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SPECIAL REPORT

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Libyan Television and Its Influence on the Security Sector

About the Authors

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Contents

Summary

- The Libyan security landscape is broadly divided into two camps: revolutionary-Islamist and institutionalist-conservative. The country's resurgent media sector is split along similar lines. This polarization and related partisan reporting reinforce polarization among security sector actors and the public and could further undermine established peace in Libya.

- Media narratives dominating Libya's security sector revolve around three axes: whether actors are legal or illegal, whether they supported or opposed the 2011 revolution, and whether they are correct or deviant Muslims. Security actors use these narratives to build their legitimacy.

- Of the three channels monitored, Libya Al Ahrar was the most balanced but displayed a cautiously anti-Islamist, institutionalist agenda. Al Nabaa was mainstream Islamist and a staunch supporter of revolutionary units, such as the Libyan Shield Force. Libya Awalan was strongly anti-Islamist, conservative, and a vocal supporter of Haftar's actions in Benghazi.

- Libyans have little trust in any of the main regional and Libyan national television channels, including the national broadcaster, Libya Al Wataniyah, which fares no better than the private channels.

- Channels with clear anti-Islamist credentials were more trusted than their pro-Islamist counterparts, reflecting the general anti-Islamist sentiment among Libyans today.

- Channels advance their opinion on the legality of security actors, have thus contributed to related consumer perceptions about those actors, and in turn play an important role in how the security situation in Libya continues to unfold.

Introduction

The security landscape in Libya is a confusing array of institutional actors—army and police—and noninstitutional actors—independent brigades and Ansar Al Sharia—that compete over

the monopoly on the legal use of violence, which they use in their claim for legitimacy. All of these actors have led Libya to civil war. Generally operating under a legal mandate from competent but often competing state institutions, they have each developed narratives to legitimize their actions and delegitimize their competitors. Three aspects of legitimacy appear to bolster these narratives: defining the boundaries between legal or illegal actors, between supporters or opponents of the 2011 revolution, and between correct practices of Islam.

Libya's mainstream and social media—the majority of which outlets have adopted strongly partisan stances—are key tools for many security actors in demonstrating their positions. During and after the revolution, international outlets became popular for their timely and balanced reporting.[1] However, national survey and paired interviews conducted across Libya indicate that in this time of intensified conflict, the country's mainstream media are increasingly accessed and influential. Even though few outlets are highly trusted (see table 1), the Libyan media have been able to shape and reinforce popular opinions of security actors and has helped the actors build their constituencies.

To further investigate the media's role in shaping these narratives, the research team chose three popular nongovernmental Libyan satellite television channels—Libya Al Ahrar, Al Nabaa, and Libya Awalan—and conducted a ten-day monitoring exercise in May 2014.[2] Comparing the narratives and language used in each channel's daily news program regarding four security topics—the General National Congress (GNC), revolutionary brigades, Ansar Al Sharia, and retired Libyan national army general Khalifa Haftar—suggested the political and religious orientations of each channel. In parallel, a nationwide survey of 2,340 Libyans gathered attitudes among the public on these key security topics, consumption patterns of the selected channels, and perceptions of the legitimacy of the identified security actors.

Politicization of the Media

As Libya's political and security landscape frayed over the course of 2014, the alignment of media to particular brigades further inflamed divisions. This landscape is sharply divided between a revolutionary-Islamist camp and an institutionalist-conservative one. The first is a heterogeneous alliance between revolutionary constituencies (such as Misrata or Zawiya) and cross-national Islamist parties (such as the Justice and Construction Party). The second is made up of remnants of the Gadhafi regime's security institutions and tribal groups (such as the Warfallah or the Warshefana) eager to preserve their historic privileges and resistant to any significant political change.

The media sector is split along similar lines and is similarly polarized. After the Gadhafi regime fell, Libya witnessed a proliferation of media outlets, which was perceived as one of the first achievements of the new era. However, instead of stimulating debates on political and social issues, television in particular has become a mouthpiece for political parties, tribes, and cities.[3] This evolution, however, has taken some time to become clear.[4] A lack of journalistic professionalism has helped the unveiling process, and it is common to see journalists or presenters taking sides.[5]

Three types of channels occupy the television landscape today. The first are relatively popular local ones—such as Misrata, Tobactes, Benghazi, and Fezzan[6]—usually linked to local political and military forces. In November 2013, for example, Misrata TV urged Misratan fighters to mobilize and gather at the city's western gate to move toward Tripoli.[7] The second type of channels are national ones that have progressively turned to openly supporting competing political actors. Most national channels have a clear political identity, and three are privately owned—Libya Al Ahrar, Al Nabaa, and Libya Awalan.[8] The third type are regional channels, primarily Saudi Al Arabiya and Qatari Al Jazeera. Al Jazeera considers the Libyan

Shield Force (LSF) and the Libyan Revolutionaries Operations Room (LROR) to be the Libyan National Army, and Zintani Brigades and retired Libyan National Army General Haftar's forces to be illegal groups attempting a coup against the democratic institutions. Meanwhile, Al Arabiya considers Haftar to be a representative of the Libyan National Army and strenuously promotes Operation Dignity.[9]

Orientations of National Channels

The political and religious orientations of Libya Al Ahrar, Al Nabaa, and Libya Awalan were inferred from their response to four key topics: the GNC, revolutionary brigades, Ansar Al Sharia, and Haftar (see table 1).[10]

Table 1. Orientations of Leading National Television Channels

	GNC	Revolutionary brigades	Ansar Al Sharia	Haftar	Summary
Libya Al Ahrar	critical	critical, considers them legal entities	critical, accuses it of role in assassination campaign, gives airtime	cautiously supportive, gives space for opposing voices	cautiously anti-Islamist, institutional
Al Nabaa	supportive	supportive, considers them legal entities	prefers to focus instead on revolutionary brigades	regards Haftar as a renegade general	mainstream Islamist
Libya Awalan	strongly critical	strongly critical, considers them illegal entities	strongly critical, considers them khawarij and terrorists	strongly supportive, regards Haftar as leader of Libyan Army	strongly anti-Islamist, conservative

This media monitoring was conducted when Haftar launched Operation Dignity in eastern Libya and the conflict began to intensify. Since then, although media narratives have further radicalized, the May 2014 trends remain relevant. The greatest shift has been seen in Libya Al Ahrar, which broadcasts from Qatar. Allegedly under pressure from its host country, Al Ahrar's editorial line shifted in the summer of 2014 from being relatively balanced to espousing the cause of the revolutionary-Islamist camp. Protesting this shift, its president, Mahmud Shamman, and a number of its prominent journalists submitted their resignations in August 2014.[11] Today the channel is considered part of the revolutionary-Islamist camp's propaganda toolbox. The channel appears to have lost much of its prestige since then, however, and its website has tellingly not been maintained since May 2014.

GNC

Libya Al Ahrar tended to be highly critical of the GNC, questioned the compliance of its extended mandate with the 2011 constitutional declaration, and covered anti-GNC demonstrations extensively in May 2014. However, it also distinguished itself from other anti-Islamist channels with its more rational discourse and interviews of personalities from across the political spectrum.

Al Nabaa cautiously promoted the idea that the GNC and the army chief of staff are Libya's "legal caretakers in the absence of any other legitimate bodies." It described opposition to the GNC as lacking legitimacy and legality.

Libya Awalan considered the GNC illegal. After February 7, 2014, its broadcasting screen featured a logo referring to the number of days since the expiry of the GNC mandate. Its narratives referred to the GNC as "a source of partisanship," remarked on the GNC's "dominance by the Muslim Brothers, who divided the country," and accused the Al Wafa and Justice and Construction parliamentary blocs of "supporting terrorism."

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Revolutionary Brigades

Libya Al Ahrar questioned the actions of revolutionary brigades and their ability to fulfill the mandate handed down to them from the GNC and the army chief of staff. A presenter who questioned the Benghazi LSF figurehead Ziad Bal'am asked, "Seeing that you represent the state in Benghazi and receive salaries from the government, what have you done so far to offer protection to Benghazi inhabitants?" Al Ahrar did not question the legality of revolutionary actors but did interrogate their ideas, actions, and errors. The channel used the same questioning techniques with anti-Islamist brigades such as Al Qa'qa' or Al Sawa'iq.

Al Nabaa consistently presented revolutionary brigades operating under the army chief of staff or the Ministry of Interior as legal entities but presented groups supporting Haftar or Zintani militias as illegal. It also stressed the revolutionary credentials of the brigades, consistently reminding viewers of their "heroic" role during the revolution. Last, it promoted the revolutionaries' successful policing and peacekeeping roles in the aftermath of the revolution. When describing the clashes between Haftar and revolutionary-Islamist brigades in Benghazi, the channel often referred to the role of the February 17th brigade and Libya Shield 7 in securing Al Kufra, recalling and emphasizing Shield 7's legitimacy as a capable policing body.

Libya Awalan adopted a simplistic approach, labeling brigades as illegal, reporting that they had obtained their mandate from an illegal body (the GNC) and that—compared with the National Army and National Police—they were undisciplined, and systematically conflating them with Ansar Al Sharia in Benghazi, thus implying their involvement in terrorist activities.

Ansar Al Sharia

Libya Al Ahrar avoided any public and direct accusation of involvement in terrorism or illegal actions. However, it did openly question the Ansar Al Sharia's role in the assassination campaign in eastern Libya. Al Ahrar hosted Mohammed Al Zahawi, head of Ansar Al Sharia, and did not hesitate to ask about the movement's alleged terrorist activities.[12] It was on Libya Al Ahrar that Mahmud al Barasi, member of Ansar Al Sharia's shura council, first publically excommunicated the government, the National Army, and the National Police in November 2013.

Al Nabaa described the clashes between Haftar and revolutionary-Islamist brigades in Benghazi uniquely. It generally avoided referring to Ansar Al Sharia, downgraded its role in the ongoing struggle, and reduced the conflict to legal revolutionary brigades versus an outlaw ex-general. It would often refer to those involved in fighting on the side of the revolutionaries as "the youth" or "the guys," effectively humanizing them. In removing explicit reference to Ansar Al Sharia, it implied that the conflict in Benghazi did not involve radical elements. Moreover, in referring to Haftar's forces as outlaws, it identified those forces as illegal and thus illegitimate.

Libya Awalan used two main narratives in its attempt to disqualify Ansar Al Sharia. The first was to deprive it of religious legitimacy, using the term *khawarij* that the Libyan League of Ulemas invoked when excommunicating the group.[13] Second, it deprived Ansar Al Sharia of political legitimacy by labeling its members as extremists and terrorists and publically accusing them of being behind the assassination campaign in Benghazi.

Khalifa Haftar

Libya Al Ahrar tended to praise the actions of retired general Khalifa Haftar, considering them necessary to pacifying "the East against unidentified terrorist groups." It remains cautious about the legal ambiguity of Haftar's actions, however, and gave airtime to voices critical of Haftar. Unlike other anti-Islamist channels, Al Ahrar questions Haftar's personal political ambitions.

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Al Nabaa described Haftar's action as an illegal attempted coup. Al Nabaa also focuses on the civilian and material casualties caused by the shelling of Benghazi by Haftar's forces. One presenter compared the current situation to February 2011, when the city was being attacked by Gadhafi.

Libya Awalan again adopted a simplistic discourse, describing Haftar as "the legal commander of [the] National Army" and referring to his appointment as "the Head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces" created in May 2014.[14] Libya Awalan praised Operation Dignity, describing it as an antiterrorist campaign aimed at "cleaning Benghazi from the Brotherhood and the Khawarij."
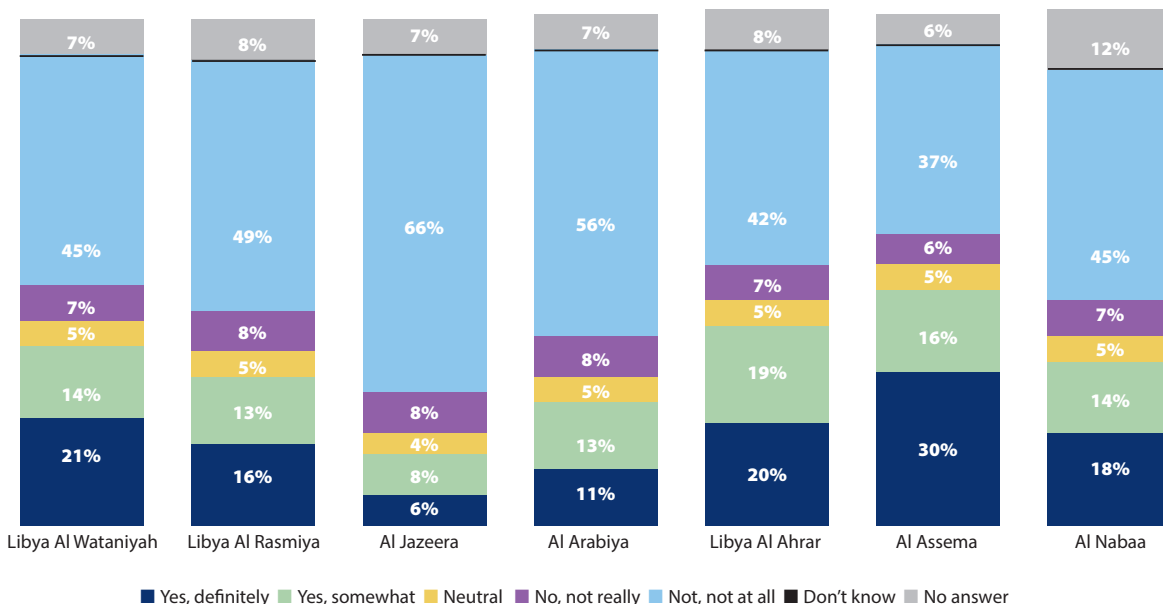
Trust in Channels

Survey respondents were asked about their trust in the main regional and Libyan national television channels. Overall, they expressed very negative opinions about all of them, including the national public broadcaster, Al Wataniyah, which fared no better than private-sector channels. These opinions support findings from other media studies that Libyans perceive many outlets to have nefarious "agendas."[15]

Two observations are worth emphasizing. First, regional television channels enjoyed particularly low levels of trust: Only 6 percent of respondents fully trust Al Jazeera and only 11 percent fully trust Al Arabiya. These levels clearly indicate both the channels' limited influence and a general suspicion among the public about political agendas. The second observation is that trust in channels varied with national sentiment: Channels having clear anti-Islamist credentials were more trusted than pro-Islamist channels (compare Al Assema's 30 percent with Al Nabaa's 18 percent), a reflection of the general anti-Islamist sentiment among Libyans today. Al Wataniyah, which has been under revolutionary-Islamist influence for some time, and which was shut down for this reason by the Al Thini government in August 2014, had the best ratings of the Islamist channels, though 21 percent is still quite poor for a national public broadcaster.

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Figure 1. Trust in Channels*

	Libya Al Wataniyah	Libya Al Rasmiya	Al Jazeera	Al Arabiya	Libya Al Ahrar	Al Assema	Al Nabaa
No answer	7%	8%	7%	7%	8%	6%	12%
Not, not at all	45%	49%	66%	56%	42%	37%	45%
No, not really	7%	8%	8%	8%	7%	6%	7%
Neutral	5%	5%	4%	5%	5%	5%	5%
Yes, somewhat	14%	13%	8%	13%	19%	16%	14%
Yes, definitely	21%	16%	6%	11%	20%	30%	18%

■ Yes, definitely ■ Yes, somewhat ■ Neutral ■ No, not really ■ Not, not at all ■ Don't know ■ No answer
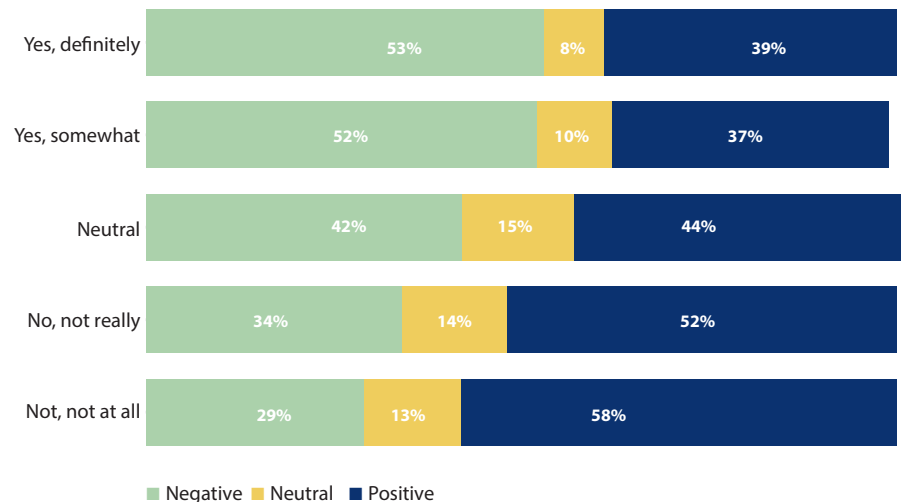
Note: 2,256 people were surveyed.

The survey also assessed the impact of television channels on perceptions of the legitimacy of the main security actors. Figure 2 presents the strong correlation between trust in Al Jazeera and opposition to Haftar's becoming the new army chief of staff. Just 39 percent of those who favored Haftar as the army chief of staff trusted Al Jazeera. Among Haftar opponents, however, trust in the Qatari channel increased to 58 percent. A similar result was seen with Al Nabaa but could only be weakly identified with anti-Islamist channel Al Arabiya, suggesting that it is a rather less divisive channel. Notably, 67 percent of those who did not have an opinion about Haftar had a good opinion about Al Jazeera, an indicator of the limits of influence of the channel's narrative. Overall, correlations between perceptions of security groups' legitimacy and perceptions of the different channels are strong and insightful:[16]

- a significant positive correlation between perceptions of Al Assema and support for forces operating under Haftar
- a significant negative correlation between perceptions of Al Jazeera and support for forces operating under Haftar's command
- a significant positive correlation between perceptions of Al Assema and support for Al Qa'qa'
- a significant positive correlation between perceptions of Al Nabaa and support for Islamist-leaning brigades, such as LSF and LROR

Figure 2. Trust in Al Jazeera*

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Yes, definitely	53%	8%	39%
Yes, somewhat	52%	10%	37%
Neutral	42%	15%	44%
No, not really	34%	14%	52%
Not, not at all	29%	13%	58%

■ Negative ■ Neutral ■ Positive

Note: 2,256 people were surveyed.

Conclusions

This research makes it clear that mainstream Libyan television channels played a substantial role in the early days of the ongoing conflict between the country's revolutionary-Islamist and the institutionalist-conservative camps. The media, by taking partisan positions and using specific narratives to describe security-related events, have helped shape the public perceptions of security and political actors, such as the GNC, retired Libyan national army general Khalifa Haftar, Ansar Al Sharia, and independent brigades.

In particular, channels have helped build perceptions of legal legitimacy among Libya's security actors, and correlations between trust in certain channels and perceptions of actors' legal legitimacy are statistically significant. Despite continual and occasionally substantial changes in the media sector since the research was undertaken, these trends remain valid today.

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The partisan coverage of the conflict by mainstream Libyan television channels helps explain the dramatic polarization of public opinions over the clashes. These outlets are being transformed into propaganda tools, further boosting the civil strife in the country. This in turn is having an effect on media outlets generally, which are increasingly viewed as political and military arms and thus themselves become targets. Some security actors in Libya are justifying attacks on media outlets by blaming journalists' bias and influence in the political struggle.

Although the politicization of Libya's television channels may help increase audience shares in the short term, it likely also undermines their credibility in the long term, which is a particular concern for the national public broadcaster Libya Al Wataniyah.

This research was limited in duration and scope, yet the value of the approach, which combined qualitative comparative narrative assessments of daily news broadcasts with quantitative audience surveys, is clear. The analysis enabled outlets to be positioned fairly accurately on the revolutionary-Islamist and institutionalist-conservative spectrums and to be ranked in terms of popularity and trust with interesting results. It was seen, for example, that some channels previously supported by the international community had less balanced positions than donors had perhaps initially assessed.

Much more could be done to develop this approach into a robust research tool for media development programmers. First, it would be valuable to repeat the exercise more frequently to understand how shifts in the political-security landscape are reflected in the channels' narratives and audience perceptions. Second, the study could be valuably extended to include government channels such as Al Wataniyah or Al Rasmiyah and consider methods to include social media outlets.

Endnotes

Data provided for figures 1 and 2 were rounded to the nearest whole number, which may cause the total to be over or under 100 percent.

1. For general background information on the evolution of Libya's media landscape, see Altai Consulting, "A Rapid Assessment of Libya's Media Landscape," 2012, and "Libya Media Assessment: One Year Later," 2013.
2. Khalil and Hargreaves, "Perceptions of Security in Libya: Institutional and Revolutionary Actors," Peaceworks no. 108, U.S. Institute of Peace, April 2015.
3. For example, Al Dardanil is considered Bani Walid's local television channel, reportedly broadcasting from Damascus. It is often described as being the voice of the former regime.
4. In the 2013 Altai media assessment, it was still very difficult to identify political orientations of channels.
5. For example, in May 2014, an anchor on Libya Awalan celebrated the announcement of the start of Haftar's Operation Dignity on air, shouting "God is Great" several times.
6. Altai Consulting, "Libya Media" 39. For example, Misrata TV has a 34 percent audience preference in Misrata, compared with less than 5 percent elsewhere.
7. Clashes in the Gharghour neighborhood in Tripoli, between Shield 6 and local armed groups.
8. Libya Al Ahrar and Libya Awalan are highly influential: Al Ahrar was voted second most popular, with 40 percent (surpassed only by Al Wataniyah, a national broadcaster, with 56 percent), Awalan taking only 21 percent. Al Nabaa is a new channel. See Altai Consulting, "Libya Media," 40.
9. In February 2014, Haftar announced his plans for a military coup on Al Arabiya.
10. Al Assema, which was also studied, took a very similar line to Libya Awalan.
11. Al Wasat, "War and Audiovisual Landscape Chaos in Libya," August 23, 2014, www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/32809/ and www.libyaherald.com/2014/08/09/staff-quit-libya-ahrar-tv-accusing-it-of-anti-parliament-bias/.
12. The killing of Al Zahawi was reported lately but is yet to be confirmed.
13. In Sunni creed, those who are excommunicated from the Nation of Islam are known as khawarij. Libyan League of Ulema, "Invitation to Ansar Al l-Sharia," May 28, 2014, www.alwasat.ly/ar/mobile/article?articleid=49984.
14. This council does not have any legal mandate in Libya and can be seen as propaganda by pro-Haftar forces.
15. Altai Consulting, "Libya Media," 80.
16. All figures are Pearson's correlation coefficients between 0.205 and 0.254.

Of Related Interest

- *Media in Fragile Environments* by Andrew Robertson, Eran Fraenkel, Emrys Schoemaker, and Sheldon Himelfarb (USIP Press, 2011)

- *Perceptions of Security in Libya* by Naji Abou-Khalil and Laurence Hargreaves (Peaceworks, April 2015)

- *Security and Justice in Postrevolution Libya* by Fiona Mangan and Christina Murtaugh (Peaceworks, September 2014)

- *Security Sector Transformation in the Arab Awakening* by Donald J. Planty (Special Report, September 2012)

- *Evaluating Media Interventions in Conflict Countries* by Amelia Arsenault, Sheldon Himelfarb, and Susan Abbott (Peaceworks, October 2011)

- *Stakeholders of Libya's February 17 Revolution* by Susanne Tarkowski Tempelhof and Manal Omar (Special Report, December 2011)

- *Blogs and Bullets: New Media in Contentious Politics* by Sean Aday, Henry Farrell, Marc Lynch, John Sides, John Kelly, and Ethan Zuckerman (Peaceworks, September 2010)

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