

Mounting strife in southern Libya adds to the country's instability

Michel Cousins

Tunis

There have been increasingly bitter clashes in the southern Libyan city of Sebha between the Tebu community and a military unit composed largely of members of the major Arab tribe in the area, Awlad Suleiman, and which is linked to the Tripoli-based government of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj.

There are no reliable figures on casualties but fighting has intensified recently, notably in Sebha's Tayuri district, which is home to both Tebu and Tuareg communities worried they could be sucked into the conflict. Municipal authorities opened two schools to provide shelter to more than 1,200 people who fled from Tayuri.

Since the toppling of the regime of Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, inter-communal violence, as well as crimes such as kidnappings and robberies, have soared in Sebha.

There were "wars" in 2012 and 2014 between the Tebus and Awlad Suleiman, as well as numerous brief clashes and fighting between Awlad Suleiman and the Qaddafi tribe.

There was fighting in the city between the Tebus and the Tuareg, part of a wider regional conflict between them. A peace deal between them, mediated by Qatar in 2015, was implemented last year. A deal between the Tebu and Awlad Suleiman, mediated by Italy and Presidency Council member Abdulsalam Kajman, was sealed in Rome in March 2017.

Now, however, the deals seem to be in tatters, destabilising what little security exists in southern Libya, an area where there is widespread sympathy for the Qaddafi regime and where, recent reports said, the Islamic State is making inroads.

Fighting between the Sixth Force, the military unit of Awlad Suleiman, and the Tebus started over a common occurrence in the crime-troubled city – a shooting. Usually, it would have been contained; however, the deep hostility between the two sides caused the incident to spiral into what is being referred to locally as the "Third Awlad Suleiman-Tebu War."

Efforts to end the fighting have made matters worse. Mediators from eastern Libya were accused of using their position to bring the Sixth Force and the Sebha area under the control of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA).

The eastern elders tried to win over the Awlad Suleiman tribe by offering the Sixth Force legitimacy as an LNA unit, after which the LNA announced the force was under its control.

Awlad Suleiman rejected this,

however, saying the force remained under the control of the Defence Ministry in Tripoli. In response, the LNA announced it replaced the force's leader with his deputy. Nothing, however, had changed: Ahmed al-Ataibi remains in charge.

There has been talk in Tripoli about Tebus from Chad invading to take over Sebha. The Sarraj government issued a statement that claimed mercenaries attacked the Sixth Force and warned that Libya's sovereignty was at stake.

There are certainly Tebus from Chad involved in and around Sebha, as well as local Tebus, but Tripoli's support for the Sixth Force and attempts by the LNA to bring the force to its side increased Tebu fears that they are being pushed out of the area. They say Tripoli and Benghazi are biased towards Awlad Suleiman and warn of further unspecified action if there is no change.

Political activists in southern Libya said the issue was also "about money."

"Neither the Tebus nor the Sixth Force are really interested in Haftar or Sarraj. They are interested in who is going to pay them," one analyst said.

Additionally, there is the matter of compensation. After the Awlad Suleiman-Tebu war in 2015, mediation efforts that resulted in an agreement in March 2017 stated that both sides would be compensated by the Libyan state. The southern activists said the bulk of the money has not been paid, which is a source of friction between the two sides.

There is also the checkpoint 17km south of Sebha, manned by Tebu fighters, many Chadian. Tebus say that everything to the south of it is Tebu territory and that the checkpoint is necessary to control entry into it but it is also a source of revenue. Goods trucks and many other vehicles passing through are required to pay 50-100 dinars (\$37-\$75) – sometimes more – to guards.

Tebu forces also control the Sebha airport, which is closed but which the local municipality and most people in Sebha want to reopen. The local municipality wants the Tebus out but they have no intention of going. They claim they need to remain at the airport to protect the nearby Tayuri district.

The conflict is not going to go away. The divisions run deep. Other Arab tribes in the region have stayed on the sidelines but the Awlad Suleiman are reported to be building alliances with other tribes in the area – the Magarha, the Hassauna and possibly even the Qaddafi, which had supported the Tebu, having a common enemy in Awlad Suleiman.

In this inflammatory situation, the rivalry between Tripoli and Benghazi is turning a local drama into a national crisis.

Michel Cousins is a contributor to The Arab Weekly on Libyan issues.



Standing ground. A Tebu fighter poses on the back of a pickup truck in the Tayuri district in the southern Libyan city of Sebha. (Reuters)



Modest investor. Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy (L) listens to his Tunisian counterpart Youssef Chahed after their meeting in Tunis, on February 26. (AFP)

Tunisia, battling rough economy, looks to expand ties with Spain

Stephen Quillen

Tunis

Spain and Tunisia pledged to strengthen economic and military ties during a visit by Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy to Tunis.

The official visit, the first by a Spanish prime minister to Tunisia since the "Arab spring" uprisings in 2011, saw the two countries sign eight memorandums and agreements on economic, cultural and educational matters. Spain also announced a \$30.8 million line of credit for small and medium-sized businesses in Tunisia.

Rajoy, accompanied by numerous ministers and high-level officials, expressed support for Tunisia's democratic transition and urged for economic operators to increase investment in the country.

"The Tunisian economy is at a crucial moment..." Rajoy said at the closing of a Tunisian-Spanish business forum February 26. "Structural reforms are always difficult and take time to give their first fruit."

Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, also speaking at the event, said Tunisia could look to Spain as a model for "structural reform" as it battles a sluggish economy, and that closer ties would benefit both countries.

Tunisia has struggled to recover from years of worsening inflation, debt, unemployment and poverty. Its economy was further hit when the European Union, a close partner, blacklisted the country as being at high risk of money laundering and terror financing.

Spain has been a consistent, if modest, investor in Tunisia's economy. There are 67 Spanish companies operating in the North African country, creating approximately \$1.3 billion in investment and more than 6,000 jobs. Trade volume between the two countries totalled \$1.5 billion last year. Spain is Tunisia's fifth largest exporter, behind France, Italy, Germany and Algeria.

Samir Majoul, president of the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicraft, said

that, while relations between the two countries are solid, Tunisian and Spanish companies should move their cooperation from "simple operations to a strategic partnership."

"Although Spain is a major player in the European Union, its imports from Tunisia represent only 3.8% of Tunisia's exports to the EU and its exports are only 4.5% of Tunisia's imports from Europe," said Majoul.

"Similarly, Spanish investments in Tunisia remain focused on the construction materials industry and deserve to be diversified in sectors with high added value."

Also high on the agenda during Rajoy's visit was the fight against terror, which the two countries resolved to engage in with enhanced military and security ties.

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Spanish Defence Minister Maria Dolores de Cospedal, in a meeting with her Tunisian counterpart, stressed that Tunisia is a key military ally for Spain and reaffirmed Spain's willingness to develop its military partnership with Tunisia, the Tunisian Press Agency reported.

Tunisian Defence Minister Abdelkrim Zbidi praised "excellent cooperation between the two countries" in the areas of "Special Forces, mine clearance and sharing of expertise" and called for closer collaboration within the "5+5 Defence" and "G7+6" initiatives.

The calls for increased security cooperation come at a time when both countries are facing a jihadist threat.

Last August, Spain suffered terror attacks in Barcelona, Cambrils and Alcanar, in which 15 people were killed. Most of the suspects of the attacks were Moroccan nationals or of Moroccan origin.

Tunisia was hit by terror attacks at tourist sites, including the Bardo National Museum, in 2015 during which 60 people, mostly European tourists, died. During his trip to Tunis, Rajoy placed a wreath in honour of the museum attack's 21 victims.

While Tunisia has not had a terror attack at home in nearly two years, security services are on alert for suspected jihadists attempting to infiltrate from neighbouring Libya and Algeria.

In 2017, security forces carried out 122,000 raids on safe houses and other locations suspected of being used by jihadists, detaining 1,456 suspects, Interior Minister Lotfi Brahmi said at a parliamentary hearing.

Tunisian forces also work closely with NATO, as well as European and US forces, conducting joint training missions and knowledge-sharing exercises.

Spain and Tunisia are longstanding allies. Former Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez signed a bilateral Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation in 1995, leading to a ten-fold increase in bilateral trade.

While there were plans to further expand the two countries' economic relationship, large-scale trade and investment failed to materialise after Tunisia went through years of political instability and tumult following the toppling of the Ben Ali regime in 2011.

Stephen Quillen is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunis.