



Addressing the Rise of Libya's Madkhali-Salafis

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Principal Findings

What's new? Madkhali-Salafis, followers of an ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim doctrine originating in Saudi Arabia, have gained great influence across Libya, including in key armed groups and religious institutions. Although they helped fight ISIS and provide security, their rise is divisive and could complicate efforts to resolve the Libyan conflict.

Why does it matter? From civil society advocates to Sufis to religious minorities, many are alarmed by the Madkhalis' clout, intolerant actions and anti-democratic agenda. Their ideology also sets them against political Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood, echoing wider regional divides. Their presence in powerful armed groups makes them central actors in Libya's conflict.

What should be done? Actors working toward a political solution to the Libyan conflict should ensure that, in rebuilding the security apparatus, they prevent security forces' politicisation through any kind of ideological influence. And Madkhalis should commit to respecting the freedom of religious minorities and civil society groups and the neutrality of religious institutions.

Executive Summary

Madkhali-Salafis (“Madkhalis” for short), followers of an ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim doctrine, are growing in influence across Libya since the fall of the Qadhafi regime in 2011. Present in major armed groups in both east and west, they wield considerable military clout and, as a result, political leverage over both post-2014 rival governments. Their rise within the security sector follows a common pattern among other Libyan warring factions, both Islamist and non-Islamist, which have sought to expand their influence by penetrating the security apparatus and converting its members to their worldview. Now, their anti-democratic agenda and rejection of Libya’s religious and cultural diversity has triggered growing apprehension from many Libyans. Libyan political actors negotiating a solution to the conflict should seek to build a professional security apparatus shielded from ideological influence of any kind. For their part, Madkhalis should publicly commit to respecting religious freedom.

Madkhalis form an important contingent in the eastern military forces currently attacking the seat of government in Tripoli but their rise and the tensions this is causing in Libya is by no means the conflict’s principal fault line. Many others play a significant part: the two governments’ rival claims to legitimacy, failed attempts to unite the country’s divided military, rifts among international stakeholders, a deadlocked UN-backed political process and local actors’ strong economic incentives in prolonging the crisis. In other words, the Madkhalis are just one factor. But they have been overlooked, at least in part due to their opaqueness and the ambiguity of their political objectives. Yet their growing role adds another layer to an already multi-dimensional conflict.

As elsewhere in the Arab world, the Madkhali current – named after Sheikh Rabee al-Madkhali, a Saudi theologian whose followers adhere to an ultra-conservative but politically quietist ideology – has grown rapidly in Libya in recent years. Tolerated by Muammar al-Qadhafi prior to the 2011 uprising because of its political subservience and only a minor actor immediately after the regime’s fall, it has gained a wide following since the current conflict began in 2014 and has entrenched itself in key institutions. In Tripoli, Madkhali fighters are well-represented in major armed groups that have worked with the internationally-recognised Government of National Accord to bring security to the capital. They control or wield significant influence over some of its key facilities and institutions, for which they provide protection. In the east, they are an important component of the Libyan National Army (LNA), playing a key role in the battle to retake Benghazi under the command of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, and currently moving westward with the LNA to wrest control of Tripoli from the UN-led government of Faiez Serraj and allied armed groups.

Madkhalis have also taken control of important religious institutions, using them to spread their sometimes divisive beliefs. Although not directly engaged in electoral politics because of their rejection of democracy, they nevertheless constitute an important lobby for a greater role for religion in public life, including a maximalist application of Sharia, which they want reflected in any future constitution. So far, they have not rejected the state court system (which Islamist factions in Libya, in-

cluding ISIS and al-Qaeda aligned groups, have in the past). Likewise, although some of their members have called for greater gender segregation, so far the movement has not attempted a blanket enforcement of such demands. Yet the group's secretive behaviour and its readiness to embrace tactical cooperation especially with paramilitary forces in both eastern and western Libya raises questions about its long-term goals.

The Madkhali current also enjoys – or enjoyed – a certain popularity among some Libyans, who approve of their perceived integrity and, in some places, for helping restore order. Their particular brand of ideology – fiercely opposed to both non-violent political Islamists and violent jihadist groups – has made them allies in the fight against the Islamic State, but also deepened one of the divides in the Libyan conflict between supporters and opponents of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. In fact, their ideological opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood aligns them on one side of a wider regional divide that has prolonged the conflict. Unlike some of the revolutionary groups that emerged in 2011, they have not sought to punish or marginalise former Qadhafi loyalists. Their ideology allows them to transcend tribal, ethnic and regional divides, and they are perhaps unique in having built a presence across the country, allying with local forces on different sides of the conflict.

For their critics, however, the Madkhalis are extremists who are implementing an agenda to transform society. They see the group's verbal, at times physical, attacks on a range of targets – secularists, Islamists, members of religious minorities such as the Ibadis, followers of mystic traditions such as Sufism, women and youth activists – and use of state religious institutions to spread its ultra-conservative dogma as a strategy to impose new cultural and societal norms. Combined with Madkhalis' growing military clout and influence over the main political hubs and security forces, and a lack of clarity as to their ultimate ambitions, their rapid rise since 2011 is becoming a widespread source of anxiety.

Adding to this, Madkhali has openly backed Haftar, a deeply divisive figure who has called for elections but whose opponents accuse of wanting to establish a military dictatorship, raising the prospect that Madkhalis currently aligned with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord, which Haftar opposes, might switch camps. Suspicion that Madkhali's religious edicts are prompted by Saudi Arabia's own political and security prerogatives has raised the fear that the current is serving a foreign agenda. Riyadh's apparent backing for the Haftar-led offensive on Tripoli in early April have reinforced such fears.

Those seeking to bring Libyan parties to the negotiating table to reach a political solution to the conflict should take into account not only the Madkhalis' unique position but also the potential for conflict that their rise creates. They have an important presence in what are likely to be the building blocks of any future integrated security forces, and they hold strong views on the constitutional and electoral processes that Libyan actors and the UN currently are preparing. At a minimum, Libyan and external actors should:

- ❑ Ensure that security arrangements currently being devised – whether those the UN-backed effort in Tripoli that the Government of National Accord (GNA) is seeking to implement, or unilateral security decisions carried out by the LNA and the east-based government that supports it, or future efforts to revive what are

currently deadlocked initiatives to unite Libya's fragmented security forces – tackle the problem posed by the ideological influence of any armed group in the security apparatus. This should include provisions that individuals be integrated into security bodies according to their qualifications rather than ideological or other ties, and that the rival governments discourage religious activism in the security apparatus, be it by Madkhalis or others.

- ❑ Assert the principle that official religious institutions be tolerant of religious freedom and diversity in their legal and administrative actions. The rival governments, as well as any unity government that eventually emerges, should repudiate any edict that would endanger Libya's religious minorities and affirm that all religious currents and sects deserve protection and tolerance – rights that should be constitutionally guaranteed.
- ❑ Press the GNA and its rival in eastern Libya to allow civil society organisations and actors to operate safely without harassment or threats, and not tolerate any possible future attempt to encroach on the judicial apparatus or pursue more militant gender segregation.
- ❑ Encourage Saudi Arabia to restrain its religious authorities and individuals based in its territory from inciting or participating in violence in Libya.

The absence of a functioning state and the ongoing turf war among competing political groups and military factions admittedly makes such efforts difficult. Eight years of conflict have splintered the social fabric and undermined the trust in the state apparatus, opening space for groups with religious-based ideologies to gain ground. Some have openly engaged in violence or inserted themselves in security forces. The failure to contain these groups is one more factor that could undermine progress toward Libya's stabilisation, and indeed could help reverse it, or even thrust the country into a new deadly war.

Tripoli/Brussels, 25 April 2019

Addressing the Rise of Libya's Madkhali-Salafis

I. Introduction

Ultra-conservative Muslims known as Salafis – a revivalist movement advocating a return to the practices of early Islam – have gained prominence in Libya since the fall of Muammar al-Qadhafi's regime in 2011, wielding influence in armed groups, official security and religious institutions, and at times seeking to impose their views on society. One particular subset of Salafis, adherents of a school of thought established by Saudi theologian Sheikh Rabee al-Madkhali, has made a particularly rapid ascent and now holds considerable political, military and social influence in both western and eastern Libya.

Some officials in Libya's rival governments – the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli and the Interim Government (which is not recognised internationally) in eastern Libya – defend the Madkhali-Salafis (henceforth referred to as Madkhalis) as reliable security partners and dismiss their religious ideology as harmless. However, their rise is alarming their political opponents, particularly Islamist factions, as well as religious minorities and civil society actors, adding another fracture line to an already layered and complex conflict.¹ Madkhalis' prominence in some of the most important armed groups, including ones critical to Tripoli and Benghazi's stability, are also complicating an already fragmented political and military scene.

Although Madkhalis were active under Qadhafi's regime, which they generally supported, the 2011 uprising and subsequent breakdown of state authority gave them unprecedented opportunities to organise and gain positions of influence. So did the conflict that broke out in 2014 and the division of already fragile state institutions between competing governments in the east and west. Madkhalis have found allies among the principal forces in the conflict, including the Libyan National Army (LNA), a military coalition based in eastern Libya headed by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and allied to the Interim Government also based in eastern Libya, and the internationally-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in the west, which came to power following the December 2015 signing of the Libyan Political Agreement. Both governments and military coalitions have relied on armed groups with a Mad-

¹ Many Libyans (as elsewhere in the Arab world) refer to followers of Madkhali as "Madkhalis" (*madkhaliyeen*) or, more generically, their movement as "Madkhalism" (*mudakhala*), but these terms are generally rejected by those they designate as derogatory. In particular, they reject the idea that they are adherents of "Madkhalism", which they view as an attempt to depict them as a cult of personality, rather than Salafis in the sense of people who seek to follow the example of Prophet Muhammad and his companions. In this report, we use the term "Madkhali-Salafis" to refer to Salafis who adopt Madkhali's views and those of like-minded scholars (which we call Madkhali-Salafism), in part to reflect that there are Salafis who reject them, but we also refer to them, more simply, as "Madkhalis". Section II offers a brief overview of the differences between different strands of Salafism and the origins of Madkhali-Salafism.

khali component.² The LNA offensive launched in early April 2019 to capture Tripoli and the ensuing battle for the control of the capital could, if successful, open more space for them to operate.³

Given their growing influence across Libya, and their readiness to use it to further an ideological agenda many Libyans see as intolerant and repressive, Madkhalis increasingly find themselves under scrutiny. In some respects, they have behaved no worse than other armed groups, and their societal agenda is not unique. Islamists, especially jihadist groups such as Ansar al-Sharia and the Islamic State, have also restricted a range of public freedoms, and other religious factions with ties to armed groups have supported the demolition of Sufi shrines, which they consider heterodox. But what sets the Madkhalis apart is that they are firmly rooted in the security apparatus with the active support of authorities in power as Islamist groups, be they political Islamist or Salafi-jihadist, appear to be losing ground. Another contentious issue is their association with Saudi Arabia, which has opened them to the charge that they seek to impose a foreign agenda.

Research for this report was principally conducted over the course of 2018 and early 2019 in major Libyan cities, including Tripoli and Benghazi, as well as abroad, through interviews with Libyan adherents and opponents of Madkhali-Salafism, government officials, politicians, businesspeople, civil society activists, foreign experts and diplomats. Some Libyan interviewees did not want to be quoted by name when discussing the rise of Madkhalis due to fears of repercussions, including arrest by security forces with ties to this current, a sign of the movement's perceived power and lack of tolerance for criticism.

² For background on the post-2014 conflict in Libya and on the emergence of rival Libyan governments, see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°157, *Libya: Getting Geneva Right*, 26 February 2015; and Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°170, *The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset*, 4 November 2016.

³ See Crisis Group Alert, "Averting a Full-Blown War in Libya", 10 April 2019. Fighters with Madkhali sympathies are among the LNA forces that were deployed to Tripoli in April 2019, and security units affiliated with the Tripoli government also contain Madkhali elements. If they were to join forces, the Madkhalis could become a powerful component in a unified security apparatus.

II. The Madkhali-Salafi trend in Libya

A. Wahhabi Origins

Salafism is a religious current that calls for the emulation of the *salaf al-salih* (pious ancestors), the first adherents of Islam who accompanied Prophet Muhammad, as related by the *hadith* (the sayings and actions attributed to the prophet, which collectively amount to his *sunna*, or path, and complement the Quran by elaborating on points of religious doctrine and practical matters). Although Salafism emerged in Egypt in the nineteenth century as an anti-colonial Muslim revivalist movement, its theological roots lie with the eighteenth-century Wahhabism that originated in the Najd region of the Arabian Peninsula, in what is today Saudi Arabia.⁴

In its contemporary incarnation, it is generally divided into three broad sub-trends: scripturalist or “scientific” Salafism, a politically quietist current that opposes political participation and contestation; reformist Salafism, which is more politically engaged and can take a revolutionary form; and jihadist Salafism of the kind embraced by al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁵ Much of the contemporary schism in Salafism emerged in Saudi Arabia toward the end of the 1980s, particularly over the kingdom’s foreign policy.

Madkhali-Salafism – named after Sheikh Rabee Ibn Hadi Umayr al-Madkhali, an octogenarian Saudi scholar who chaired the Sunna Studies department of the Islamic University of Medina in the 1990s – has emerged in the last three decades as a major current in the first category of “scientific Salafism”.⁶ Madkhali’s followers have spread far and wide across the Arab world, in part due to the support of well-funded Saudi religious charities and access to satellite television channels.⁷

⁴ Salafism has multiple connotations and a historic lineage dating back to the religious debates of the Abbasid era (750-1258), the Hanbali school of jurisprudence in Sunnism founded by Sheikh Ibn Hanbal (d. 855), and in particular the works of the medieval scholar Sheikh Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1327). These ideas were revived by the scholar Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703-1792), the founder of Wahhabism, an ultra-conservative religious movement. Ibn Wahhab, who came from the Najd region of the Arabian Peninsula, formed a pact with Muhammad Ibn Saud, the leader of a Najd tribe, offering political support in exchange for his backing of Wahhabi doctrine. This alliance is a cornerstone of the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where Wahhabism is now the dominant religious doctrine. Although some of the reformist religious and nationalist leaders of the Arab world in the nineteenth and twentieth century sometimes called themselves Salafis, in its contemporary sense Salafism is most frequently associated with Wahhabism and ultra-conservatism. See Bernard Rougier (ed.), *Qu'est-ce que le salafisme ?* (Paris, 2008).

⁵ Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005.

⁶ Madkhali maintains a website where his fatwas are published: www.rabee.net. He has authored over 30 books on Islamic science and hadith (religious text) methodology. A full bibliography of his work in Arabic is available in Khalid b. Dahhwi al-Zafiri, *thabt muallafat al-shaykh Rabi b. Hadi al-Madkhali (Ascertained Publications of Shaykh Rabee b. Hadi al-Madkhali)* and can be downloaded online at bit.ly/2W4B37W (last accessed 17 March 2019). An English translation of the 1984 book that brought him to fame is *The methodology of the prophets in calling to Allah: that is the way of wisdom and intelligence* (Birmingham, UK: Al-Hidaayah, 1997). An online translation of the latter is available at bit.ly/2TeEeYQ (last accessed 17 March 2019).

⁷ Outside Saudi Arabia, the Muslim World League has traditionally been the Kingdom’s primary vehicle for promoting its interpretations of Sunni Islam – specifically through the funding, training and construction of mosques and Islamic institutions. However, with the advent of social media,

Madkhali rose to prominence in Saudi Arabia in the context of the 1990-1991 Gulf war as a staunch defender of the Saudi royal family's decision to allow U.S. troops on Saudi soil. More generally, he has defended the concept of *ta'at wali al amr* (obedience to the ruler regardless of how just or pious he is), making him an often-cited example of a "court scholar".⁸ The cornerstone of Madkhali-Salafi ideology, however, is the belief that religious authority in the Muslim world should be based on scholars' virtues and behaviour (a classic Islamic methodology known as *ilm al jarh wa taadil*, the science of disparagement and praise); Madkhali's followers hold that he is the most virtuous scholar in present times.⁹

This self-styled religious investiture is the instrument with which Madkhali combats contemporary religious thinkers or political currents that he deems divisive or corruptive of the Muslim nation (*umma*). His main targets are more revolutionary Salafi movements, particularly those of a Salafi-jihadist orientation, as well as political Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁰ He also rejects democracy as contrary to Islam; accordingly, clerics associated with the trend in Libya regularly preach against a democratic path.¹¹ His Saudi origins and once prominent role in the King-

many clerical opinions are distinct from state-sanctioned views and may even contradict official opinion.

⁸ See Stéphane Lacroix, *Les islamistes saoudiens, une insurrection manquée* (Paris, 2010). Although known for his call to obedience to ruling authorities, Madkhali did not formulate the principle of *ta'at wali al amr*, which a number of other Salafi groups follow. Crisis Group interview, Libyan religious scholar, Tunis, February 2019.

⁹ Madkhali's followers refer to him with the title of "flagbearer of the science of *al jarh wa taadil* in the present era" (*hamil rayat al jarh wa taadil fihadha al asr*). As quietist Salafis, Madkhalis assume that Islam is transcendent and universal, and condemn all separate currents, associations, political movements and parties as divisive, transgressive and corruptive of morals. *Jarh wa taadil* is the methodology that Madkhalis use to condemn a person or a movement and it is implemented through some formal steps: listing their mistakes, admonition and then banning or exile of the disparaged (*majruh*) person or movement. Unlike some other groups they do not condemn their opponents to excommunication (*takfir*) and hence do not advocate killing them. An expert on Salafism said: "Although this peaceful method of combating deviation seems benign, since the punishment is ostracism, it is especially the public smear campaigns that the Madkhalis wage against their opponents that have made them notorious". Roel Meijer, "Politicising *Al-Jarh Wa-l-Ta'dil*: Rabi' B. Hadi Al-Madkhali and the transnational battle for religious authority", in Nicolet Boekhoff-van der Voort, Kees Versteegh and Joas Wagemakers (eds), *The Transmission and Dynamics of the Textual Sources of Islam: essay in honor of Harald Motzki*, vol. 89 (Leiden, 2011), p. 383. Scholars from Islamist currents have criticised Madkhalis' methodology of disparagement on numerous occasions. See, for example, Aboo Hafs Ash-Shaamee, "A Summary of the Deviations of the Madaakhilah", available online at bit.ly/2FzMrSO (last accessed 29 March 2019).

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Madkhalis in Tripoli, Benghazi, Misrata. 2012-2018. A fatwa issued by the Madkhali-controlled Supreme Fatwa Committee in eastern Libya describes the Muslim Brotherhood as a "perverted" organisation of "infidels". See "ما هي أخطاء الإخوان المسلمين في العقيدة" ["What are the doctrinal mistakes of the Muslim Brotherhood?"], Supreme Fatwa Committee, at: www.aifta.net/archives/656. Madkhalis view the Muslim Brotherhood as the quintessence of "partisan-ship" (*firqa, hizbiyya*) and competition (*tanafus*) and as such as the source of fanaticism (*taassub*) and of all modern political deviations. From their point of view, the Muslim Brotherhood's main fault is that it gives priority to politics over purification of doctrine. Meijer, op. cit.

¹¹ See Rabee al-Madkhali, "التحذير من الفتن ومن الديمقراطية ومشتقاتها" ["Warning against strife and against democracy and its derivatives"], 4 March 2012, at: www.rabee.net/ar/articles.php?cat=8&id=228.

dom's religious establishment have prompted accusations that his sermons and edicts on Libya serve a foreign agenda.¹²

B. *Emergence in Libya*

When it first appeared in Libya in the 1990s, security services, alert for any signs of possible radicalism, treated Madkhali-Salafism with suspicion.¹³ The ideology was introduced by Libyans who had studied at Madkhali-linked institutions in Saudi Arabia and Yemen, or who had been exposed to Madkhali-Salafism while on pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. Several of the key figures in Libya's Madkhali movement today – including its most prominent preacher, Sheikh Abu Musab Majdi Hafala, mooted by some of his supporters as a possible future Grand Mufti (the top state-appointed religious position) – have attended religious colleges in Saudi Arabia and Yemen.¹⁴

After realising the advantages of a Salafi current that preached against political dissent, the Qadhafi regime allowed Madkhalism to expand. Madkhali's acolytes took over a number of existing mosques and opened new ones. They also ran centres where children learned to memorise the Quran, and distributed religious books and taped sermons imported from Saudi Arabia. Later, as Madkhali used satellite television and the internet to spread his doctrine beyond Saudi Arabia, he gained more followers in Libya.¹⁵

Over time, the Qadhafi regime also allowed Madkhali-Salafism to flourish as a counterweight to the influence of jihadist groups formed by Libyan veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In their sermons and literature, Madkhalis warned against both banned political Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadist groups opposed to Qadhafi's rule (although both the Brotherhood and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group – the most serious armed threat to the regime in the

¹² According to a Libyan critic, Madkhali's fatwas regarding Libya are informed by the position of the Saudi state: "Sheikh Rabee takes instructions from the Saudi intelligence, so his positions on Libya reflect those of Saudi Arabia itself. This is because the principle of *ta'at wali al amr* (obedience to the ruler) overrides everything else in his ideology". He added that for Madkhali, the *wali al amr* is the Saudi establishment, and that implementing his fatwas (religious rulings) is *mulzima* (compulsory) for Madkhalis, unlike for Islamist groups, which consider a fatwa as a guiding interpretation with no religious obligation attached. Crisis Group interview, former Libyan diplomat, Tunis, February 2019. A Benghazi resident with close contact to commanders of the Haftar-led Libyan National Army also pointed a finger at Saudi intelligence, and listed Saudi intelligence officers by name as those in charge of maintaining contact with Madkhalis in Libya. Crisis Group interview, Tunis, February 2019. But the issue is far from clear-cut, as several people interviewed in Benghazi said they doubted there are such direct ties. Furthermore, foreign experts on Salafism highlight that Rabee al-Madkhali's influence in Saudi Arabia has waned. See footnote 64.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, former Libyan security official, Tunis, March 2018.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, current and former associates of Majdi Hafala and other prominent Madkhali figures, Tunis, March-April 2018. According to several Libyans, Hafala's style of preaching resembles that of Saudi or Yemeni preachers, which has contributed to the allegations he is a foreigner. But Hafala is Libyan, and lives in the Tripoli neighbourhood of Suq al-Juma. Crisis Group interviews, Rome and Tunis, February 2019. Hafala, who is also known as Abu Musaab, maintains a Facebook page where he publishes his religious rulings: www.facebook.com/abu.mos3ab.magde.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, current and former Libyan security officials, Tunis, March-April 2018.

1990s – reached an accommodation with the regime later). Some within these groups believe Qadhafi placed Madkhalis in his security apparatus to help monitor mosques and other spaces for any sign of religiously inspired challenges to the regime.¹⁶

In the 2000s, Qadhafi's son Saadi began engaging with the Madkhali current, frequenting their mosques in Tripoli, seeking counsel from Madkhali clerics and growing the beard with shaved moustache typical of its adherents. This earned Madkhalis the nickname “*jamaat Saadi*” (Saadi's group) in the years leading up to the 2011 uprising.¹⁷ At that time Madkhali-Salafism made inroads in several poorer neighbourhoods of Tripoli – most notably Buslim, Hadhba and Souq al-Juma, the hometowns of several Madkhalis now prominent in the city's security apparatus – and Benghazi through *dawa* (proselytising) and charitable works. It also won adherents in Misrata, Libya's third-largest city, and smaller towns such as Zintan and al-Khoms in the west and Marj and al-Abyar in the east.¹⁸

During the first weeks of anti-regime protests in 2011, Madkhali clerics appeared on state television to denounce the demonstrations. Madkhali himself urged Libyans not to participate in what he cast as sedition against a lawful ruler.¹⁹ This inspired another nickname: Madkhalis became known as the “stay-at-home” group. In the latter stages of the uprising, however, some adherents – particularly in Tripoli after it fell to rebel forces – joined armed groups that eventually grew to become key players in the new disorder.²⁰

C. *After Qadhafi*

As of 2018, Libya's Madkhalis were estimated to number tens of thousands, making them the largest Salafi movement in the country.²¹ Its adherents tend to be men in their 20s and 30s, many of them drawn to an ideology that offers a way to transcend traditional norms related to tribe, ethnicity and class.²² Some Libyans, however, caution against overestimating their numbers, noting that the label of Madkhali is often used inappropriately to brand other Salafi groups that follow similar ideologies, but are not strictly speaking followers of this particular strain of Salafism.

In the months leading up to the first post-Qadhafi elections in July 2012, Madkhalis emerged to campaign against the polls, which they deemed un-Islamic, and to warn Libyans against political Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood and other

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, former Libyan Islamist Fighting Group and Muslim Brotherhood members, Tripoli, Benghazi, Tunis, 2012-2018.

¹⁷ See Anas el-Gomati, “Libya's Islamists and the 17 February Revolution”, in Larbi Sadiki (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization* (London, 2014).

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, current and former Libyan security officials, Tunis, March-April 2018.

¹⁹ See Rabee al-Madkhali, “كلمة عن الأحداث والمظاهرات والخروج على الحكام” [“A word about events, demonstrations and the ousting of rulers”], 21 February 2011, at: www.rabee.net/ar/articles.php?cat=11&id=285.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, current and former Libyan security officials, Tunis, March-April 2018.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, current and former security officials, former General Authority of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs officials, Tripoli and Tunis, March-April 2018.

²² Crisis Group interviews, security and religious officials, political figures and civil society actors from east, west and south Libya, Tunis, March-May 2018.

non-Madkhalis who were forming parties and running candidates.²³ They also established their own ad hoc “prevention of vice and promotion of virtue” groups in Tripoli and other cities, some of whose members were later subsumed into militias, including those that have dominated Tripoli since 2016.²⁴

In this same period, Madkhalis began to target Sufis actively, followers of a more ascetic strand of Islam that has a significant following in Libya. They were responsible for the destruction of the Sidi Abdul-Salam al-Asmar al-Fituri shrine and mosque in Zliten in August 2012 and are suspected of playing a role in subsequent attacks on other Sufi mosques and shrines in Tripoli, Benghazi and several other towns.²⁵ Islamist preachers also supported the demolition of Sufi shrines, and locals often mistakenly accused “al-Qaeda” militants of carrying out the attacks, which suggests that the active Madkhali role was not immediately discernible early on.²⁶

Nevertheless, the attacks raised the first concerns among Libya's intelligence services and the wider population about the readiness of Madkhalis to use force in pursuit of their agenda. According to an intelligence report leaked in 2017:

Talk about the military role of the Madkhalis in Libya coincided with the destruction and bombing of shrines in various areas of the country, quite early on after the fall of the Qadhafi regime. Eyewitnesses confirmed that the demolition of the shrines was conducted in a military fashion: those doing the destruction were escorted by military groups for protection and security.²⁷

Such was the Madkhalis' growing assertiveness from early 2012 onward that, in summer 2013, Ali Zeidan, then prime minister, raised his concern with senior Saudi officials. Zeidan recalled that Riyadh helped address the issue, saying: “We were concerned for several reasons, including the fact these Madkhalis were talking against

²³ In a recorded 2012 speech, Hafala told Salafis not to get involved in political life, saying that the best way to “do politics is to withdraw from politics”, and to concentrate on their religious studies instead. See www.safeshare.tv/w/oySHCDFyDw, accessed on 17 February 2019.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, current and former security officials, Tunis, March-May 2018.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, former imam of the Zliten mosque that was attacked, Tunis, February 2018. The former imam, who now lives abroad, said that Sheikh Rabee al-Madkhali issued a fatwa calling on his followers to destroy this specific shrine back in 2012. He was unable to produce the reported video of the fatwa, which is no longer available online. While there is no proof of their involvement in the subsequent destruction of other sites, most Libyans place the blame of these acts on them. See also “Libya: New Wave of Attacks Against Sufi Sites”, Human Rights Watch, 7 December 2017.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Libyan religious scholar, Tunis, February 2018.

²⁷ Libyan intelligence report dated March 2017, leaked to Crisis Group. (Original in Arabic.) Excerpts from this report surfaced on social media in 2017. In the case of the destruction of Sufi tombs in Tripoli's Othman Pasha al-Sagizli madrasa in late 2012, witnesses state that security forces that carried out the demolition were commanded by Abdel Rauf Kara, already an important Tripoli militia leader at the time but with no known link to the Madkhalis. On Kara's subsequent rise, see section III.b. Crisis Group interviews, Sufi teachers at the madrasa, Tripoli, 2013. An old man who worked in the Zliten mosque and shrine told Crisis Group a few days after the attack that “al-Qaeda came and destroyed the shrine”. Crisis Group interview, Zliten, September 2012. A teacher of the Othman Pasha madrasa, who denounced the attack on television, was killed in mysterious circumstances soon after, and a number of other teachers fled into exile. Crisis Group interviews, Sufi scholars, Tripoli, 2013.

democracy. I told the Saudis we don't want anyone using religion in this way. They told us they spoke to Rabee Madkhali about our concerns. They took it seriously".²⁸

Madkhali subsequently issued a fatwa allowing his followers in Libya to participate in national elections in February 2014 to select the 60-member committee tasked with drafting the post-Qadhafi constitution and vote "for the greater good".²⁹ The fatwa – something of a departure from Madkhali's views on elections in that it endorsed voting for the Constitutional Drafting Assembly – was driven by concern over the role sharia law should be given in the constitution and how that would affect future legislation, an issue that remains fundamental for the movement.³⁰

Libyans hold polarised views of Madkhalis. Many consider them alien to the country's social mores and traditions, which are based on more mainstream traditions, and see their influence in Libya's security, religious and social spheres as a threat. According to Aref al-Nayed, a former Libyan ambassador to the UAE and a Sufi scholar:

The Madkhalis tried to impede the freedom of other schools of Islam, especially the Maleki tradition. They demolished mausoleums, burned books, tried to restrict women's movements. There, I do not agree. I ask them to be humble enough to accept others, to coexist with them. And I think that the policy of using them militarily is dangerous. Any armed religious group ends up representing a danger.³¹

But others, including some officials in Libya's rival governments, have expressed support for the Madkhalis, either saying they appreciate their religious teaching or praising Madkhali-dominated armed groups as more disciplined and less corruptible, or both. An official at a state institution in Tripoli defended the work of Radaa, an armed group with a strong Madkhali component, in 2014, stating that "if it were not for their protection, government institutions might have fallen in the hands of Islamic State militants".³² Similarly a Tripoli businessman said:

I don't share their ideology but I don't see them as much of a problem compared with the jihadi groups. Right now they have a role to play in providing security and many people accept that. But there will be a reaction if they use that more forcefully to push their religious agenda.³³

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Ali Zeidan, Tunis, April 2018.

²⁹ This fatwa was posted on YouTube but is no longer available. It is cited in the March 2017 Libyan intelligence report.

³⁰ Madkhalis would later continue to campaign on the question of Sharia in the constitution, using their control of the General Authority of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs in eastern Libya to try to influence the Constitutional Drafting Assembly. Crisis Group interview, academic in eastern Libya close to Constitutional Drafting Assembly, Tunis, September 2018.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Aref al-Nayed, Tunis, February 2019. While accusing the Madkhalis of posing a threat to society, Nayed and many other Libyans who also oppose political Islamists caution against singling out the Madkhalis: from their point of view, the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi jihadists are equally divisive.

³² Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, 2018 (and again in April 2019).

³³ Crisis Group phone interview, March 2018. Similarly, a foreign consultant who regularly travels to Tripoli said he feels more secure under the protection of Radaa, the Madkhali-dominated armed group that also provides security for the Central Bank of Libya and the Government of National Accord: "Their ideology is not something I agree with and yes, it is a challenge, but when I visit Tripo-

Yet even the official in a state institution cited above expressed concerns about the turn the Madkhalis had taken from a protective force a few years ago to a significant armed actor with an intolerant ideology and unknown political ambitions.³⁴

Some officials with close ties to Madkhali groups completely brush off the problem, mainly because they do not view the Madkhalis as a coherent group with a well-defined transformative agenda. In the words of a minister of the east-based Interim Government:

The Madkhalis are not a problem for us. First of all, they are not an organisation (*tanzim*) as such, with a project and clear agenda. In this sense, they are very different from the Muslim Brotherhood and the jihadists, and that is why also in Qadhafi's time we sentenced to prison members of the Brotherhood and jihadists but not Salafis. Furthermore, these Salafi leaders in Libya today are very simple men. They don't have the intellectual heft and depth of knowledge that the other groups have. Barely any of them have higher degrees.³⁵

Similarly, a number of ordinary Libyans both in western and eastern Libya indicated they do not view Madkhalis as a concern.³⁶

Yet, the Madkhalis' growing sway is striking. They have gradually joined local policing forces and the prison system in several parts of the country, including its two most important cities, Tripoli and Benghazi. This has allowed them to influence important governance institutions and take control of the state institution that manages religious endowments and mosques (the *Awqaf*), through which they can wield significant influence over religious schools and communities.

li, I prefer to rely on these guys for security over anyone else. They are disciplined. That's the difference". Crisis Group interview, Malta, September 2018.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, 2018 (and again in April 2019). Likewise, other officials in state institutions were less enthusiastic, pointing at what they said was the threat emanating from religiously motivated political actors inside the security services. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Tripoli, 2019.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, minister of the east-based government, Benghazi, March 2019. Such views were also echoed by the head of the Benghazi police force. Crisis Group interview, Benghazi, March 2019.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, residents of Khoms, Tripoli, Benghazi, November 2018-March 2019.

III. The Madkhalis' Role in Armed Groups

The conflict that began in 2014 created new opportunities for Madkhalis to take up arms. In Benghazi, aggrieved by the assassinations of a number of Salafis active in the security sector in 2013-2014 by unknown gunmen,³⁷ they joined Operation Dignity, the coalition of military officers and local militias launched in May 2014 by Khalifa Haftar, a Qadhafi-era general who left the country and went into opposition in the 1980s, returning after 2011. The rhetoric of Haftar's campaign, casting his operation as a "war on terrorism" and describing the Muslim Brotherhood as "the main enemy", chimed with their longstanding animosity toward the Brotherhood and other Islamists.³⁸ From the outset, Haftar and his forces branded non-Islamist opponents and critics – including erstwhile allies and sometimes even foreign officials – as Brotherhood members or sympathisers, which meant his operation cast a wide net.

Fears that Haftar ultimately wanted to impose himself as military ruler, together with the outcome of the June 2014 parliamentary elections, which appeared to change the political tide in favour of his Operation Dignity, led a coalition of Islamist and non-Islamist armed groups hostile to Haftar and his allies to launch Operation Libya Dawn, routing Haftar-aligned militias from the capital. This shift created a space in which Tripoli-based armed groups with Madkhalis in their ranks could expand. Though many of their fellow Madkhalis in eastern Libya had joined Haftar at that time, those in Tripoli focused instead on building their influence inside institutions by joining some of the capital's largest militias and coexisting – albeit uneasily – with other armed groups with which they were otherwise at odds, politically and doctrinally.

A. *In the East*

The assassination of several Salafis in Benghazi from mid-2013 to early 2014 – in particular the murder of Colonel Kamal Bazaza, a well-known imam who also worked in the Benghazi Security Directorate – coupled with longstanding animus toward the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists prompted the city's Madkhalis to join Operation Dignity, Haftar's anti-Islamist campaign, soon after it launched in May 2014. Madkhali fighters were part of several units that participated in the campaign in Benghazi and its hinterland, including in the Saiqa special forces, but they also formed their own explicitly Salafi armed groups under the Operation Dignity umbrella.

³⁷ More than 500 people, mainly security officers, political activists and judges, were killed in a string of targeted assassinations in eastern Libya between 2012 and 2014. The perpetrators remain unknown. The killings are believed to have been motivated by a mix of revenge, score-settling, tribal feuds, religious disagreements and ordinary crime. However, many families of the victims point the finger at Islamist militants; others accuse Qadhafi loyalists of orchestrating the killings. See Hanan Salah, "Counting the Dead in Benghazi", *Foreign Policy*, 6 June 2014.

³⁸ See Khalid Mahmoud, "Khalifa Haftar pledges to 'purge' Libya of Muslim Brotherhood", *Asharq al-Awsat*, 20 May 2014. Asked whether he intended to completely "purge" the Brotherhood from Libyan territory, Haftar replied: "Yes, completely. I am not looking for reconciliation. There is only one enemy, and that is the Muslim Brotherhood, the malignant disease which is seeking to spread throughout the bones of the Arab world".

Eastern Madkhali armed groups joined Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) from 2014 onward – since early 2018 with the explicit encouragement of Madkhali himself, who issued a fatwa supporting Haftar – and have become key to his fighting strength.³⁹ Empowered as a result, Madkhali theologians now dominate the eastern branch of the General Authority of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, the state body that administers mosques.⁴⁰ The General Authority's Supreme Fatwa Committee has on occasion issued highly politicised religious rulings, including several related to the conflict, for example encouraging people to fight for the LNA against its enemies, whom it has depicted as "kharijites".⁴¹ The General Authority's assertiveness in attempting to impose its ideological agenda has brought it into conflict with Abdullah al-Thinni, the head of the unrecognised government allied with Haftar and also based in eastern Libya. In December 2018, Thinni attempted to curb the powers of the General Authority's director, accusing him of importing foreign ideologies harmful to social cohesion and national security.⁴²

While Haftar has tended to downplay their role – because it clashes with his attempts to portray himself as the leader of professional and legitimate army while presenting Operation Dignity as "anti-Islamist" to Libyans and Arab allies but "secular" to Westerners – Madkhalis who enlisted in Haftar's operation were commonly perceived to be the most dogged fighters. Supporters in eastern Libya often describe them as the "backbone" of that offensive or "Haftar's shock troops".⁴³ As a former Haftar adviser put it: "It was the Madkhalis who carried out the real fight for Haftar. They suffered huge casualties".⁴⁴ Another eastern Libyan figure noted that on some occasions the Madkhali fighters were deployed for operations that other fighters might not have joined for tribal reasons, saying: "The fact the Madkhalis are driven by ideology above tribal considerations meant they have been useful in situations

³⁹ See video recording of Madkhali's explicit encouragement to support Haftar in this speech dated 22 February 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HAYwsUtjF4, last accessed on 17 February 2019. Before then, Madkhali had maintained a more ambiguous position regarding which government in Libya his followers should support. In a recording from April 2016, only one month after the arrival of the UN-backed Government of National Accord, he told his followers to stay united and only support those who follow Islam and the implementation of sharia, but made no mention of which of the three rival governments in Libya they should obey. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bjR68rDGqU, last accessed on 17 February 2019. In this recording, his Libyan followers press him on whether that means they should follow the UN-backed government or the one appointed previously by Libya's pre-2014 parliament, the General National Congress (GNC), both of which, they say, claim to be supporting sharia. Madkhali replies: "I do not trust them [the UN-backed government]. Remain with those who want the application of a sharia-compliant constitution" – thereby implying, though not explicitly naming, the GNC-appointed government. He made no mention of Haftar or the east-based authority.

⁴⁰ Like many public institutions, the General Authority of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs has been divided into rival eastern and western branches since 2014.

⁴¹ Kharijites (*khawarij* in Arabic) represent a breakaway Muslim sect known for its use of violence and rigid doctrinal beliefs that emerged in the first century of the Islamic era. In its current iteration, the term *khawarij* is used to smear religious opponents (denoting that they have "broken away" from "the correct path") and, more specifically, jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS.

⁴² Statement issued by the office of Abdullah al-Thinni, 26 December 2018.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, European diplomats, Tunis, March 2018; Crisis Group interviews, Benghazi residents, Tunis, March 2018, and Benghazi, March 2019.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, former Haftar adviser, January 2018.

where regular military officers who joined Haftar's operation might be apprehensive due to tribal sensitivities".⁴⁵

Foremost among eastern Madkhali groups were the Tawhid Battalion, founded in Benghazi in the early stages of Operation Dignity, and another group led by Ashraf Maiar commonly known as the Salafi Brigade. Maiar was frequently photographed with Haftar and regularly received by Haftar's allies at the House of Representatives in the eastern town of Tobruk. In June 2017, the UN Panel of Experts on Libya noted that Salafi commanders in Haftar's coalition had publicly called for the execution of "apostates". The Panel also reported testimonies concerning a "secret section" at Qarnada prison in Shahhat, in eastern Libya, supervised by two members of Tawhid, where torture and beatings allegedly took place.⁴⁶ Tawhid spawned affiliates in Ajdabiya and Bayda before Haftar issued a decree in February 2016 disbanding the battalion, after which its members joined other formations, including a new unit called the 210 Brigade, whose social media accounts recurrently feature tributes to Madkhali.⁴⁷

The decision to disband Tawhid came after Benghazi residents began to raise questions over its long-term objectives and associates, and especially its ultra-conservative ideology.⁴⁸ As Haftar advanced in Benghazi from 2015 onward, Madkhalis took over mosques and religious institutions. Some residents even began calling them "another Ansar al-Sharia" – a reference to the Salafi-jihadist group that joined ranks with the anti-Haftar coalition known as the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council.⁴⁹ As one Benghazi resident put it: "We supported Haftar to get rid of Ansar and now we see these people empowered as a result. They are armed, they are hardline Salafi and they are trying to force their ideas on us. What is the difference between the two?"⁵⁰

Haftar's decision to dismantle Tawhid also followed growing concern among key military figures within his coalition about the role of the Madkhalis and the need to dilute Salafi influence in the LNA in general.⁵¹ Because of the way Haftar built his coalition from May 2014 onward, bringing together disgruntled army officers with tribal, Salafi or regional militias and armed civilian volunteers, the lines between regular and irregular fighters are often blurred. Despite Tawhid's disbanding, the

⁴⁵ Crisis Group Skype interview, analyst based in eastern Libya, January 2018. Given that Haftar's coalition hinged on support from a delicate balance of prominent eastern tribes, some operations targeting members of those tribes were considered sensitive in the region's overall tribal dynamic.

⁴⁶ See "Letter dated 1 June 2017 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council", UNSC S/2017/466, 1 June 2017. The Panel of Experts was established to assist the UN Security Council Libya Sanctions Committee in carrying out its mandate by providing reports and recommendations to the committee.

⁴⁷ See Facebook account of the Information Office of Brigade 210, www.facebook.com/-المكتب-1656572557936303-مشاة-البيّة-210-الكتيبة-210.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Benghazi residents, Tunis, March 2018.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Benghazi residents, Tunis, March 2018.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group Skype interview, Benghazi resident, February 2016.

⁵¹ According to a former Haftar adviser, key Operation Dignity commanders, including Wanis Bukhamada of the Saiqa special forces and Jamal Zahawi of the Zawiya Martyrs (21) Brigade, were particularly concerned about growing Madkhali influence. Crisis Group interview, January 2018.

Madkhalis maintained their influence within LNA circles, infiltrating several of the LNA's regular units and the wider security infrastructure in Benghazi.⁵²

One such Madkhali-dominated unit within the LNA is the Tariq Ibn Ziyad brigade. It came to public attention in February 2017 after releasing a video of the execution of a suspected ISIS fighter from Benghazi. In November 2017, a member of the brigade, Mohammed al-Fakri, was detained by other LNA members in Benghazi in connection with the apparent summary execution of 36 men in the LNA-controlled town of al-Abyar.⁵³ According to local media reports, one of those killed, allegedly because he was Sufi, was a 71-year-old religious figure, Sheikh Muftah al-Bakoosh al-Werfalli.⁵⁴ In March 2018, the brigade joined an operation Haftar launched in the Sebha region of southern Libya and participated in another offensive in southern Libya in January 2019, joining forces with local Madkhali-dominated armed groups.⁵⁵ It also took part in the battle for Derna, where fighting continued until February 2019.⁵⁶ In April 2019, Haftar's forces, fortified by some Madkhali groups, moved on Tripoli with the apparent aim to subdue local militias, remove the UN-backed government and grab power.

The influence of the Madkhali current within the LNA was also evident in the visit to Libya in early 2017 of Osama al-Otaibi, a Madkhali preacher from Saudi Arabia, at the invitation of the LNA General Command. Otaibi undertook a speaking tour across eastern Libya and was invited to visit Zintan by the LNA's western region commander, Idris Madi. His plans to give lectures in Tobruk – the eastern town where the House of Representatives is based – prompted protests by the local mayor and other residents.⁵⁷

⁵² Crisis Group interview, former Haftar adviser, January 2018. In March 2019, Benghazi-based officials claimed that some of the LNA's brigades' Salafi members had been arrested, suggesting that a policy reversal might be underway. Crisis Group interview, Benghazi-based municipal official, Benghazi, March 2019.

⁵³ See "Libya: Mass Extra-Judicial Execution", Human Rights Watch, 29 November 2017.

⁵⁴ See "After finding the corpse of the Sheikh of the [Sufi] confraternity... Sufis vow vengeance in retaliation for Sheikh Muftah al-Bakoosh", "بعد العثور على جثمان شيخ الطريقة... الصوفية تتوعد بالثأر", Libya Stand website, 29 October 2019 (last accessed 1 April 2019).

⁵⁵ "Operation Law Enforcement" began on 19 March 2018 after the expiry of a Haftar ultimatum demanding that foreign nationals leave southern Libya – an allusion to Chadian and Sudanese mercenaries. While the operation's professed objectives were to restore security in the south, Haftar sought to expand his influence into a strategically key region and rout Chadian or Darfuri fighters not aligned with his LNA.

⁵⁶ As in Benghazi, residents in Derna reported that Madkhalis took over mosques and removed literature to which they objected. Crisis Group email correspondence, Derna residents, October 2018. In early 2018, pro-LNA Madkhali cleric Abu Abdul Rahman al-Makki called for jihad against anti-Haftar armed groups controlling Derna in eastern Libya when he visited LNA forces then shelling the town. See video on Facebook page of the Ain Mara Martyrs Operations Room, 4 February 2018, at: www.facebook.com/381378748865684/videos/576575569346000.

⁵⁷ "No one can stop me", Otaibi told Libyan media, which also reported that he visited Tobruk under the protection of Aguila Saleh, speaker of the House of Representatives. During his visit, Otaibi drew attention for interviews he gave insisting the earth was flat and did not revolve around the sun. He also denounced the Libyan tradition of celebrating Mawlid, the Prophet Mohammed's birthday. See "ارغم معارضة الأمن والبلدية.. العتبيي يصل طبرق وسط حراسة مشددة", *Al-Wasat*, 14 February 2017, at: <http://alwasat.ly/news/libya/124686>.

The Madkhali-dominated Supreme Fatwa Committee in eastern Libya has publicly asked the LNA General Command and its chief of staff to allow their troops to grow beards, which have always been banned in the Libyan military.⁵⁸ It is notable how many members of the security apparatus in eastern Libya now sport the heavy beards with shaved moustaches favoured by Salafis. This has raised concerns over how much Madkhali ideology may have penetrated the LNA. As an academic in Benghazi put it: "This shows the influence of the Madkhalis in the security sphere. Beards were unheard of before in the Libyan army or police but now the atmosphere encourages it".⁵⁹

Madkhali has issued a number of fatwas relating to the Libyan conflict from Saudi Arabia; most of these revealed an agenda centred more on combating ideological enemies (especially Islamists) than on taking sides in the institutional conflict between the western and eastern authorities. In February 2015, he issued a fatwa forbidding participation in the battle between Haftar's troops and anti-Haftar forces based in western Libya, even as Salafis had joined Haftar's coalition. The following year, however, he issued another fatwa calling on all Salafis in Libya to counter the Benghazi Defence Brigades, an armed group formed by anti-Haftar military personnel and militiamen, including many Islamist veterans of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council.⁶⁰ The Benghazi Defence Brigades had the endorsement of the Tripoli-based Grand Mufti, al-Sadeq al-Gharyani, who is a fierce critic of Madkhali and his followers.

In another fatwa published on his own website in July 2017, Madkhali again referred to Benghazi and called on Salafis to repel the "aggression" of the Muslim Brotherhood, which he describes as "more dangerous to the Salafis than the Jews and the Christians".⁶¹ The 2016 fatwa was criticised by the Tripoli-based General Authority for Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, which accused Madkhali not only of incitement but also of misrepresenting the fighting in Benghazi.⁶² It was also denounced by the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood, which called on the Government of National Accord to raise what it described as "blatant interference that leads to infighting among Libyans" with Saudi authorities.⁶³

⁵⁸ See fatwa issued by the Supreme Fatwa Committee, at: www.aifta.net/archives/787.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group phone interview, Benghazi-based academic, September 2018.

⁶⁰ See "Rabee al-Madkhali يدعو إلى ثورة سلفية ضد الإخوان في ليبيا" ["Rabee al-Madkhali calls for a Salafi revolt against the Brotherhood in Libya"], *Libya al-Mustaqbal*, 10 July 2016. The YouTube video announcing this fatwa is no longer available.

⁶¹ See Rabee al-Madkhali, "نصيحة للمسلمين عموماً والسلفيين خاصة، في ليبيا وغيرها من البلاد الإسلامية" ["Advice for Muslims in general and Salafis in particular, in Libya and other Islamic countries"], 4 July 2017, at: www.rabee.net/ar/articles.php?cat=8&id=319.

⁶² See "بيان الهيئة العامة للأوقاف والشؤون الإنسانية بخصوص منشور الشيخ ربيع المدخلي حول تدخله في الشأن الليبي" ["Statement of the General Authority of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs regarding the publication of Sheikh Rabee al-Madkhali and his intervention in Libyan affairs"], Facebook, 11 July 2016, at: www.facebook.com/AwqafLibya/photos/a.545007992198220/1240189876013358/?type=3&theater.

⁶³ See "Statement from Libyan Muslim Brotherhood on Current Affairs", IkhwanWeb, 19 July 2016, at: www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=32600. The link between the Saudi state and individual clerics is rarely straightforward and can be difficult to ascertain. Religious bodies in Saudi Arabia fall under the regulation, guidance and patronage of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Proselytisation and Guidance. In practice, clerics operate with varying degrees of independence from officially

Madkhali's approach has evolved into a more open embrace of Haftar, particularly after Haftar's success in asserting his authority in eastern Libya. In early 2018, Madkhali's followers in Libya distributed an audio message in which their sheikh urged his supporters explicitly to unite behind Haftar.⁶⁴ In turn, Haftar began to publicly defend the Madkhalis as his allies, insisting – in foreign media interviews at least – that they believe in the authority of the state and respect democratically elected bodies.⁶⁵ Members of Haftar's inner circle also play down the issue when diplomats and activists have raised concerns about Madkhali attitudes toward religious minorities and civil society.⁶⁶ According to Fadel al-Deeb, Haftar's political adviser:

We are in a phase in which anybody who wants to fight with the Libyan National Army is welcome. We cannot say no to the Salafis, nor to the Amazigh [Berbers, many of whom belong to the Ibadi sect of Islam which Madkhalis consider apostates] or anybody else. As long as they respect military law and do not carry out religious preaching while in the army, they can join.⁶⁷

B. *In the West*

While Madkhalis are embedded in a number of smaller armed groups across western Libya, notably in Sabratha, Surman and Zawiya, as well as in many of the Counter-Crime Units (Mukafahat al-Jareema, usually part of the police under the interior ministry) in various towns, the most significant force in which Madkhalis play a pronounced role is the Special Deterrence Force (Quwat al-Radaa al-Khaasa, commonly

sanctioned interpretations of sharia. Within certain parameters, modern Saudi Arabia has tolerated a range of interpretations of Hanbali tradition, considered a mainstream school of Islamic thought. While an imperfect measure, a cleric's proximity to state institutions can be an indicator of his alignment with government and security authorities on certain issues. Madkhali has been closely associated with the Saudi state through his career. He headed the Faculty of Hadith at one of the Kingdom's premier government-funded institutions of religious thinking, the Islamic University of Medina. He was emblematic of a movement of clerics known as the al-Jami, who were among the first to criticise Saudi Arabia's so-called Sahwat (Awakening) Islamist movement. The al-Jami gained favour both among many in the ruling family, including with former Interior Ministry Prince Nayef, and were subsequently appointed to key posts within the religious establishment in the 1990s and 2000s. Madkhali personally gained a reputation as a quietist and staunch supporter of the al-Saud. But many scholars believe that Madkhali has become controversial in recent years and that his influence in Saudi Arabia has waned, becoming more of a transnational phenomenon without a real base in the Kingdom. For more information, see Stephen Lacroix, *Awakening Islam* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Nabil Mouline, *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia* (Hartford, CN, 2014); and Meijer, "Politicising Al-Jarh wa-l-Ta'dil", op. cit.

⁶⁴ See footnote 39 on Madkhali's explicit call to support Haftar.

⁶⁵ See Laurent De Saint Perier, "Khalifa Haftar: 'La Libye n'est pas encore mûre pour la démocratie'", *Jeune Afrique*, 5 February 2018. Asked about Salafis in the interview, Haftar said: "They are indeed our allies. They believe in the authority of the state, they respect the democratically elected bodies and they are the worst enemies of Daesh [Islamic State] and fanatical Islam".

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Tunis, March 2018. At a conference in Washington in May 2017 organised by the National Council on U.S.-Libya Relations, an advocacy group, Benghazi activist Zahra Langhi asked Abdelbaset Badri, a close Haftar associate and then Libyan ambassador to Saudi Arabia, about the growing influence of Madkhalis. Badri laughed and initially deflected the question but later replied, playing down concerns.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Benghazi, November 2018.

known as Radaa).⁶⁸ The unit, led by Abdel Rauf Kara, is nominally under the interior ministry's authority (although it functions autonomously in practice) and is one of the largest security formations in the capital. Radaa's Tripoli headquarters is located in Mitiga airport, but it operates smaller units elsewhere and has ambitions to open more branches nationwide.⁶⁹

Radaa largely presents itself as a policing force conducting operations against criminals, including human traffickers, arms smugglers, drug dealers and kidnapers. It also focuses heavily on counter-terrorism, detaining suspected ISIS and al-Qaeda members in its prison in the Mitiga complex where religious indoctrination takes place.⁷⁰ Many senior figures and foot soldiers within Radaa are dedicated Madkhalis, with some known to be particularly hardline and a few explicitly identified as students of Hafala.⁷¹ But Radaa also includes professional non-ideological security officers from the Qadhafi era, many of whom have enlisted since 2015.⁷²

Radaa's leader, Kara, is not Madkhali himself, but he is ultra-conservative (for instance, he does not meet with women) and follows Salafi dress codes. Religious scholars suggest he follows another quietist Salafi school of thought known as Albani, which predates Madkhalism.⁷³ High-ranking officers with Radaa forcefully deny that the group has any ideological outlook. As a senior officer put it following clashes in Tripoli in September 2018 (which some Radaa opponents cast explicitly as an effort to expel "ideological militias"):

People accuse us of being Madkhali, but there is no link. Kara is a simple moderate Muslim. What is Madkhalism anyway? It is a sheikh in the Gulf who issues legal opinions. It is an exaggeration to think that such a man has the ability to mobilise forces in Libya. We are not a militia; we are a force under the interior ministry. We are all officers with military ranking, including Kara who is a major.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ A Tripoli businessman argued that this was part of Radaa's strategy to expand its reach: "Radaa used the banner of the Counter-Crime Units to expand outside Tripoli. Through this it managed to set up in Sbea, Khoms, Sabrata and Wadi Rabia". Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, May 2018.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, Tripoli security official, Tunis, April 2018.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, interlocutors in contact with relatives of detainees, Tunis, March 2018. Radaa officials say the prison at Mitiga holds 500 ISIS militants, many of them foreign. Crisis Group interview, senior Radaa officers, Tripoli, October 2018. Concerns over the running of the prison prompted the Presidency Council to issue a decree in September 2018 establishing a committee to review the cases of detainees to determine "their detention status and its conformity with legal procedures".

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Libyan politician, Tripoli, November 2018.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, Radaa members and associates, Tripoli, 2015, and Tunis, 2018.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, religious scholar, Tunis, February 2018. The Albani movement follows the preaching of Albanian Islamic scholar Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani, who taught mostly in Syria and is the main theoriser of the idea of *ta'at wali al amr*.

⁷⁴ In a series of statements in September 2018, Misratan Salah Badi – a commander in the armed anti-GNA Al-Somood alliance – referred to the existence of "ideological militias" in Tripoli, with specific reference to Radaa as a "Madkhali" group, as one of the reasons his forces joined the mobilisation in and around the capital that month "المنصة تنشر رسالة صلاح بادي إلى سوق الجمعة" ["Al-Manassa publishes Salah al-Badi's letter to Suq al-Juma"], Al-Manassa website, <https://elmanassa.com/news/view/20341> (last accessed 9 April 2019). The mobilisation resulted in weeks of fighting and at least 115 deaths, mostly civilians. Badi was later sanctioned by the UN Security

There are signs, however, that the Madkhali current within Radaa is getting stronger, with some former members and associates complaining the force has become too ideologically driven.⁷⁵ Prominent figures from Libya's Sufi community have accused Radaa personnel of participating in attacks on Sufi mosques and shrines in Tripoli.⁷⁶ Radaa officers also arrested clerics and officials from the Tripoli-based Dar al-Iftaa (the state body that issues fatwas) and the General Authority of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, who are opposed to the Madkhali current. Radaa's pursuit of individuals linked to the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council and Benghazi Defence Brigades in Tripoli coincided with Madkhali's messaging about the need to deter groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood or the Tripoli Grand Mufti, al-Sadeq al-Gharyani.⁷⁷

Tensions between Tripoli's armed Madkhalis and Gharyani's circle – many of whom were already anxious over Madkhali control of a number of the city's mosques – escalated in late 2016 when Nader al-Omrani, a prominent member of Gharyani's Dar al-Iftaa who had publicly criticised the Madkhalis, disappeared following a series of tit-for-tat abductions.⁷⁸ A member of the committee established by the Tripoli-based government to investigate the case said: "Omrani, a respected and influential scholar, was a challenge to the Madkhalis. Unlike many others, he was not afraid to criticise them openly, whether in the mosque or on TV".⁷⁹

The following month, a video surfaced showing a man claiming to be Omrani's assassin (Omran's body was never recovered), who alleged that the Crime Fighting Apparatus, a sub-unit of Radaa known to have a strong Madkhali element, had killed him. "We wanted to kill the sheikh because he presented an ideology different from Salafi scholars and clerics, especially that of Rabee al-Madkhali", the man said, adding that he had acted on orders of prominent Egyptian Madkhali preacher Muham-

Council for his role in the violence. See www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1970/materials/summaries/individual/salah-badi. Crisis Group interview, senior Radaa officers, Tripoli, October 2018.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Tunis, May, 2018.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, members of the Sufi community, Tunis, May and September 2018. According to Human Rights Watch: "A religious scholar with ties to the Sufi community in Tripoli said it was the SDF [Special Deterrence Force], which had gained control of the neighbourhood, that intentionally damaged the 16th-century Sidi Abu Gharara Sufi mosque. On October 20, the SDF issued a statement denying responsibility and pledging to hold those responsible to account". See "Libya: New Wave of Attacks Against Sufi Sites", Human Rights Watch, 7 December 2017.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, individuals linked to the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council and Benghazi Defence Brigades, Tunis, March 2018.

⁷⁸ See "مداخلة فضيلة الشيخ د. نادر العمراني بخصوص الموقف من فتوى الشيخ ربيع المدخلي الداعية للقتال إلى جانب حفتر" ["Comment of His Eminence Sheikh Nader al-Omrani on the position emerging from the fatwa of Sheikh Rabee al-Madkhali"], video, Dar al-Iftaa Facebook page, 11 July 2016, at: www.facebook.com/IFTALibya/videos/1163447350372023.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, investigative committee member, August 2018.

mad Said Raslan.⁸⁰ Both Radaa and Raslan issued statements denying any connection to Omrani's disappearance and purported killing.⁸¹

On his satellite television channel, Ghariyani condemned the alleged killing and denounced Madkhalism as a manifestation of Saudi interference in Libya: "We want the Saudi Madkhali ideology to take its hands off the Libyan crisis. We know that the Madkhalis here in Libya are the ones who killed Omrani, because he is moderate in Islam and they are radicals".⁸² The Tripoli-based General Authority of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs subsequently barred eleven Madkhali imams from preaching in mosques in the city and banned religious literature linked to Madkhali and Raslan.⁸³

Perceptions that the Madkhali current is growing stronger within Radaa and in Tripoli more generally has fed clashes between Radaa and other armed groups, particularly those from the Tajoura neighbourhood close to Radaa's Meitiga base. Esa Mansour, a member of an armed group from Tajoura known as the 33rd Brigade that attacked Radaa's headquarters in January 2018, said:

They are no different from Islamic State. They take inspiration from a foreign ideology and this is unacceptable to us. They target Sufis and Ibadis. They are against elections, whereas we want a civil democratic state. If this emirate of Radaa is still around in a year, you will see a war against them.⁸⁴

Radaa officials say their opponents, who have staged attacks on their base in Mitiga, are interested only in releasing detainees they are holding in their prison, claiming, "Their problem is with the terrorists we hold here. We have about 500 ISIS members. We consider these terrorists, while they consider them revolutionaries [*thuwwar*]"⁸⁵. When armed clashes erupted in Tripoli in late August 2018, drawing in Radaa and other forces aligned with the Government of National Accord, there were reports of coordination between Radaa's Madkhali elements and their fellow Madkhalis in other western towns, including Surman and Sabratha.⁸⁶ Some of the claims underpinning these reports appear exaggerated, pointing to a tendency among those vying with Radaa for power to highlight its Madkhali component as a scarecrow when convenient.

⁸⁰ Raslan, a former Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood member, is now one of the group's leading critics and one of Rabee al-Madkhali's more influential followers in the Islamic world.

⁸¹ See Moutaz Ali, "Man confesses to Omrani murder, links to Radaa alleged", *Libya Herald*, 21 November 2016, at: www.libyaherald.com/2016/11/21/man-confesses-to-omrani-murder-links-to-radaa-alleged.

⁸² See "Murder of Fatwa House cleric ignites ire in Tripoli", *Libyan Express*, 26 November 2016, at: www.libyanexpress.com/murder-of-fatwa-house-cleric-ignites-ire-in-tripoli.

⁸³ See Abdulkader Assad, "Tripoli Awqaf: Madkhali preachers not allowed to give religious speeches at mosques", *Libya Observer*, 24 November 2016, at: www.libyaobserver.ly/news/tripoli-awqaf-madkhali-preachers-not-allowed-give-religious-speeches-mosques.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Esa Mansour, 33rd Brigade member, Tripoli, May 2018.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Radaa officers, Tripoli, October 2018.

⁸⁶ These reports, most of which circulated on social media, included claims that armed Madkhali groups from several towns had moved toward Tripoli to aid Radaa. More credibly sourced reports suggested that Radaa had transferred detainees via helicopter from Mitiga to Surman, a town located between Sabratha and Zawiya in western Libya, out of concern the prison could be stormed. Crisis Group interviews, security officials, August and September 2018.

Some supporters of the armed groups fighting Radaa and its allies in August and September 2018 framed their offensive as partly aimed at pushing back against Madkhali influence in the city and western Libya in general, suggesting that they see this anti-Madkhali approach as having broad appeal.⁸⁷ But the clashes also appeared to rally some Madkhali elements in Tripoli. Heavily armed gunmen wearing masks posted a video on social media announcing themselves as the “Tripoli Protection Force” and declaring the launch of “Operation Badr” against what they described as “apostate criminals and Kharijites” – language similar to that used by Madkhalis fighting for Haftar in eastern Libya.⁸⁸

Anti-Madkhali factions in western Libya accuse the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord and its Presidency Council, both headed by Faiez Serraj, of supporting and empowering Madkhali-aligned security forces ever since the GNA established itself in Tripoli in early 2016.⁸⁹ Such backing increased and became more explicit in May 2018, when the Presidency Council approved Decree No. 555, which renamed Radaa as the Deterrence Unit for the Fight against Organised Crime and Terrorism (*Jihaz al-Radaa li-Mukafaha al-Jarima al-Munazzama wa al-Irhab*) and granted it a nationwide remit.⁹⁰ This decree gave Radaa sweeping new powers, including of arrest, detention and surveillance. After Libyan and international actors, including human rights groups, raised concerns, Serraj sent the decree to the interior ministry for review, but it appears to have been implemented in its original form.⁹¹

A Misrata politician, expressing a common fear that the informal power of Madkhali militias is undermining institutions, said:

Serraj and [Central Bank of Libya governor Seddik] al-Kebir enjoy Kara's protection, but in the long term this is dangerous because he [Kara] is against the state and the nation. The arrangement the government has with Kara undermines the judiciary system and plays with the political system. Kara considers Serraj as working for them and under their orders. This is flawed and dangerous. Radaa is a cancer feeding off the failure of the state.⁹²

Concerns over increasing Madkhali influence within the machinery of the state have also grown within institutions that use Radaa forces for security. A senior official in one such institution said:

⁸⁷ Crisis Group phone interviews, individuals linked to the armed groups fighting Radaa at the time, August and September 2018.

⁸⁸ The video was widely shared, including by journalist Mohammad Abdusamee on Twitter, at: twitter.com/Mohammed_abdusa/status/1043120500636037121.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Tunis, August and September 2018. Faiez Serraj is head of the Presidency Council (PC) of the internationally-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli. The PC is supposed to be a nine-person power-sharing body (four of whom have resigned or frozen their participation in PC meetings), but Serraj signs off on many of the decisions and regulations passed in the name of the Presidency Council, without consulting other PC members.

⁹⁰ Decision of the Presidency Council of the Government of National Accord N°. 555 of 2018, 7 May 2018.

⁹¹ See “Libya: Decree integrating Radaa forces into a new security apparatus overlooks need for accountability”, Amnesty International, 21 June 2018.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Misratan politician, Misrata, October 2018.

We initially saw a lot of good in them. They appeared disciplined, a potent security force that could deliver. But we are increasingly uneasy. We have become suspicious of the hardline ideological element within Radaa and how much they have managed to get inside the system. They are dangerous in that sense. But the question is what are the alternatives? If we don't deal with them, what happens?⁹³

C. *A National Network?*

While Madkhali influence is concentrated in Tripoli and Benghazi, it has also expanded into other cities, towns and villages, including in peripheral areas. In addition to the Madkhalis studied within Counter-Crime Units and other official security forces, distinctly Madkhali armed groups play key roles in several towns, including Sirte, Kufra and Sabratha (where the heavily Madkhali al-Wadi Brigade, which has ties with Haftar's LNA, gained ascendance following clashes between rival groups in September 2017). "The Madkhalis are everywhere in Libya to one degree or another and they recruit each other", observed a Tripoli academic.⁹⁴

Qadhafi's hometown of Sirte had a Madkhali presence before the 2011 uprising that ran several mosques and Quran memorisation centres. In August 2015, Khalid bin Rajab al-Ferjani, a prominent local preacher, was killed by ISIS after he publicly criticised the group as it took control of the city.⁹⁵ His assassination triggered an attempted popular uprising, which ISIS brutally quashed. Several of those who fled Sirte, including Ferjani's brother, later formed the 604th Infantry Battalion with the support of fellow Madkhalis in other groups, including Radaa in Tripoli. The 604th Battalion joined the Misrata-led alliance known as al-Bunyan al-Marsous formed to drive ISIS from Sirte, but its distinctly ideological character drew Madkhali fighters from across western Libya. Many within the al-Bunyan al-Marsous coalition were wary of the 604th Battalion for the same reason.⁹⁶ The 604th Battalion remains an important player in Sirte today, where it is presenting itself – like Radaa in Tripoli – as a policing force, and has also opened new mosques and religious schools.

Madkhali influence likewise has grown in the south-eastern oasis town of Kufra, which has seen recurrent fighting since 2011 between Arabs of the Zwaya tribe (dominant in the area) and the Tebu minority (whose homeland ranges across southern Libya and northern Chad). Subul al-Salam, a local Madkhali armed group affiliated with the LNA, appears to have bridged that divide and contains within its ranks both Zwaya and Tebu fighters – an example of how Salafi ideology can trump tribal and ethnic loyalties. Subul al-Salam also has links with Madkhalis in Radaa in Tripoli.⁹⁷

In December 2017, members of Subul al-Salam were accused of desecrating the funerary shrine of Sayyid Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Sanussi, a key figure in the Sanussi Sufi religious order, the most important in Libya, which was headquartered in

⁹³ Crisis Group electronic interview, February 2019.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group phone interview, Tripoli academic, August 2018.

⁹⁵ See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°178, *How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb*, 24 July 2017.

⁹⁶ Some observed that the battalion was keen to commandeer mosques in areas liberated from ISIS and also appeared to have access to external funding. Crisis Group phone interviews, members of Bunyan al-Marsous, 2016.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group online interviews, Kufra residents, May 2018.

Kufra in late 19th century. Vehicles used in the attack reportedly featured LNA insignia, mimicking other Madkhali raids on Sufi mosques and shrines elsewhere in Libya.⁹⁸ Residents blamed the prominent Madkhali preacher Hafala for inciting the attack.⁹⁹ Hafala, who is usually based between Tripoli and Surman in western Libya, had visited Kufra to give a series of lectures, during which he railed against democracy, civil society and Sufism.¹⁰⁰ The desecration of the Senussi shrine was denounced by the Government of National Accord and the Dar al-Iftaa, which claimed “[Madkhalis] are being sent to Libya by Saudi Arabia in order to destabilise the country and abort the revolution”.¹⁰¹

The nature of the relationship between Madkhalis based in the east and their ideological brethren in western Libya is difficult to ascertain, particularly as there is no national-level governmental structure or unified army and police forces; many groups cluster around charismatic local preachers or militia leaders, even if they share a common loyalty to Madkhali and his disciples. At present, the Madkhali-dominated armed groups – while aligned with opposing factions, whether the Government of National Accord or the LNA and the Bayda-based government in the east – have avoided conflict with each other, possibly a strategy aimed at ensuring they can continue to expand influence across the country. According to the UN Panel of Experts on Libya, they have been exchanging information on individuals suspected of affiliation with terrorist organisations.¹⁰²

Anxiety over the growing reach of Madkhali-Salafism has elevated tensions in several cities and towns, sometimes resulting in armed confrontations between Madkhali-dominated factions and their opponents. A senior GNA security official said:

We have already seen some [tensions] but there is a bigger clash coming. In the east, it will be between the Madkhalis and the military personnel [under Haftar's command] who earlier joined forces with them because they had a common cause. In the west, it is likely to be a reaction from wider society against their agenda.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ This claim circulated on Libyan social media networks following the attack.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group online interviews, Kufra residents, May 2018.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Kufra residents, Tunis, February 2018.

¹⁰¹ See "بيان دار الإفتاء بخصوص نبش القبور في الكفرة، واقتحام مسجد عبد الله بن عمر رضي الله عنهما في طرابلس" [“Dar al-Iftaa statement on the desecration of tombs in Kufra and the storming of Abdallah bin Omar mosque”], Dar al-Iftaa Facebook page, 2 January 2018, at: www.facebook.com/IFTALibya/posts/1698199093563510.

¹⁰² The UN Panel of Experts on Libya has noted the growing influence of Madkhali-Salafism within the security sphere in east and west Libya in several reports. See “Letter dated 1 June 2017 from the Panel of Experts on Libya established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) addressed to the President of the Security Council”, UNSC S/2017/466, 1 June 2017. An interim report written by the Panel in 2018 – which was not made public, but leaked – noted: “Salafi-Madkhali groups are specialising in the control of detention centres and intelligence services. They support different political factions but have been collaborating and exchanging information on individuals suspected of affiliation with terrorist organisations”. The Panel also noted reports of human rights abuses by such groups against individuals displaced from Benghazi, families with members belonging to “revolutionary or Islamist armed groups” and Sufi scholars and followers. It adds: “The anti-terrorist narrative developed by these groups is used to capture financial and political support provided by the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the LNA, and to gain international legitimacy”.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, GNA security official, Geneva, April 2018.

As Haftar's forces converge on Tripoli, the question is whether the Madkhali component of Radaa will switch sides to join their Madkhali brethren within the LNA. Unified, they will constitute an even more powerful group, especially if Haftar prevails over his enemies in Tripoli and sets about rebuilding the country's security apparatus.

IV. The Madkhalis' Societal and Ideological Agenda

Key to the Libyan debate about the rise of Madkhalis is the question of how the current may evolve, with the present environment in Libya possibly encouraging ambitions well beyond the ideology's ostensibly quietist roots. This prospect alarms several senior figures within Libya's wider security sector, with some considering Madkhali-Salafism a key challenge to the country's stabilisation, both now and in the future.¹⁰⁴ A former senior official in the transitional government put in place after the fall of the Qadhafi regime said:

It is the pernicious nature of the Madkhalis that is most concerning. Not only are they deeply involved in the security sector, but they also have a strong grip on the country's religious space in terms of widespread control of mosques and other institutions. The Madkhalis' success in gaining such power and influence within the security, religious and social spheres in a relatively short period of time shows they are unlike any other current we have seen since 2011. That and the lack of clarity about their long-term goals should worry us.¹⁰⁵

This reflects wider concern about the socio-cultural changes Madkhalis have sought to bring about, particularly in eastern Libya, through their control of formal institutions and campaigns of intimidation.¹⁰⁶

A. Control of Religious Institutions

The political divide that emerged in mid-2014 resulted in competing governments in east and west Libya, a rupture that persists despite the December 2015 Libyan Political Agreement and the establishment of the Government of National Accord in Tripoli. One consequence of this divide has been the creation of a number of parallel state institutions based in eastern Libya duplicating those affiliated with the Tripoli-based government. For Madkhalis, control of religious institutions has been a priority, particularly as the western Libyan official religious establishment was dominated (at least until late 2018) by their ideological rivals. That the Dar al-Iftaa in Tripoli is headed by Ghariyani, who is close to several non-Madkhali revolutionary groups as well as the Muslim Brotherhood, is one important point of contention.¹⁰⁷

When rival governments emerged in 2014, the eastern government established its own General Authority of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs (commonly known as the Awqaf) and under it a Supreme Fatwa Committee. These were counterparts to the Awqaf and Dar al-Iftaa in Tripoli.¹⁰⁸ Over time, as links developed between

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, GNA security official and Western security personnel, Geneva and Tunis, April 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, former senior transitional government official, Tunis, September 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, civil society activists from Tripoli and Benghazi, by phone and in Tunis, February-June 2018.

¹⁰⁷ The official website of the Madkhali-dominated General Authority of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs in eastern Libya, www.aifta.net, features a number of fatwas denouncing Ghariyani.

¹⁰⁸ In November 2014, the House of Representatives in Tobruk voted to dismiss al-Sadeq al-Ghariyani as Grand Mufti and dissolve the Dar al-Iftaa in Tripoli. Yet this had no practical effect.

Haftar and the Madkhalis, individuals close to the movement were propelled to key posts in these institutions, giving them unprecedented influence within mosques and religious institutions, including local branches of the ministry of religious endowments across eastern Libya.¹⁰⁹ As a Benghazi resident put it:

In Benghazi they control all the mosques now, and Rabee al-Madkhali's literature is everywhere to the exclusion of work by other scholars, particularly those they disagree with. In their sermons they denounce the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists but also Sufis, secularists, liberals and the whole idea of democracy and pluralism.¹¹⁰

The Madkhalis appear to have the upper hand in their turf war to control religious institutions in Tripoli since late 2018. While Ghariyani, whose often belligerent rhetoric and ultra-conservative views on gender segregation have proved controversial, remains head of Dar al-Iftaa, his allies among armed groups are in retreat and he spends most of his time outside Libya, albeit maintaining a profile through his satellite television channel, al-Tanasuh, and social media. Even before Ghariyani's influence began to wane, Madkhalis had been steadily gaining control of a large number of the capital's mosques, a former senior religious official said, adding that many regional branches of the Tripoli-based Awqaf are also under their control in towns where they have a strong presence. He added: "I would say a majority of Tripoli's mosques are now under Madkhali influence. Their growing influence is a problem because they believe in only one way. They don't accept many of our traditional ways in Libya, and this creates dangerous tensions".¹¹¹

In late 2018, the Madkhalis scored a major victory when they persuaded Faiez Serraj, head of the Tripoli-based GNA, to appoint Mohamed Abbani, a preacher widely considered sympathetic to the Madkhali current, as head of the Tripoli-based Awqaf, replacing Abbas Ghadi, who was close to Ghariyani. Serraj reportedly was forced to bow to Madkhali pressure when they threatened to retaliate after the Tripoli Awqaf authorised Sufi communities to hold public celebrations marking the *mawlid*, a popular holiday commemorating the Prophet Mohammed's birthday, in November 2018.¹¹² Madkhalis oppose Sufi mawlid celebrations, considering them un-Islamic.

Following his appointment, Abbani issued permits to several Madkhali preachers, allowing them to deliver sermons and engage in other religious activities across the country.¹¹³ Abbani has also sought to replace the heads of Awqaf branches across

¹⁰⁹ Mohamed Eljarh, a researcher based in eastern Libya, expressed alarm on his Twitter account about the nature of the sermons delivered by Madkhali preachers at mosques in the region: "I attended 1 of the sermons & witnessed extreme attack on ISIS, MB, Liberals, seculars, Sufis, philosophy and books". Tweets by Mohamed Eljarh, @Eljarh, researcher, 1:40am and 1:54am, 28 January 2017.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Benghazi resident, Tunis, March 2018. Even in Derna, a traditional hotbed of Salafi-jihadism, which was under attack by LNA forces throughout 2018, Salafis swiftly took control of the local Awqaf office in late 2018 immediately after the LNA proclaimed that it had taken control of the city. Crisis Group phone interview, Derna resident, Derna, January 2019.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, former senior official in the General Authority of Religious Endowments and Islamic Religious Affairs, Tunis, March 2018.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, Sufi scholar, Tunis, February 2019.

¹¹³ Crisis Group electronic interviews, individuals close to the Tripoli General Authority for Endowments and Religious Affairs, December 2018 and January 2019.

western Libya with Madkhalis, but his efforts have been opposed in a number of towns, including Misrata, where tensions between Madkhalis and armed groups of a more revolutionary bent have grown.

B. *A Divisive, Ultra-conservative Social Agenda*

In the east especially, Madkhalis have used the eastern Awqaf to pursue their ideological agenda in several ways. In July 2016, the Authority issued a statement arguing that the draft constitution then under consideration should not be approved because, it claimed, the text contained violations of Sharia, particularly in reference to what the statement described as “national security” and “societal peace”.¹¹⁴

When the Constitutional Drafting Assembly (CDA) approved the final draft the following year, the Supreme Fatwa Committee again warned Libyans that some of its provisions breached Sharia, including the notion of citizenship – particularly in relation to equality between men and women – and the defence of freedom of expression and assembly.¹¹⁵ The committee also took issue with provisions related to forming political parties, which it described as a source of conflict and division.

Some of the decisions of the eastern religious institutions have sparked national outrage. In July 2017, the Supreme Fatwa Committee issued a fatwa accusing adherents of the Ibadi sect of Islam, common among Libya's Amazigh (Berber) minority, of “deviance” and of subscribing to an “infidel” doctrine.¹¹⁶ The ruling on Ibadis drew widespread condemnation. A joint statement issued by more than 200 Libyan politicians, academics, journalists and activists “categorically rejected the sectarian religious discourse, which divides Libyans and strives to disseminate hate speech”.¹¹⁷ For Amazigh-led armed groups in western Libya, the fatwa also further fuelled suspicion of forces with a strong or dominant Madkhali component, including Radaa. As an Amazigh commander put it: “The Madkhalis are openly against the Ibadis. How can I, as an Ibadi, accept that they be given so much power?”¹¹⁸

In line with Madkhali doctrine, the committee has issued rulings against women travelling without a male guardian; called for all gatherings to be gender-segregated; has denounced any celebration of Prophet Muhammad's birthday, traditionally a popular holiday in Libya; and prohibited demonstrations in general as sinful.¹¹⁹ In

¹¹⁴ See "بيان الهيئة العامة للأوقاف والشؤون الإسلامية بالحكومة الليبية المؤقتة بشأن مسودة الدستور وما فيه من "مخالفات وملاحظات" [“Statement regarding the draft constitution and its violations and observations”], eastern General Authority of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 19 July 2016, at: www.aifta.net/archives/data.

¹¹⁵ See "بيان اللجنة العليا للإفتاء بشأن مقترح مسودة مشروع الدستور الصادرة في شهر يوليو 2107 م" [“Statement of the Supreme Fatwa Committee on the draft constitution proposal issued in July 2017”], Supreme Fatwa Committee, 1 August 2018, at: www.aifta.net/archives/data.

¹¹⁶ The fatwa described Ibadis as “a misguided and aberrant” group and “infidels”. See www.aifta.net/archives/421.

¹¹⁷ See “Libya: Incitement Against Religious Minority”, Human Rights Watch, 20 July 2017.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, military commander of Amazigh origin, Tunis, May 2018.

¹¹⁹ Some close to the eastern authorities and Haftar's forces have attempted to deflect worries over the Madkhalis' rising influence by accusing those raising such concerns of being sympathisers of opponents such as the Brotherhood. A Benghazi resident and advisor to the eastern authorities insisted: “I hardly see [the Madkhalis] at all in Benghazi's daily life. For the average Benghaziino those

October 2018, the committee issued a statement – read out at mosques across eastern Libya – repeating its denunciation of demonstrations, describing them as a “Western evil”.¹²⁰

Beyond religious institutions, Madkhali elements in the LNA and its affiliated security branches have acted as self-appointed “morality police”. Several incidents throughout 2017 highlighted this aspect of their growing influence. In January that year, Madkhali elements in the local security directorate seized a shipment of books imported from Egypt – including works by Friedrich Nietzsche, Paulo Coelho and Naguib Mahfouz – in the town of al-Marj. They denounced what they called a “cultural invasion” of un-Islamic literature, claiming the books contained pornographic material and information on Shiism, Christianity and sorcery. The eastern Awqaf issued a lengthy statement regarding the incident, accusing “secularists” of trying to encourage “moral corruption”.¹²¹

Over 130 Libyan writers and intellectuals responded in an open letter criticising the seizure as “intellectual terrorism” and “an attempt to muzzle voices and confiscate opinion and thought”. The letter made reference to a “particular doctrine” – without referring directly to Madkhali-Salafism – and warned:

The actions of the followers of this doctrine, including in mosques, schools, media and other social institutions in many regions of Libya, threaten social harmony, increase the threat to civil peace and contribute to the complexity of the crisis faced by the country.¹²²

The following month, Abdelrazeq al-Naduri, the LNA's chief of staff and then military governor of the eastern region, issued an order prohibiting women under the age of 60 from travelling abroad unless accompanied by a male guardian. He argued the ban was necessary for “reasons of public interest” and “to limit negative aspects that accompanied Libyan women's international travel”.¹²³ Several observers accused Madkhali elements within the LNA of pushing for the order.¹²⁴ The LNA annulled the ban within days – most likely due to the public outcry – and replaced it with

things do not touch his or her life unless [they are] attached to the opposite ideology or agenda”. Crisis Group electronic interview, January 2019.

¹²⁰ Sami Zapti, the *Libya Herald's* editor, posted the statement on his Twitter account, expressing concern over its content: “Libya's eastern-based #Madkhali #Salafism dominated religious endowment condemns demonstrations as a western evil & orders against demonstrations & criticism of political ruler of the day & requires ruler be obeyed! Left to them we'd still be under Qaddafi today!”, Tweet by Sami Zaptia @ZaptiaS, 1:27am, 19 October 2018.

¹²¹ See “خطبة معممه من إدارة شؤون المساجد في دور العلمانية في إفساد المجتمع بنشر كتب الضلالة والرذيلة وسيل” [“Speech by the Department of Mosques Affairs on the role of secularism in corrupting society by publishing misguided and sinful books and ways of preventing its evil”], General Authority for Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 25 January 2017, at: www.facebook.com/OqafLibya/posts/1388355771194970.

¹²² See “عشرات الكتاب والمتقنين يصدرن بيان إدانة لمصادرة الكتب” [“Dozens of writers and intellectuals issue a statement condemning the seizure of books”], *Al-Wasat*, 23 January 2017.

¹²³ See “بوابة الوسط تنشر قرار الحاكم العسكري بمنع الليبيات من السفر دون محرم” [“Al-Wasat publishes the text of the military governor's decision to prohibit women from traveling without a guardian”], *Al-Wasat*, 19 February 2017.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, civil society and women activists from eastern Libya, Tunis, March and April 2018.

a new order imposing travel restrictions on all Libyans, male and female, aged between 18 and 45, requiring security clearance before travelling abroad. Civil society activists, especially women who had mobilised against the original order, interpreted the new decree, which referred to the “need to put in place measures to counter risks from abroad that threaten national security”, as an attempt to further curtail civil society activity, already regularly criticised by Madkhali clerics in mosques under their control.¹²⁵

In March 2017, LNA-affiliated Madkhalis shut down a Benghazi rally marking “Earth Hour”, an international event organised by the World Wildlife Fund to raise environmental awareness, and arrested a number of people, including an Agence France-Presse photographer who had taken pictures of the event. The eastern Awqaf issued a statement saying the rally was “sinful” because it included men and women mixing and it accused participants of “Satanism”.¹²⁶

A key Madkhali figure involved in the shutting of the Earth Hour event, Abdul Fateh Ben Ghalboun, who commands a unit allied to the LNA's Saiqa special forces, has also publicly criticised the mixing of male and female students at universities in Benghazi. In December 2017, Ben Ghalboun's unit arrested a young male singer after videos of him performing at an all-girls high school event circulated on social media. Ben Ghalboun accused the singer of encouraging vice. The school's principal was also detained.¹²⁷ So far, however, there is no sign of the implementation of gender segregation in any of Benghazi's universities, where young male and female students intermingle openly.¹²⁸

Since late 2014, a number of activists in eastern Libya who have publicly warned against the growing power of Madkhalis within Haftar's coalition or posted comments on social media criticising their heavy-handedness have been threatened and in some cases detained.¹²⁹ A Benghazi activist said:

¹²⁵ See “عبيير أمنينة: الحاكم العسكري جمد قرار من الليبيات من السفر دون محرم” [“Abeer Amnina: The military governor froze the decision to prevent the travel of [female] Libyans without a guardian”], *Al-Wasat*, 21 February 2017.

¹²⁶ See “Three including AFP photographer freed after ‘sinful’ Benghazi Earth Hour celebrations”, *Libya Herald*, 29 March 2017.

¹²⁷ See “Anger grows over Benghazi entertainer arrest by Salafists”, *Libya Herald*, 23 December 2017. In February 2019, a unit from the Benghazi police rapid response department tasked with the protection of public decency (الإدارة العامة لحماية الآداب العامة) raided a wedding hall in the city. The unit posted photographs of the raid on its Facebook page, explaining that it was a mixed gathering of several nationalities: www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=262517848003479&id=227986778123253. The incident caused much controversy and Jamal Alumami, a local Madkhali who served as head of the unit, was subsequently replaced. The same unit had sparked outrage in December 2018, when it raided a women-only gathering at a well-known café in Benghazi and accused some of those present of gambling. Crisis Group interviews, Benghazi residents, Benghazi, March 2019.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, activists from Benghazi, Tunis, February-April 2018.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, activists from Benghazi, Tunis, February-April 2018.

They use their influence within the security apparatus to pursue their agenda. They are much feared. Anyone who speaks against them is targeted. Those of us involved in civil society have become very wary, because we know they are suspicious of us. The space for our activities is shrinking.¹³⁰

Similar dynamics have played out in Tripoli and other parts of western Libya where Madkhalis have an armed presence. In November 2017, Radaa shut down a comic book convention in Tripoli and arrested the organisers and some attendees for violating “morals and modesty”. In a statement, Radaa added that such events were “derived from abroad and exploit the weakness of religious faith and the fascination with foreign cultures”.¹³¹ In May 2018, Radaa detained two men who had organised the Septimus Awards, an annual media event. Relative of one of the detainees told Human Rights Watch they believed the men may have been targeted because photographs of the ceremony showed men and women mingling, with some women dressed in a manner Radaa considered unacceptable.¹³²

Madkhalis are not alone in pursuing an ultra-conservative agenda hostile to civil society, but activists say they have contributed to mainstreaming it and have put their Islamist rivals (particularly Ghariyani, the Tripoli-based Mufti) in western Libya on the defensive.¹³³ In addition to specific attacks on civil society and their growing control of mosques, Madkhalis have also spread their influence through mosque-based social and humanitarian activities and religious charities, whose services are in higher demand as purchasing power declined steeply since 2014. They have also set up an extensive network of radio stations that broadcast Madkhali's sermons, and are active online where they have created several popular websites, forums and social media pages to disseminate their ideology and aggressively monitor social media for any criticism of Madkhali, his ideas or the Madkhali current more generally.

Finally, they have moved into the private education sector, opening up schools in Tripoli, Benghazi and elsewhere. Educators have raised concerns about how many of these schools are operating without a licence from the education ministry, how they are funded and the contents of their curricula, particularly in light of the widespread view that they promote intolerance. A Benghazi-based academic warned:

Their influence is immense and people should be concerned. This threatens minorities like the Sufis and Ibadis and, in my view, it threatens our national identity more generally, because this imported ideology is at odds with it. Not seeing their growing influence as a problem is a problem in itself.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Benghazi-based academic, Tunis, February 2018.

¹³¹ See “Libyan Salafist-led force breaks up comic festival for ‘indecent’”, Reuters, 4 November 2017.

¹³² “Libya: Armed Group Detains Media Figures”, Human Rights Watch, May 2018.

¹³³ In December 2018, Ghariyani launched a fierce attack on civil society, accusing some activists of working with foreign embassies to promote gender equality in Libya, which he argued was un-Islamic. Ghariyani had used such rhetoric against civil society before but the ferocity of this attack prompted some civil society activists to speculate that he might be trying to match the Madkhalis, whom he not only opposes doctrinally but also considers rivals. “It was very similar to the way the Madkhalis talk about us”, said a Tripoli-based women's activist. “It puts us in danger”. Crisis Group email correspondence, December 2018.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group phone interview, Benghazi-based academic, September 2018.

In early 2019, the eastern government approved the request to establish some Salafi religious training centres.¹³⁵ Even in Tripoli, Madkhalis have requested authorisation to open religious training centres, but this remains a contentious issue that is being debated within the GNA's ministry of education.

So far, Madkhalis have made no attempt to alter Libya's legal and judicial system, which is based on European-style positive law. Other ultra-conservative groups that sought to impose their agenda in the past (such as al-Qaeda-inspired groups or ISIS) began with persecuting judges and lawyers and trying to disband courts they condemned as not Sharia-compliant. While Madkhalis have not engaged in such practices, their critics fear it may just be a matter of time.¹³⁶ For their defenders, however, such fears are unfounded.¹³⁷

C. *What do Madkhalis Ultimately Want?*

For the moment, Madkhalis appear to be more interested in making tactical alliances at a local level, likely in reaction to Libya's multiple power centres and the absence of any real centralised authority. Despite Madkhali's fatwa urging his followers to unite behind Haftar and the LNA, it makes practical sense for Madkhali factions to ally themselves with whatever counts as the authority in the area where they operate. Some people have suggested that their apparently contradictory political position could be the result of instructions handed down from authorities in Saudi Arabia, who formally recognise the Tripoli-based GNA but support Haftar in practice. But another explanation is possible. Aref al-Nayed, the former Libyan ambassador to the UAE and Sufi scholar, said:

In any discourse on Salafism you must be aware of the multiple levels on which they operate: doctrinal, strategic and tactical. It is only when considering the strategic level that you can explain the strange phenomenon of Madkhalis fighting on opposite sides of the political divide.¹³⁸

Were they to come together in a formal alliance beyond what loosely exists today, they would present a formidable bloc. A number of adherents appear to view the country as a potential experimental space for greater ambitions, although the precise nature of these ambitions remains vague – in part because Madkhalis tend to be secretive and opaque in the way they organise themselves.

The influence the Madkhalis currently wield raises questions (and among their critics, a considerable degree of alarm) about their impact on Libya's long-term political, social and security trajectory. The presence of such an ultra-conservative cur-

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Sufi scholar, Tunis, February 2019. An east-based minister involved in the matter said that the east-based Interim Government's education ministry reviewed the curricula and books that would be taught at these institutes, equivalent to high schools, and approved them. "There was nothing dangerous or controversial in the material that students would be learning from," he said. Crisis Group phone interview, Benghazi, March 2019.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Libyan religious scholars and activists, Tunis and Benghazi, February-March 2019.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, judge and east-based Interim Government officials, Benghazi, March 2019.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Tunis, February 2019.

rent within the country's security infrastructure has already created societal tensions and sparked violence. The Madkhalis' explicit ideological animosity toward mainstream Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood is amplifying tensions and making the current conflict more difficult to resolve. In particular, this hostility reflects the wider regional fault lines between Qatar and Turkey on one hand, which have supported the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups, and Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates on the other, which have supported Haftar and his allies. Furthermore, the Madkhalis' central tenet of unquestioning support for rulers could bolster any figure or faction that seeks to impose themselves in an undemocratic manner while claiming religious legitimacy by allying with them.

How Libya's Madkhali current evolves partly will be a function of its relationship with external actors, particularly in Saudi Arabia but also with the Madkhali milieu in neighbouring Egypt. Apart from the ideological link with Madkhali, the movement's critics in Libya voice concerns over possible ties to the Saudi government or security apparatus. Some describe the Madkhalis as a "Trojan horse" for Saudi influence in Libya, although for now there is no evidence of this. Suspicions of Saudi support usually stem from the perception many heavily Madkhali armed groups tend to be better funded and equipped than others.¹³⁹ There are indications that the Egyptian government is concerned about the rising power and influence of Madkhalis across the border in eastern Libya and how that may affect Egypt's own Madkhalis, most of whom are concentrated in Alexandria, a hub for exiled Libyans.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ A former senior official in the General Authority of Religious Endowments and Islamic Religious Affairs said: "That's what everyone is wondering: where do they get the money for all this? Money for better military equipment, money for all the mosques they control and are opening, money for their entire project?" Crisis Group interview, Tunis, March 2018.

¹⁴⁰ An eastern government official commented: "The Egyptians said they were worried about how the Madkhalis' military might in eastern Libya was growing. They were concerned about how that may spill over in Egypt with their own Madkhalis". Crisis Group interview, Tunis, August 2018. While Egypt is aligned with Madkhalis in their hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood, in September 2018 Egyptian authorities banned prominent Madkhali cleric Muhammad Said Raslan from preaching. Raslan, the Egyptian preacher who denied accusations he had been implicated in the abduction and purported murder of anti-Madkhali cleric Nader al-Omrani in Tripoli in 2016, has a large following in Libya.

V. Building an Inclusive Peace

Given the limited capacity of Libya's rival governments (and their reliance on armed groups that have at least some Madkhali elements), the lack of progress to date in UN-led attempts to reunite the country, and a regional context that is worsening ideological divides, dealing with the challenge the Madkhali movement presents as a military and cultural force is not straightforward. It is important not to exaggerate the Madkhali challenge, as some of their critics do, as their rise is clearly the product of a wider set of issues affecting Libya – most importantly, the collapse of state authority and the proliferation of armed groups. At the same time, their opposition to other religious currents (and the reciprocal hostility of these groups to Madkhali-Salafism) is part of a broader battle over the construction and legitimacy of religious authority in the Muslim world. However, the particular reactions their rise provokes among their critics, as well as some of their behaviour, merit attention.

Some guidelines are relevant to efforts to build a peace process that integrates the conflict's political and security components. The two rival governments, prominent conflict actors including armed groups, the UN and external actors involved in diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict should:

- ❑ Ensure that security arrangements currently being devised – whether the UN-backed effort in Tripoli that the Government of National Accord (GNA) is seeking to implement, or unilateral security decisions carried out by the LNA and the east-based government that supports it, or future efforts to revive what are currently deadlocked initiatives to unite Libya's fragmented security forces – tackle the problems posed by the ideological influence of any armed group in the security apparatus. This should include provisions that individuals be integrated into security bodies according to their qualifications rather than ideological or other ties, and that the rival governments remove the influence of religious ideologies, including the Madkhalis', from the security apparatus.
- ❑ Assert the principle that official religious institutions be inclusive entities that reflect Libya's different religious currents. The rival governments, as well as any unity government that eventually emerges, should repudiate any edicts that would endanger Libya's religious minorities and affirm that all religious currents and sects deserve protection and tolerance – rights that should be constitutionally guaranteed.
- ❑ Press the GNA and its rival in eastern Libya to allow civil society organisations and actors to operate safely without harassment or threats, and not tolerate any possible future attempt to encroach on the judicial apparatus or pursue more militant gender segregation.
- ❑ Encourage Saudi Arabia to restrain its religious authorities and individuals based in its territory from inciting violence in Libya.

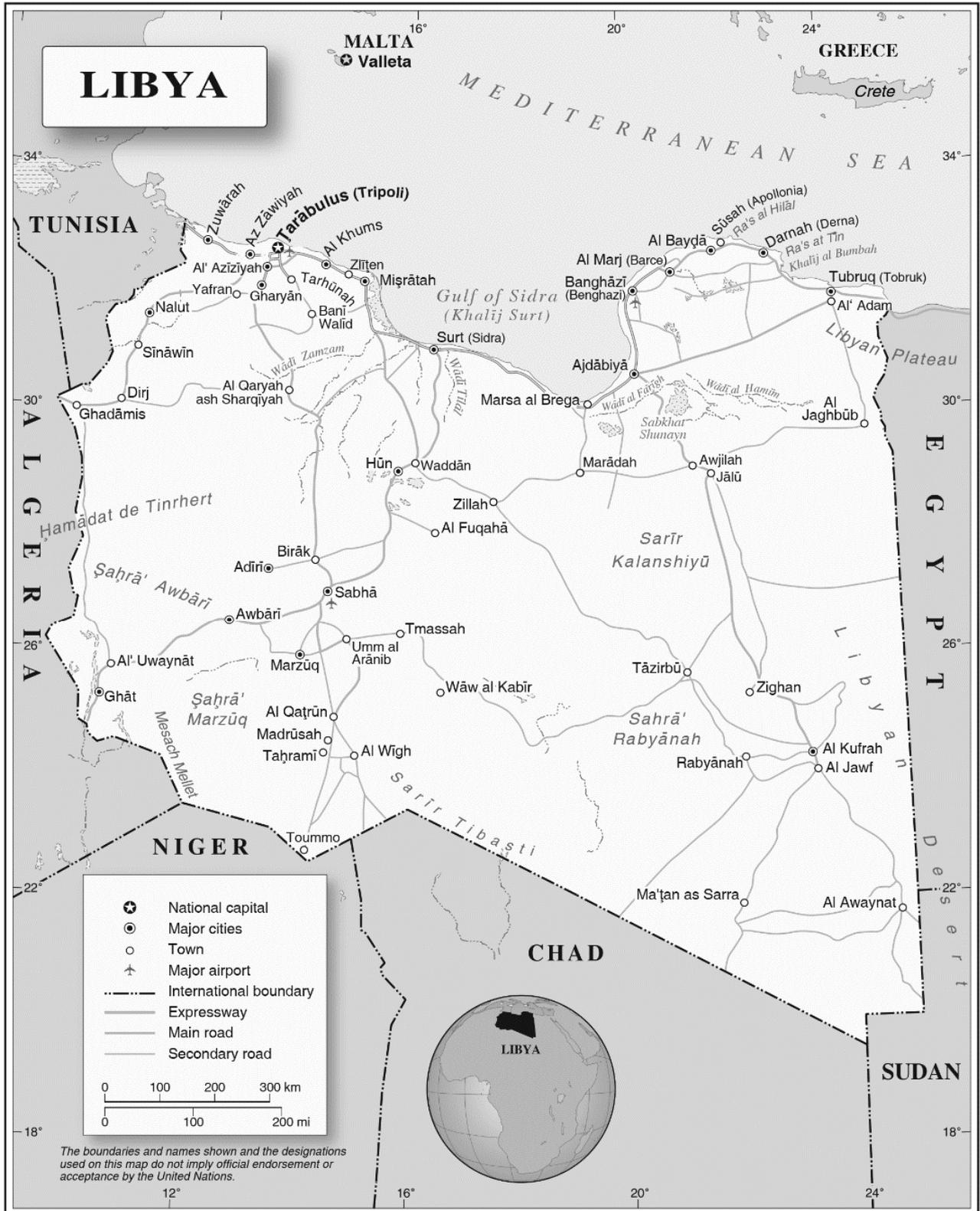
VI. Conclusion

Libyans and external actors alike have to contend with the fact that Madkhali-Salafism is a growing phenomenon in Libya, one which is substantially shaping its security, religious and social spheres. The presence of Madkhalis in armed groups with varying degrees of legitimacy across the country has enabled them to pursue an ultra-conservative agenda aimed at transforming society. While lauded by some for their perceived integrity and willingness to tackle crime and combat ISIS, Madkhalis are increasingly feared by others whom they have targeted, including civil society activists, Sufis, the Amazigh minority and members of the Muslim Brotherhood. This fear is triggering resistance, which is already manifesting itself through civil society pushback, but also militarily, as clashes between heavily armed Madkhali groups and their rivals in different parts of the country attest.

The rise of the Madkhali current should be handled sensibly, particularly as it is influential among important security actors and is thus likely to play a role in any political solution to the conflict. The goal, as with the myriad other political-military actors with influence in Libya, should be to get them to adhere to norms of behaviour that are conducive to reaching such a political solution and make it lasting. This will entail persuading them to restrain their societal agenda, arguably the most divisive aspect of their ideology, and getting all Libyan parties to adhere to minimal baselines for inclusiveness in religious institutions. Doing so would set a standard that not only applies to groups like Madkhalis, but also others that, whether for ideological or political reasons, have made the Libyan conflict more divisive and intractable.

Tripoli/Brussels, 25 April 2019

Appendix A: Map of Libya



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Germany Federal Foreign Office, Irish Aid, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the UK Department for International Development, and the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

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April 2019

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Middle East and North Africa since 2016

Special Reports

Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

Israel/Palestine

How to Preserve the Fragile Calm at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade, Middle East Briefing N°48, 7 April 2016 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Israel/Palestine: Parameters for a Two-State Settlement, Middle East Report N°172, 28 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria, Middle East Report N°182, 8 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Averting War in Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°60, 20 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Rebuilding the Gaza Ceasefire, Middle East Report N°191, 16 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Defusing the Crisis at Jerusalem's Gate of Mercy, Middle East Briefing N°67, 3 April 2019 (also available in Arabic)

Iraq/Syria/Lebanon

Arsal in the Crosshairs: The Predicament of a Small Lebanese Border Town, Middle East Briefing N°46, 23 February 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Russia's Choice in Syria, Middle East Briefing N°47, 29 March 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border, Middle East Briefing N°49, 8 April 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's "Generation 2000", Middle East Report N°169, 8 August 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum, Middle East Report N°175, 14 March 2017 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa, Middle East Briefing N°53, 28 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria, Middle East Report N°176, 4 May 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Oil and Borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis, Middle East Briefing N°55, 17 October 2017 (also available in Arabic).

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Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State, Middle East Report N°188, 30 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How to Cope with Iraq's Summer Brushfire, Middle East Briefing N°61, 31 July 2018.

Saving Idlib from Destruction, Middle East Briefing N°63, 3 September 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East, Middle East Report N°190, 5 September 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries, Middle East Report N°194, 14 December 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Avoiding a Free-for-all in Syria's North East, Middle East Briefing N°66, 21 December 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, Middle East Report N°196, 25 February 2019.

The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019 (also available in Arabic).

After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid, Middle East Report N°199, 27 March 2019 (also available in Arabic).

North Africa

Tunisia: Transitional Justice and the Fight Against Corruption, Middle East and North Africa Report N°168, 3 May 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Jihadist Violence in Tunisia: The Urgent Need for a National Strategy, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°50, 22 June 2016 (also available in French and Arabic).

The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset, Middle East and North Africa Report N°170, 4 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Algeria's South: Trouble's Bellwether, Middle East and North Africa Report N°171, 21 November 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia, Middle East and North Africa Report N°177, 10 May 2017 (only available in French and Arabic).

How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb, Middle East and North Africa Report N°178, 24 July 2017 (also available in Arabic and French).

How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border, Middle East and North Africa Report N°179, 31 July 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift, Middle East and North Africa Report N°180, 11 January 2018 (also available in French and Arabic).

Libya's Unhealthy Focus on Personalities, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°57, 8 May 2018.

Making the Best of France's Libya Summit, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°58, 28 May 2018 (also available in French).

Restoring Public Confidence in Tunisia's Political System, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°62, 2 August 2018 (also available in French and Arabic).

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Yemen: Is Peace Possible?, Middle East Report N°167, 9 February 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Turkey and Iran: Bitter Friends, Bitter Rivals, Middle East Briefing N°51, 13 December 2016 (also available in Farsi).

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Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base, Middle East Report N°174, 2 February 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Instruments of Pain (I): Conflict and Famine in Yemen, Middle East Briefing N°52, 13 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Discord in Yemen's North Could Be a Chance for Peace, Middle East Briefing N°54, 11 October 2017 (also available in Arabic).

The Iran Nuclear Deal at Two: A Status Report, Middle East Report N°181, 16 January 2018 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East, Middle East Report N°184, 13 April 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How Europe Can Save the Iran Nuclear Deal, Middle East Report N°185, 2 May 2018 (also available in Persian and Arabic).

Yemen: Averting a Destructive Battle for Hodeida, Middle East Briefing N°59, 11 June 2018.

The Illogic of the U.S. Sanctions Snapback on Iran, Middle East Briefing N°64, 2 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa, Middle East Briefing N°65, 6 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How to Halt Yemen's Slide into Famine, Middle East Report N°193, 21 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

On Thin Ice: The Iran Nuclear Deal at Three, Middle East Report N°195, 16 January 2019 (also available in Farsi and Arabic).

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