

Charting a Path to Security Sector Integration for Libya: An Incremental Approach

By Mariam Alsoudi and Misbah Omar | September 2025

Libya's security sector faces many challenges. It remains deeply fractured, with overlapping institutions split between the country's Eastern and Western regions. Political divisions, competition for state resources, historical grievances, and societal fragmentation have undermined reform efforts. Meanwhile, an institutional vacuum has enabled armed groups to consolidate control, often using state resources for political or criminal gain. Recent clashes between rival armed groups in Tripoli and its surroundings, in addition to the discovery of dozens of bodies in militia-run detention sites, underscore the growing human cost of this dysfunction. The presence of foreign fighters and forces aligned with internal political actors unwilling to relinquish power further complicates matters, prolonging instability and obstructing Libyan-led efforts to regain full control.

DESPITE THESE ISSUES, THERE IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO INITIATE A NEW PATH. In particular, regarding the security sector, an incremental and inclusive approach – anchored in the current reality – could set the country onto a trajectory that would gradually restore stability, rebuild national institutions, and produce elections with broad legitimacy. In contrast, a continuation of the status quo will further entrench armed groups, enable impunity, erode public trust, and make future reforms even more difficult.

A workable path forward on security sector integration must contend with two distinct but interconnected dimensions. First, the fragmentation within Tripolitania – which reflects the region’s unique historical, social, and economic dynamics – calls for a regionally tailored approach to reconciliation, disarmament, and reintegration. Second, the political and institutional divide between East and West, particularly the consolidation of power in the East versus the more fragmented landscape in the West, requires a renewed national social covenant.

Against this background, this paper outlines an incremental roadmap for rebuilding trust and creating the conditions necessary for integrating Libya’s fragmented security sector. Building on IFIT’s broader work on [partial agreements](#), its publication on [incremental agreements](#) in Libya, and insights from an [IFIT-hosted event](#) on security sector integration in Libya, the proposed roadmap prioritises realistic, trust-building steps that promote coordination, transparency, and shared accountability. The approach is designed to complement ongoing political initiatives, including the new UN sequential political roadmap for Libya.

The Opportunity for Reform

Integrating Libya’s fragmented security sector is essential for restoring the rule of law, supporting the political process, and ending impunity. Fragmentation fuels corruption, weakens institutions, and creates space for illegal armed groups and criminal networks. A phased trust-building strategy can help restore confidence between security actors, reduce political exploitation of institutions, and limit foreign interference. It can also lay the groundwork for future elections, reconciliation, and broader state legitimacy.

Recent developments have created both the need and opportunity to pursue trust-building measures. Following the Derna catastrophe, improved social cohesion between East and West provided a rare window to encourage cooperation among security actors. At the same time, fiscal pressures and rising corruption, as highlighted by Central Bank data¹ and other sources,² have underscored the need for more coordinated, accountable security spending. Regional instability, including potential spillover from neighbouring Sudan and the Sahel and the resurgence of extremist

¹ The Libyan Central Bank’s report on revenues and expenditures for January and February 2025.

<https://cbl.gov.ly/micifaf/2025/02/بي-اربي-ف-ر-ه-ش-ل-ق-ا-ف-ن-ا-ل-ا-و-د-ا-ر-ي-ا-ل-ا-ن-ا-ي-ب-2025-1.pdf>

² OCCRP (Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project) confirmed that the Central Bank of Libya in Tripoli failed to account for up to \$4.8 billion in newly printed banknotes produced by the British company De La Rue, according to an audit leaked by Deloitte in January 2023.

<https://www.occrp.org/en/news/report-libyan-central-bank-failed-to-account-for-billions-of-new-bills>.

groups, further reinforces the urgency of collaboration. International pressure – through sanctions and national and international media scrutiny – likewise offers reasons for engagement, especially alongside UN plans to relaunch the political process.

Viewed through an incremental lens, a focus on shared security concerns such as border control, counterterrorism, organised crime, and irregular migration can serve as an effective entry point for cooperation between rival institutions. These issues transcend factional divides and offer opportunities for joint action that reinforces national sovereignty and public safety. Addressing these threats also can help reduce reliance on foreign security actors by building internal capacity and legitimacy. In conjunction with a more unified approach from international partners – anchored in the phased reform process – momentum can be reinforced and spoiler incentives reduced.

A Phased Roadmap for Trust-Building and Future Security Sector Integration

This paper outlines a four-phase roadmap for security sector integration. Each phase is intended not as a rigid blueprint, but as a flexible guide that acknowledges Libya's fragmented realities and builds upon entry points for cooperation. All of this will require professional third-party facilitation, perhaps in the form of a small, customised team of trusted local and international experts.

Phase One: Building Confidence Through Localised Cooperation

The initial phase should prioritise confidence-building measures aimed at reducing entrenched fear and mistrust, rather than focusing immediately on institutional restructuring. High-level closed-door dialogue could allow representatives of local councils, police actors, and civil society from different regions to meet in informal settings. By starting with collaborative actions on issues that transcend factional divides, such as coordinated disaster response or basic public safety, rival actors can engage in low-stakes cooperation that demonstrates mutual benefits. Importantly, initial steps should build on practical experience already gained, such as lessons from the 5+5 Joint Military Commission, while also supporting incremental mapping of Libya's fragmented security actors and structures.

Indicative milestones at this stage may include:

- High-level closed-door dialogue exchanges between local councils, police actors, and civil society.
- Incremental mapping of security actors.
- Joint community initiatives (e.g. disaster relief, public safety projects) across rival lines.
- Reduced local tensions and more frequent communication between actors in contested areas.

Phase Two: Technical Collaboration and Local Accountability

Once channels of communication are established, cooperation in more structured, technical areas could begin. These could include limited joint patrols in areas where rival groups operate in proximity, or pilot coordination mechanisms to avoid clashes. Informal exchanges among officers – for example, through training workshops or procedural dialogues – could help foster shared understandings of professional standards. At the same time, local oversight bodies involving civil society, judicial actors, and community leaders could be established to monitor conduct, report abuses, and reinforce transparency. Introducing basic fiscal transparency, such as shared reporting on payrolls and budgets, could further strengthen accountability and build public confidence.

Indicative milestones at this stage may include:

- Limited joint patrols or deconfliction mechanisms piloted in high-risk towns.
- Training workshops and professional exchanges organised across rival institutions.
- Local oversight bodies established to monitor conduct, investigate abuses, and promote transparency.
- Initial steps towards fiscal transparency taken, including publication of basic financial data.

Phase Three: Scaling Coordination to the National Level

As local cooperation begins to demonstrate results, a central coordination platform could be established to bring together senior representatives of ministries, security institutions, and legislative and judicial bodies. Its purpose would not be immediate unification, but the facilitation of strategic dialogue and crisis coordination across Libya's fragmented institutions. A politically neutral location would help ensure participation from both East and West. Initial measures, such as developing shared personnel registries to reduce payroll manipulation, adopting standardised recruitment criteria to improve professionalism, and creating unified budget frameworks to increase transparency, may appear technical, but can serve as powerful confidence-building tools and open the door to more substantive institutional reforms.

Indicative milestones at this stage may include:

- A national coordination platform established with East-West participation to manage crises and track reforms.
- Shared personnel registries piloted to reduce payroll duplication and manipulation.
- Common recruitment criteria and budget planning frameworks introduced across institutions.
- Evidence of increased national-level dialogue on security policy and oversight.

Phase Four: Embedding Reform in Legal and Political Structures

The culmination of the roadmap would be to anchor reform within Libya's constitutional and legal frameworks. A joint legislative committee could be mandated to clarify institutional responsibilities, codify unified chains of command, and establish

clear accountability provisions. Parallel dialogue with international actors would be necessary to sequence the withdrawal of foreign forces and mercenaries, beginning with non-combat elements, while reinforcing Libyan sovereignty. Crucially, this phase should be linked to Libya's broader political process, including constitutional dialogue and preparations for future elections, to ensure security sector reform contributes directly to state legitimacy. Public outreach campaigns, explaining new legal frameworks, clarifying citizen rights, and promoting transparency, would be essential to build buy-in, particularly among populations historically marginalised by security actors.

Indicative milestones at this stage may include:

- Draft legislation clarifying command chains and accountability provisions.
- Sequencing discussions on withdrawal of foreign forces and mercenaries.
- Security reform integration into broader political dialogue, including constitutional and electoral processes.
- Public outreach campaigns to explain new legal frameworks and citizen rights.

Taken together, the four phases chart a pathway from tentative local cooperation to nationally anchored reform. The emphasis is less on immediate unification and more on generating legitimacy through visible improvements in security, transparency, and accountability. By converting small steps into cumulative gains, the roadmap seeks to strengthen Libyan sovereignty, rebuild public trust, and prepare the ground for more comprehensive integration in the future.

Risks and Challenges on the Path Forward

The path toward security sector integration in Libya is likely to encounter a range of interrelated challenges. These stem not only from the enduring legacies of conflict and state fragmentation, but also from a mix of local, national, and international dynamics. Anticipating and addressing these obstacles will be essential to sustaining progress.

- **Entrenched armed group influence:** Armed groups continue to exert significant control over Libya's key security institutions, often operating with limited accountability. While direct confrontation is unlikely to succeed, incremental efforts that build trust, promote professional standards, and offer pathways for inclusion can help shift incentives over time.
- **Overlapping criminal and political networks:** The blurred boundaries between political power and organised criminal activity pose a structural barrier to reform. Strengthening oversight, supporting early-warning mechanisms, and fostering cooperation on cross-border threats may reduce the space for such networks to operate.
- **Local resistance and societal fragmentation:** In some regions, reform may be seen as a threat to local influence or identity. Tailored engagement strategies that reflect regional dynamics, coupled with efforts to ensure broad representation and transparency, can help mitigate these challenges.
- **Foreign interference and proxy dynamics:** External powers maintain vested political and military interests in Libya. While difficult to eliminate entirely, diplomatic efforts aimed at securing broad international consensus and reinforcing Libyan sovereignty can help reduce the impact of competing agendas.

- **Legal and institutional fragmentation:** Unclear mandates and overlapping responsibilities within Libya's security institutions undermine coherence. Legal clarification, coordinated reforms, and transitional oversight mechanisms can help to streamline roles and improve accountability.
- **Financial opacity and corruption:** Off-budget spending, payroll manipulation, and lack of fiscal transparency erode institutional credibility. Introducing phased financial oversight and auditing tools, where possible, may incrementally build public trust and discipline.
- **Mistrust and fear of marginalisation:** Years of conflict and fragmentation have generated deep suspicion among security actors. Carefully sequenced, low-risk cooperation efforts, especially at the local level, can help demonstrate the benefits of coordination and reduce the perceived risks of engagement.
- **Spoiler behaviour and political volatility:** Periods of transition may invite violence from actors seeking to disrupt or exploit reform processes. Preventive diplomacy, inclusive dialogue, and the establishment of protective mechanisms can help to limit the influence of spoilers.
- **Weak enforcement and institutional capacity:** Even where reforms are adopted, institutions may lack the capacity or legitimacy to implement them. Targeted technical support, joint monitoring, and reinforcement of rule-of-law norms can help create the conditions for gradual improvement.

Each of these challenges reinforces the importance of a flexible, locally rooted, and adaptive approach to reform; one that recognises political realities while seeking to shift them over time through practical cooperation and trust-building.

Conclusion: From Trust-Building to Gradual Integration

This paper does not assume the immediate unification of Libya's security institutions. Instead, it offers a sequenced path toward trust-building, institutional coordination, and eventual integration. Through a phased approach, it seeks to shift incentives, reduce fragmentation, and strengthen legitimate governance in a way that complements the UN's political roadmap for Libya.

Departing from abstract peacebuilding paradigms, the proposed approach acknowledges the persistence of rivalries, entrenched interests, and geopolitical complexity. It therefore balances incentives with firm guardrails, embeds reform within a credible framework, and centres community trust as a critical enabler of sustainable progress.

Ultimately, this paper affirms that political and security reforms should be mutually reinforcing. Without credible security reform, political agreements and future elections will lack durability; without a functioning political process, security institutions will remain fragmented and politicised.

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