
POLICY COMMENTARY

Urban Peace-Building through Community-Based Initiatives to Control SALWs in Libya

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In post-revolution Libya, the proliferation and trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) became pervasive due to the ongoing political and armed conflict that succeeded the fall of Qaddafi. The continuing state of insecurity and weakness of central state authorities has led local and community-based actors to develop their own peacebuilding initiatives, some of which included homegrown measures to control or reduce the proliferation of SALW. Drawing on insights collected in the cities of Az-Zāwiyah, Bayda, and Tobruk, this policy commentary discusses the mechanisms leading to the emergence of such initiatives, the methods of their implementation, and their strengths and weaknesses. Although these local initiatives did not result in building lasting and comprehensive peace at the national level, they offer a preliminary set of lessons learned that can help inform prospective peacebuilding and SALW control efforts in Libya.

Keywords: Libya; Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW); Peacebuilding; Civil War; Armed Conflict; Civil Society

Introduction

The proliferation and trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW)¹ in post-Qaddafi Libya is attributable to exogenous and endogenous factors that perpetuated the ongoing conflict and fragmentation. The intra-Libyan divisions, the dominance of non-state armed groups and their capture of key state institutions, the absence of a state that is able to claim the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force, Libya's porous borders, the detrimental regional external interventions, and the limits and failures of global mechanisms to broker a peace deal or initiate an inclusive political transition process towards stability and democracy, are some key factors that have entrenched the status of insecurity and created a fertile ground for the proliferation of SALW especially in the urban strongholds of the rival parties.²

The battle over Tripoli is a case in point: armed groups of different political, ideological, and social persuasions have sought to assert their influence over resources, institutions, political decision-making in the post-revolution era. Cities, towns, tribes, neighbourhoods, armed groups, and family networks throughout the country have acquired weapons by different means for different purposes – such as perceived needs for self-defence, rampant criminality, the desire for revenge, exercising control over cross-border trading routes, or seeking political gains – which rapidly transformed into threats and translated into insecurity and prolonged conflicts.³

¹ Small arms are, broadly speaking, weapons designed for individual use. They include, inter alia, revolvers and self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine guns, assault rifles, and light machine guns. Light weapons are, generally understood as, weapons designed for use by two or three persons serving as a crew, although some may be carried and used by a single person. They include, inter alia, heavy machine guns, handheld under-barrel and mounted grenade launchers, portable anti-aircraft guns, portable anti-tank guns, recoilless rifles, portable launchers of anti-tank missile and rocket systems, portable launchers of anti-aircraft missile systems, and mortars of a calibre of less than 100 millimetres (Jenzen-Jones & Schroeder 2018).

² For an in-depth analysis on the dynamics of the Libyan conflict, please see Lacher (2020). For additional analysis on the development of Libyan armed groups since 2014, please see Eaton, T. et al (2020).

³ On these various dimensions of armed groups in Libya, see Lacher & Al-Idrissi (2018); Lacher (2019); McQuinn (2012); Tubiana & Gramizzi (2017, 2018).

The central government in turn remains too weak to assert its authority or control the spread and use of arms and is therefore unable to perform or conduct a comprehensive disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) process. It is within this context and in the absence of an overarching, national strategy to tackle the proliferation and trafficking of SALW, that local initiatives emerged organically from the bottom up. A number of community-based peacebuilding initiatives took place that addressed more or less directly the issue of arms proliferation, especially in urban settings in both the West and East of Libya.⁴

The political and security chaos in which Libya is still mired has challenged the effectiveness and sustainability of these community-based initiatives and makes the assessment of their effectiveness a particularly difficult endeavour. While it would be unfair to expect local efforts to succeed in reducing SALW proliferation nationally, these experiences offer useful insights for constructing future national plans.

Some of these initiatives came in response to local needs for restoring stability and maintaining functioning social institutions. Others emerged as a response to specific incidents taking place in the communities. In most cases, though small in scale, these initiatives originated from a unique confluence of local and tribal customs and other factors unique to the communities. This *Policy Commentary* offers insights from local researchers who interviewed community leaders in three urban settings—Az-Zāwiyah (West Libya), and Tobruk and Bayda (East Libya)—and draws a number of policy-relevant conclusions on how local community-based initiatives can help inform prospective peacebuilding and SALW control efforts in Libya.⁵

Az-Zāwiyah

Az-Zāwiyah, a city in North-Western Libya situated on the Libyan coastline of the Mediterranean Sea about 45 km west of Tripoli, is home for nearly 200,000 people. As other cities of Libya, it suffered from the consequences of armed conflict that resulted since 2013 in casualties, displacement, socio-economic harm, the proliferation of arms, and general insecurity. Persisting insecurity led a civil society organisation, the Shaik Tahir Azzawi Charity Organization (STACO), to initiate a peacebuilding process known as the Initiative for Societal Peace and Economic Empowerment. The initiative resulted in the endorsement by local authorities of the Az-Zāwiyah Declaration for Consolidation of Peace and Reconstruction (henceforth, Az-Zāwiyah Declaration) in November 2017.⁶

The Az-Zāwiyah Declaration included 17 articles and five objectives, including the integration and inclusion of ex-militants in the reconciliation process in the hope of disarming society; the provision of opportunities for ex-militants and armed groups to turn in their weapons and arms; the eradication of extremism; the reduction of violence; and the maintenance of stability in the long-term. SALW control was a cornerstone of the Declaration: Article 7, for instance, aimed to ‘make Az-Zāwiyah a safe city clean and empty from all manifestations of unregulated arms.’⁷ Concrete achievements included the brokering of a ceasefire arrangement after three years of armed conflict, the reopening of roads, the removal of heavy weapons and

⁴ In addition, it is worth highlighting that the various Libyan governments since Qaddafi's fall enacted several pieces of legislations to control the use, trade, and proliferation of arms especially between the years 2011 and 2014 (Available at DCAF's The Libyan security sector legal database <https://security-legislation.ly/>). However, a critical examination of these legislative attempts leads to two main conclusions: 1) there was a lack of coordination among Libyan legislatures over time; laws and resolutions on arms control were passed after large gaps in time and did not offer continuity of efforts or programmes; and 2) the laws and resolutions on arms control that were implemented suffered from selective and inefficient execution (Doghman 2019).

⁵ In late 2018, two Libya subject-matter experts were commissioned by the Small Arms Survey to research community-based initiatives to control SALW in Libya. In-depth case studies were produced, and 33 in-depth interviews with key interlocutors were conducted. The interviewees came from a variety of Libyan professional and personal backgrounds; they included members of the government, activists, academics, former militia leaders, traditional leaders, and civil society organizations, and were primarily men. The sub-sections in this policy commentary concerning the case studies benefited from and relied greatly on the background papers by the subject-matter experts (Doghman 2019; Eljarh 2019).

⁶ The backers of this initiative firmly believed that ‘perceptions matter’ to change attitudes and promoted an alternative narrative and discourse to foster peaceful action. Operationally, STACO implemented the initiative in phases and accompanied it with a public information campaign to increase awareness of the need to renounce violence and engage in national reconciliation and societal peace, notably through banners and posters that were spread across the city's squares, parks, entrances of mosques, clubs, and shops. A task force composed largely of independent youth with reputable social, educational, and professional affiliations and strong negotiation skills was set up to engage in bilateral conversations with the city's multiple actors. This led to an agreement that comprehensive dialogue amongst the city's residents and amongst the rival groups themselves was important, and that strategies for stopping the violence needed to integrate human development and economic empowerment dimensions. Subsequent phases included building confidence between armed and unarmed local actors; changing and influencing the position of the key armed groups on issues related to disarmament, reintegration, and local governance; holding detailed discussions with state and sub-state institutions such as ministerial and municipal bodies; creating the space for direct bilateral dialogue between these state and sub-state actors; and the development by the STACO task force of an action plan to translate agreements into concrete steps specifying the timeframe, the actors involved, and the expected outcomes (Doghman 2019).

⁷ To read the full text of the Az-Zāwiyah Declaration (in Arabic), please click here <https://bit.ly/33P3SdB>.

armed groups from the city's streets, and the election of a new city council. A follow-up committee was established to coordinate with different institutions in the city to create a framework to implement the terms of the declaration.

The implementation of the declaration did not meet all expectations,⁸ and progress made at the local level was greatly hampered by the national context of ongoing conflict. The initiative nevertheless demonstrated the mobilizing role that civil society actors can play in promoting peacebuilding and SALW control, as well as their readiness to tackle national issues. Indeed, in February 2020, STACO launched a national initiative to promote stability, security, and reconciliation and started advocating for the central role of the judiciary establishment (*al-Mo'asasa al-Qadaiya*) in tackling the impasse across Libya.⁹

Tobruk

Tobruk is a city located in Eastern Libya with an estimated population of 170,000. Although a widespread hunting culture means that a large part of the population still holds SALW at home, the existence of strong and well-established tribal structures has prevented the proliferation of armed groups and ensured relative stability and societal peace.

In the post-2011 context, access to SALW in Tobruk has been regulated by the city's strict tribal customs and penal codes, which have come to fill the gap left by the collapse of the central state in terms of weapons control. A web of trusted brokers and institutions unique to Tobruk—including hybrid structures consisting of tribal leaders, security establishment officials, local council members and civil society actors—played a key role in recognizing from the outset the dangers of arms proliferation and of the formation of armed groups. A neutral committee formed after 2016 by tribal elders and notables, for instance, established specific penalties for the use of SALW in disputes, ranging from fines to exile from the city. Such arrangements helped ensure the participation of trusted military and security figures in times of chaos for tackling challenges related to SALW. They also anchored the local initiatives to control SALW in the local tribal structures and customary penal codes. While these mechanisms did not sufficiently involve women and youth in policy formulation, they illustrate the benefits of integrating key local security sector stakeholders for controlling local SALW proliferation and preventing misuse.

Bayda

Bayda is situated in Eastern Libya with a population of 220,000, and features an extensive administrative bureaucratic complex, built for the government including a parliament hall. Similar to Tobruk, local initiatives to control SALW emerged as a way to ensure local peace and involved both local authorities as well as key local military and security figures. The town saw the formation of powerful armed groups in the aftermath of the 2011 Libyan revolution. These groups' sponsors played a key role in forcefully confronting uncooperative armed groups that local authorities perceived as a threat. This was the case with the Islamist-leaning 17 February Security Brigade in 2014 when the two revolutionary brigades controlling the Bayda Local Council disbanded the Islamist brigade and collected their weapons via the Bayda Security Directorate. This was perceived as key to a relatively peaceful conclusion to what was a potentially dangerous escalation of violence. City leaders in Bayda city also applied pressure and lobbied the central government to support local disarmament efforts by providing funds and assistance to buy weapons from combatants in 2014–15.¹⁰

As in Tobruk, the main lesson learned from Bayda is that arms control initiatives become a more effective endeavour when local authorities and the local security and military structures enjoy considerable levels of trust and legitimacy within the local community, and are able to co-govern and ensure stability amidst of national instability.

Lessons learned

The three case studies offer insights into how Libyans have spontaneously sought to tackle SALW proliferation despite the continuing volatile context. The initiatives put in place are consistent overall with the outcomes that emerged from the 2018 Libyan National Conference Process, which involved inclusive and bottom-up consultations aimed at finding 'elements of consensus in Libya's fragmented political landscape on key issues related to the conflict and the future of the Libyan state' (HD Center 2018: 9). The conference's

⁸ For instance, it fell short of fulfilling the economic development aspirations contained in the declaration due to a lack of financial resources and competing economic visions and interests among the main players.

⁹ To read the full text of the Security and Stability of Libya Initiative (in Arabic), please click here <https://bit.ly/2Jfze3R>.

¹⁰ For more information and analysis on local governance related issues in Bayda, please refer to Eljarh's chapter in the EU Delegation to Libya's publication on Libyan Local Governance Case Studies (EU Delegation to Libya 2017: 90–104).

final report includes a series of recommendations related to national priorities, the distribution of power and resources, national reconciliation, and security and defence, including a series of actions for dealing with the prevalence of SALW and heavy weapons (HD Center 2018: 34–35).

The short case studies presented here therefore confirm the continuing relevance of bottom up SALW control in Libya for broader reconciliation efforts. Community leaders in Az-Zāwiyah stressed the multidimensional nature of the problem, and therefore promoted a wide array of measures encompassing socio-economic interventions (the integration of armed group members into state institutions or other sectors), transitional justice (promoting national reconciliation and countering narratives of revenge), and weapons-specific initiatives (regulations criminalizing the unauthorized acquisition and trafficking of arms; requiring licenses for SALW ownership and restricting the ownership and use of SALW to the military and law enforcement, programmes to improve the surveillance and control over stockpiles by the Libyan ministry of defence, voluntary SALW surrender and buy back campaigns).

While the Az-Zāwiyah approach is comprehensive, its success was also constrained by the ongoing insecurity prevailing at the national level, which hampered the mobilisation of key players and resources to carry out the important socio-economic and reintegration components of the plan. On the other hand, community leaders in Tobruk and Bayda anchored their response to their unique local and historical contexts and power structures. While the resulting security-centered actions contributed to stability in the short term, the process was also less inclusive, notably with respect to young people and women, and therefore possibly less effective in the long run.

International actors must not forget the importance of tackling the proliferation of SALW when seeking to support peacebuilding at the community level in Libya. International guidelines recognise the relevance of engaging with armed groups on weapons and ammunition management issues, for building trust and preventing further proliferation and misuse of SALW.¹¹ Research in other cities, such as Misrata, has concluded that tackling the proliferation of these weapons was arguably the top priority for improving local governance (EU Delegation to Libya 2017: 75). In this regard, the organic approaches developed in Az-Zāwiyah, Bayda, and Tobruk underscore the willingness of a range of community leaders to engage on the issue, as well as their limitations in terms of resources—both financial and technical. The international community can play an important support role by sharing lessons learned and good practices implemented in other difficult situations, by providing the technical assistance so that interventions meet the minimum international standards, as well as by helping ensure the sustainability of the socio-economic components of these initiatives. International actors also need to play their part in avoiding the uncoordinated duplication of programmes and, importantly, in stemming new weapons flows through the stricter enforcement of the UN arms embargo.

In the long run, community-based initiatives to control SALW will require the existence of an ambitious security sector reform agenda that is accompanied by consensus on the political future of the country.¹² Local actors at the community and city levels have much to offer in terms of experience and resolve for supporting such a national project and identifying the required context-specific measures to counter arms proliferation. The governing Libyan authorities need to adopt a people-first security doctrine as a first step in this endeavour. Only by appreciating the complementary roles of top-down and bottom-up frameworks for arms control can Libyans be properly positioned to tackle the challenges they encounter and build a lasting and meaningful peace.

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¹¹ See 'Unit 10' in de Tessières (2018: 47–48).

¹² Between June and August 2013, the Small Arms Survey partnered with the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and conducted a nationwide household survey (1,500 Libyan households) to research the Libyan population's views and experiences of armed violence, security and justice providers, and firearms circulation (Florquin et al. 2014). It was notable then that most respondents seemed to condition arms control to the building of solid state security institutions that can guarantee people's security, which is a condition that remains in existence as of today. For more analysis, please visit <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/G-Issue-briefs/SAS-SANA-IB1-Searching-for-Stability-Libya.pdf>.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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