eljarh, "[Benghazi's Epidemic of Assassinations](#)", Foreign Policy, published 30 October 2013.

9 Mark Kersten, [Libya's Political Isolation Law: Politics and Justice or the Politics of Justice?](#) (Washington: Middle East Institute (MEI), 05 February 2014).

10 "[Libya announces joint ceasefire, calls for elections](#)", TRT World, published 21 August 2020.

11 "[Criminality in Libya](#)", Global Organized Crime Index.

area on account of security concerns, and because the EU works mostly in the West, where the internationally recognised GNU government is based. One disclaimer, though: the absence of findings from the East does not translate into better performances on the part of local police. We simply cannot make any informed statements because there are not enough reliable publications or other well-documented sources about this issue and it is difficult to conduct interviews for political reasons.

As for the West, our findings show that the main challenges to a more effective police force can be grouped into four main categories: i) proliferation of armed groups; ii) the Libyan political environment; iii) administrative mismanagement in the security system; and iv) the presence of alternative conflict-resolution mechanisms.

Proliferation of armed groups

There is a widespread belief among EU officials and Libyan police agents that armed groups harm the performance of the police directly and indirectly. Respondents noted the effect of armed groups on Libyan police performance in three ways.

The first refers to powerful armed groups performing policing functions, such as arrests and street patrolling, thanks to their semi-formal status in the official security infrastructure. For example, a senior official of the Minister of Interior (MOI) argues that the Special Deterrence Forces (Rada), which de facto runs the Mitiga airport in Tripoli,¹² *'is known for picking up and arresting people in a targeted way'*.¹³ Two mid-level MOI officials argue that *'Prime Minister Dbeibah relies on the loyalty of the Ghaneiba militia (led by Abdelghani al-Kikli, who, since January 2021, has formally been at the helm of the so-called Stabilization Support Apparatus,*

*or SSA)*¹⁴ *and made a deal to give them control over the internal security authority.'*¹⁵

Such a political arrangement allows the SSA to conduct policing activities, which its official website lists as 'maintaining security, public order, safety, and enforcing the law'.¹⁶ Interviewees point out that the externalisation of policing functions from the formal police to armed groups means that many Libyans often see such groups as the ultimate providers of security.

The second way in which armed groups undermine the Libyan police relates to the citizens' perception of armed groups as being stronger than the police. Such perception is further reinforced by the fact that the most powerful armed groups enjoy better training and equipment than the police. One respondent broadly sums up this phenomenon by stating that *'they [the formal police] cannot intervene when gangs are fighting and cannot end demonstrations. When real violence is involved, the ability of the police is zero.'*¹⁷ Thanks to their close connection to powerful politicians, armed groups have easier access to foreign-sponsored training. As one respondent pointed out sardonically, *'if they are friends with [former] Minister of Interior, Khalid Mazen, they get put on the first list for training'*. This quote also speaks of the mismatch between the EU training expectations to produce meaningful change, and the pragmatic application of such policies in a context where Libyans have their own networks and preferences. With regard to the police, a UN official stresses the fact that *'they have 27 of their own training centres, but the planning, curriculum, and facilities are all very dated and need renovating'*.¹⁸ Finally, respondents argue that non-EU states run their own training programmes for security forces, pointing mainly at Turkey.

12 There are several sources which point to Rada running the security of the Mitiga airport. One of the most recent indirect pieces of evidence is the arrest at the airport of the health minister / Source: "[GNU Minister of Health Arrested at Mitiga Airport by Rada](#)", Libya Security Monitor, published 25 January 2022.

13 Interview with senior officers of the Ministry of Interior, Tripoli, 19 June 2022.

14 Ghaneiba is the nickname of Abdelghani al-Kikli, leader of the Stability Support Authority – SSA.

15 Interview with two mid-level officials of the Minister of Interior, Tripoli, 18 June 2022.

16 "[Stability](#)", State of Libya – Presidential Council: Stability Security Apparatus.

17 Interview with Jalel Harchaoui, Associate Fellow RUSI, 1 July 2022.

18 Interview with a UN security official, Tripoli, 20 June 2022.

The third dynamic lies in the fact that armed groups systematically divert public funds that would be otherwise directed to the police. For example, a security official from Misrata complained that *'all the money goes to militias, not to the police'*, not only through salaries but also through their political influence.¹⁹ The same respondent added that armed groups *'find dodgy ways to milk money from the state'*, such as *'claiming that they need new vehicles (...) and then sell it on the black or even the legal market'*. When we interviewed EU officials to verify that claim²⁰ some confirmed it while others dismissed it.²¹

A fourth recurring argument is that the police do not persecute armed group members involved in criminal activities. The first reason is that some officers maintain links with members of armed groups. For example, one ground operator noted that a consistent number of police officers are, in some cases, (former) armed group members who have integrated into the police but maintain their links to armed groups.²² The second argument is that there is powerful political pressure to prevent investigations and punishment of armed group members involved in crimes, as some powerful armed groups seem to have a strong influence on the Minister of Interior.²³ For example, two respondents linked with the MOI cite the situation where two drunk members of the SSA were arrested by police in Tripoli but later freed thanks to the mediation of the MOI.²⁴ This information cannot be verified independently, but it illustrates citizen perceptions of general police weakness.

Finally, it appears from interviews that there are differences in the various locations regarding the influence of armed groups on the local police. In Zawiya, for instance, there

is ongoing competition between different armed groups for supremacy, which translates into a risk of the police being powerless vis-à-vis violent crimes and undertaking only limited operations. Other cities, including Tripoli, feature a predominant alliance of powerful militias, whose power is far from uncontested.²⁵ These armed groups enjoy political support, and therefore obtain funds and training that would otherwise be directed to the police, and they carry out policing activities. In these areas, police action in prosecuting crimes committed by armed group members appears limited by political authorities. In the city of Ghat,²⁶ the LAAF of General Haftar maintains a presence alongside the national police force.

Political division within the Libyan ruling elite

Another often-reported challenge refers to the current Libyan political environment. Several respondents argued that divisions within the political elite complicate any attempt to improve the performance of the police. The political rivalry between two centres of power in Tripoli and Tobruk, as well as internal conflicts in the West, results in police officers' conflicting loyalties and affects the continuity of EU-funded projects. For example, two respondents argued that *'even if there was an honest attempt to train the right people, politics at the top make it impossible to have any kind of effect that lasts'*.²⁷ The same respondents gave the example of a training contract signed by former Minister of Interior Fatih Bashagha with the security company Rose Associates, which was then cancelled by the incoming Minister Khalid Mazen.

The second issue refers to the shared perception that Western Libyan political authorities are ultimately not interested in strengthening the national police force because their own power depends solely on

19 Interview with security officers from Misrata and Khoms, online, 27 June 2022.

20 Interview with an EU official, online, 20 June 2022.

21 Interview with an EU official, online, 14 July 2022.

22 Interview with a ground security operator from West Libya, online, 27 June 2022.

23 ["How Dabaiba turned top militia leader Abdelghani al-Kikli"](#), Africa Intelligence, published 04 April 2022.

24 Interview with two mid-level officials of the Minister of Interior, Tripoli, 18 June 2022.

25 Wolfram Lacher and Alaa al-Idrissi, *Capital of Militias: Tripoli's Armed Groups Capture the Libyan State* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, June 2018).

26 ["Haftar's forces block PM Dbeibah's visit to Libya's Ghat"](#), Daily Sabah, published 13 October 2021.

27 Interview with two mid-level officials of the Minister of Interior, Tripoli, 18 June 2022.

the support of armed groups. Several EU officers complained about a lack of support and strategy from Libyan political authorities, which negatively affects their efforts. For example, an EU official complained that *'there is no security sector reform that is being conceived by the Libyan authorities (...). We don't have multiannual planning. It's ad hoc and informal.'*²⁸ Another EU official noted that *'at the micro-operational part, there needs to be more political support from Libyans'*.²⁹ In the current political context, it is difficult to see how such a challenge could be overcome.

Administrative mismanagement in the security system

A few respondents pointed to formal and informal administrative obstacles which prevent the police from conducting their operations efficiently. Formal obstacles link to the post-Gaddafi political leadership failing to effectively reform the legal framework in order for the police to conduct investigations and arrests. A staff member from the United Nations Support Mission for Libya (UNSMIL) stressed that *'arrest and investigation procedures change all the time, and I think this is done intentionally, so people on the outside looking in are constantly confused about what the law is'*.³⁰ The issue is further aggravated by the de facto political division of the country, which has resulted in the lack of a united normative framework for law enforcement.

Moreover, some respondents identified a link between administrative inefficiency and the hybridisation of the security system. They stressed that armed groups' involvement in the security system results in administrative procedures existing only on paper due to the groups' lack of knowledge of or interest in legal provisions. A senior MOI officer stated that *'armed groups do not have any interest in the boring administrative work that makes a professional force function'*.³¹

Other respondents go even further in arguing that armed groups are actively involved in making controversial documents disappear to complicate investigations of their members accused of terrorism under Gaddafi or involved in criminal activities.³² Such accusations cannot be verified, but it provides a glimpse of respondents' perception of the negative role of powerful armed groups.

Alternative conflict-resolution mechanisms

Several respondents argued that Libyans often rely on informal authorities instead of the police to solve their disputes, conduct investigations or repress illegal activities. These dynamics ultimately affect the image of the Libyan police in the eyes of citizens, who consider them as the ultimate security providers. Some respondents argue that citizens rely on alternative security providers because they lack knowledge about procedures for reporting crimes. As one UNSMIL officer pointed out, *'there's no public knowledge. (...). No one knows how to do it; the citizens have no agency over that process.'*³³

Others argue that citizens lack trust in the ability of the police to carry out security-related activities. The interviewees identified differences in the informal authorities from one location to another. In the large cities of the Western coast, such as Tripoli, citizens are more willing to call the police to report criminal activities,³⁴ while in smaller towns, especially those characterised by a solid tribal element, citizens mostly rely on community leaders to solve their disputes. A UNDP staff member pointed out that in those locations *'Libyans rely on a mokhtar (mediator) (...) particularly in those that are ethnically and tribally homogenous, such as Ghat.'*³⁵ Another UN security officer confirmed this by pointing out that *'there is a strong community culture whereby issues*

28 Interview with a European Union Official, online, 14 July 2022.

29 Interview with a European Union Official, online, 1 August 2022.

30 Interview with an UNSMIL staff member, online, 23 June 2022.

31 Interview with a senior officer of the Minister of Foreign affairs, Tripoli, 19 June 2022.

32 Interview with two mid-level officials of the Minister of Interior, Tripoli, 18 June 2022.

33 Interview with an UNSMIL staff member, online, 23 June 2022.

34 Interview with a senior officer of the Minister of Foreign affairs, Tripoli, 19 June 2022.

35 Interview with a staff member of the UNDP, Tripoli, 20 June 2022.

*will most often get worked out on their own without involving police (...) For example, suppose there is a big troublemaker in the neighbourhood among one of the families. In that case, everyone, including the family, will get together to kick that person out.*³⁶

This finding is confirmed by a municipal representative of Ghat, who argues that *'issues get handled by police only sometimes, but we have strong family and tribal connections here, and little things get settled by those leaders'*. It needs to be said though, that in this location, the overall security is better than in most other parts of Libya.

Rebuilding Libya's security architecture: a ten-year EU effort

The previous section showed that the situation concerning the national police in West Libya is very complex, where the absence of order equals widespread violence and, to some extent, anarchy. Against this background, the EU has implemented initiatives with the aim of helping Libyans improve the overall security architecture of their country – including the police pillar – together with other international actors involved in the crisis.

Over the years, the EU has opted for a dual-track approach towards Libya: implementing crisis response programmes and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in Libya, while supporting the United Nations (UN)-led mediation efforts. In 2013, at the request of the Libyan government, the EU established the European Union Integrated Border Management Assistance Mission (EUBAM) *'to support the Libyan authorities to develop capacity for enhancing Libya's land, sea and air borders'*³⁷ – at that point in time focused solely on border assistance. That 'at the request' forms an important element in the EU's approach towards Libya that should

be mentioned here.³⁸ From the start of the conflict, local ownership has been marked as crucial, meaning that every EU initiative had to be requested by the Libyans themselves.

Either way, back to EUBAM; after some difficult years,³⁹ the Mission transformed into a fully operational CSDP Mission in 2018, and expanded its mandate.⁴⁰ Two lines of operation were added – law enforcement and criminal justice – and the role redefined as *'assist[ing] the Libyan authorities in building state security structures'*.⁴¹ Through advising, mentoring and training, it sought to improve the security situation on the ground, for example by training the Libyan police on issues such as anti-corruption and gender.⁴² Last summer, the Council extended the Mission's mandate for a further two years to June 2023, and approved a budget of 85 million euros.

In addition to EUBAM, the EU established the EU Liaison and Planning Cell (EULPC) to provide security, intelligence and planning expertise to both the EU and the United Nations Support Mission for Libya (UNSMIL) in 2015.⁴³ The main goal of UNSMIL is to coordinate international assistance in peacekeeping and to build a democratic institutional system in Libya – in which it also focuses on the national police. In 2021, for instance, UNSMIL trained some 400 diplomatic police personnel to enhance their capacity to respond to explosive hazards and operational threats. Although UNSMIL is a UN mission, it involves several EU member

36 Interview with a UN Security official, Tripoli, 20 June 2022.

37 The Council of the European Union, [Council decision 2013/233/CFSP on the European Union Integrated Border Management Assistance Mission in Libya \(EUBAM Libya\)](#) (Brussels: European Union, 2013).

38 Stefano Marcuzzi, [The role of the EU in the Libyan conflict since 2011](#) (Berlin: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, May 2022).

39 In 2014, the mission relocated to Tunis and was put on hold from February 2015 to early 2016.

40 The Council of the European Union, [Council Decision \(CFSP\) 2018/2009 of 17 December 2018 amending the extending Decision 2013/233/CFSP on the European Integrated Border Management Assistance Mission in Libya \(EUBAM Libya\)](#) (Brussels: European Union, 2018).

41 *Ibid.*

42 EUBAM Libya, ["Congratulations to twenty heads of Tripoli police stations and MOI representatives @InteriorLibya, who completed a police leadership course organized by EUBAM and delivered by international experts"](#), Twitter, 17 June 2021.

43 "EULPC", Eurogendfor, published in 2015.

states, for example the Netherlands and Germany, which are contributing financially and sending experts to provide advice on security sector reform.

The impact of EU policies in Libya

Despite the presence and activities of the EU on the ground for the past decade, most scholars and interviewees are critical when it comes to the EU's impact on the security sector in Libya, and more specifically the national police pillar, saying that real progress is lacking. How do we explain this contradiction?

First and foremost, competing interests and hidden agendas *on both sides* seem to hamper strategic and timely decision making. Let's look at the Libyan side first. As addressed earlier, some leaders of armed groups are close to ministers and other high-level officials, up to the point that their support can be crucial for political survival. Truly reforming the police will require systemic change that neither ministers nor high-level officials in Libya appear to have any appetite for (at the moment). For the EU, this lack of political will is palpable in small things, such as visa applications for EU staff often taking a long time, or even being rejected, but also in more crucial elements, such as the fact that the GNU and EUBAM have yet to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). In addition, the Libyan government has blocked any EUBAM programmes in the fields of criminal justice or law enforcement (i.e., the national police).

The European Union, however, is not without fault either. While EUBAM formally seeks to assist the Libyan authorities in building state security structures, the goal seems to be overrun by prospects of short-term gains and the external agendas of individual member states. Italy, for instance, is advocating for more EU support for ironclad borders and programmes to stem migration, while France has set itself the goal to fight Islamist radicalisation and terrorism rather than to halt migration. Spain's foremost concern, on the other hand, is not terrorism or migration, but energy security. Its third-largest company by revenue (called Repsol) is the lead operator in parts of Libya's Sharara oil

field and wants to keep that position at all costs.⁴⁴ This multiplicity of national interests creates a similar situation to the one in Libya: assisting the Libyan authorities in building state security structures in the best way possible requires a coherent, unified approach to which a number of EU member states do not want to commit (at the moment). It means that EUBAM has little clout, if any, while at the same time no one wants to admit that the EU has been (mostly) unsuccessful in achieving its objectives in this field, as this would require change.

Second, and more at ground level, past EUBAM training programmes that focused on the Libyan police are being reviewed as 'not particularly effective'. Interviewees pointed to several obstacles, but two recurring complaints were: the lack of local ownership of projects and a limited operational budget. They argue that while setting up the training courses the EU is largely operating with its own priorities in mind. That does not mean Libyans are not being consulted – they are, but their needs do not seem to be at the centre when EU projects are designed. On top of that, with an operational budget of only 2 million euros (around 2.5% of the mission's total budget), very little is possible in terms of initiating or maintaining projects. Something that seems to complicate matters even further is the fact that EUBAM staff are initially appointed only for 12 months. Good working relationships and knowledge of how Libyan ministries work are crucial but difficult to establish in such a short period.

Over the years, this political fragmentation and flaws in ground-level implementation resulted in mismanagement, ad hoc projects, and Libyans' lack of trust in the European Union – contributing to an environment in which the EU is simply not being seen as the most credible partner. Meanwhile, other regional actors have gained influence; for example Turkey, which is more than eager to expand its influence in Libya. The EU has very little power to prevent such a partnership

44 Michaël Tanchum, [Libya, energy and the Mediterranean's new great game](#) (Madrid: Royal Institute Elcano, 23 September 2020).

being formed, but this is an issue which many respondents indicated would further complicate EU efforts in supporting the Libyan security sector (in the future).

Rethinking the EU approach

How can the EU turn the tide and actually support Libya in strengthening and rebuilding a national police force? Based on our interviews and desk research, we identified three avenues that the EU could explore.

First and foremost, for the EU to play *any* meaningful role in Libya, it would do well to start by objectively (re)assessing its current *modus operandi* and existing cleavages between EU member states. In other words, what are the internal obstacles that stand in the way of an unified, multi-annual European response? And how to rebuild that? In order to have the key players on board, it would be wise to actively involve France, Italy, Spain and Germany, but also Greece, the Netherlands and Hungary, in the process. Working towards but also maintaining a unified EU response would require support from European governments – if only because of the unanimity rule in EU foreign policy making. Libya expert Tarek Megerisi even recommends that France, Italy and Germany build a ministerial-level coalition around the shared EU goals in order to have as much commitment as possible.⁴⁵

Second, because of the very complex situation with regard to the national police as well as the shared perception that (at least part of) Western Libyan political authorities are ultimately not interested in strengthening the national police force, it might be worthwhile for the EU to adjust the priorities for now. Even though a professional, well-functioning police force is an important pillar in getting Libya back on the democratic track, much has happened lately. With an election that has been delayed since December and new clashes that broke out between the two rival factions of Tripoli-

based forces, other urgent security priorities have come to the fore in which the EU could potentially play a more meaningful role. The first in particular is seen by interviewees as a way to break Libya's vicious cycle of rival governments, violence and foreign interference. Together with the UN and its key member states in the Libyan conflict, the European Union could, for instance, explore the possibilities of drawing a new roadmap to prepare Libya for new elections as well as ways to gain support for the process from their regional allies.⁴⁶

Third, the EU could consider reforming its previous model of supporting the national police in West Libya through a more adaptive approach, along the lines of an incremental strategy and – once steps have been made in removing the political obstacles on both EU and Libyan sides – an increase in its operational budget. To start with a *more adaptive approach*: a national approach which applies the same strategy in all locations does not seem to be the best fit. The interviews showed that the national police face different issues in different locations, which means it might be more effective to investigate the possibility of moving towards more local projects, which prioritise objectives adapted to the specific area. For example, in areas with a strong tribal component it might be a priority to build trust in the police, while in others the emphasis could be placed on protecting officers who investigate criminals linked to armed groups. The advantage of those types of projects in this context is that they can be tailored to a situation in a particular village or town, while at the same time the EU would continue to operate 'safely' within the framework of the national police. Moreover, local projects are known to accelerate a feeling of local ownership – a requirement often lacking in EU programmes.

Furthermore, it might be worthwhile for the EU to work more along the lines of *an incremental strategy*, in which it

45 Tarek Megerisi, *Spoiler alert: How Europe can save diplomacy in Libya* (Berlin: ECFR, January 2021).

46 For more ideas on how the EU could support Libya in its elections, see: Tarek Megerisi, *Infinity war: Libya's reoccurring conflict* (Berlin: ECFR, 2 September 2022).

builds on past experiences and changing circumstances. To be more precise, with an incremental strategy, the EU could pursue its coherent, long-term goals – hopefully the outcome of the first avenue – but instead of implementing ad hoc projects it could evaluate existing projects and tweak them based on the evaluation results. Interesting areas to analyse would be: i) the number of officers/experts trained; ii) the presence and influence of tribes and armed groups in that specific area; iii) the position and functioning of local regulations; iv) the budget available; and v) the number of local partners involved, etc.

Finally, once steps have been taken to get Libya and the EU on the same page when it comes to transforming the police, the EU would do well to *increase its operational budget*. As mentioned before, EUBAM currently has a total budget of 85 million at its disposal, which includes an operational budget of only 2 million euros. By comparison, together with the UNDP and UNSMIL, EUBAM created the Pilot Model Police Station in Hay Al Andalus, with a total investment of roughly 1.4 million euros.⁴⁷ Although this specific project has multiple funders, it shows the need for more funding in order to create several substantial projects.

Conclusion

Weak national police structures and a legacy of Muammar Gaddafi's regime characterise West Libya. In fact, to this day, Libya has the 20th highest crime rate in the world, and, as our research shows, a widespread perception among citizens that the police lack legitimacy. Over the years, the European Union has assisted the Libyan authorities in trying to strengthen the national police force, in particular through EUBAM, but success has failed to materialise. Against that backdrop, this policy brief analysed the current external constraints limiting the effectiveness of the national police in West

Libya, and the avenues the EU could explore to assist the GNU to strengthen the national police.

Throughout the research process, however, it emerged that the two issues – identifying problems versus exploring solutions – did not do justice to the situation on the ground for two reasons. First, internal and external obstacles are not always mutually exclusive, meaning that in some cases they cannot be separated. For example, 'the proliferation of armed groups' came to the fore as the most pressing external constraint. On the one hand, these groups carry out policing duties, such as street patrol and making arrests, thereby undermining the power of the police (an external constraint). On the other hand, however, some armed groups receive political support and funding from high-placed politicians and government officials, with which their position and influence are deliberately maintained (an internal constraint). Second, the EU's approach towards Libya is currently 'too fragmented', and encompasses various (national) agendas and interests. This makes it difficult to act as a credible partner to the Libyan government, let alone assist the GNU in something as difficult as strengthening the national police force.


To conclude, before any progress is possible, the Libyan government must gradually distance itself from crucial internal obstacles, in particular the political support for armed groups. As this will not happen overnight, the EU's effort could begin by assisting the government to improve the broader infrastructure of Libya, with a focus on security domains other than the police force, which is a fairly complex pillar. Parallel to this, the EU needs to work towards an approach in which it speaks with one voice in Libya, so that opportunities for strengthening the national police in West Libya can be fully exploited in the future. With its voices aligned, the EU would be most effective with a coherent, long-term strategy, implemented at the appropriate time, rather than patchy ad hoc initiatives. When this is accomplished, the EU's previous model of support for the national police in West Libya could be improved with a more adaptive approach, an incremental strategy and an increase in the operational budget.

⁴⁷ "Inauguration of Model Police Station in Tripoli", UNDP Libya, published 8 June 2021.

About the Clingendael Institute

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