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AI – Amnesty International

Libya: Government of National Unity must not legitimize militias and armed groups responsible for harrowing abuses

Members of the Internal Security Agency (ISA), a collection of powerful armed groups operating in eastern Libya, have committed harrowing human rights abuses to silence critics and opponents, including detaining them arbitrarily and subjecting them to enforced disappearances and torture, said Amnesty International.

Libya’s parliament, the House of Representatives, is currently reviewing the government’s 2021 budget proposal, which earmarks funds for militias and armed groups with histories of abuse, including the ISA. Amnesty International is calling on the Government of National Unity (GNU) not to reward abusive militias and armed groups with legitimacy and salaries.

Former Muammar al-Gaddafi-era security officers of the ISA, a reviled security and intelligence body with unchecked powers, have re-emerged in recent years joining a collection of armed groups using the ISA name and operating in the strongholds of the self-styled Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), commanded by General Khalifa Haftar.

“The Internal Security Agency armed groups have welcomed in their ranks Gaddafi-era officers and revived brutal tactics of repression. They have abducted, tortured and forcibly disappeared hundreds on the basis of their tribal affiliations or in reprisal for their opinions with the clear aim of crushing any criticism of those in power in eastern Libya,” said Heba Morayef, Regional Director of Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa Regional Office.

“Instead of incorporating armed groups suspected of crimes under international law into state institutions and trying to secure their allegiance or score political points by granting them financial backing, the Government of National Unity and those with *de facto* control of territory must take steps to hold perpetrators to account. Any attempts to integrate members of militias or armed groups must involve rigorous and thorough individual vetting.”

Amnesty International interviewed 15 people, including former detainees, families of victims, activists and lawyers and found that ISA armed groups in the cities of Benghazi, al-Marj, Ajdabiya, Derna, and Sirte have targeted individuals on the basis of their tribal affiliations, as well as activists, journalists, and critics of the LAAF and affiliated armed groups who suffered abuses in 2020 and 2021.

Return to Gaddafi-era repressive practices

Amnesty International found that heavily armed men affiliated to the ISA seized men, women and children from their homes, streets or other public places, without a warrant, sometimes blindfolding or fully covering their faces and physically assaulting them during their abduction. Those taken were held at locations controlled by the ISA without any access to lawyers and families for prolonged periods of time, in conditions that amount to enforced disappearances and facilitate torture and other ill-treatment. Since 2014, ISA members have abducted hundreds across LAAF controlled areas.

All those interviewed told Amnesty International that ISA members had beaten them or their loved ones with objects including backs of rifles and water pipes and threatened them with execution, sexual violence, indefinite detention, and violence against their family members for the purpose of extracting information or confessions. Former detainees also described being kept in dirty, overcrowded and unventilated cells; being given limited food; and subjected to forced labour.

A man told Amnesty International about his arrest in mid-2020 by members of an ISA group in eastern Libya, after he published a social media post critical of measures taken to combat the spread of Covid-19. He said that ISA members accused him of heresy and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, and subjected him to beatings with firearms and water pipes, as well as punches and kicks for four days.

In Ajdabiya, Amnesty International gathered accounts by several members of Maghabra tribe of being tortured by the ISA due to their alleged tribal affiliation with Ibrahim Jadran, former leader of the Petroleum Facilities Guard, an armed group opposed to the LAAF. Amnesty International examined photos showing the body of a man bearing marks that correlated with his account of how ISA-Ajdabiya members beat him with water pipes and tied his leg with a barbed wire.

Women are also among those abducted and unlawfully deprived of their liberty by the ISA as the result of their perceived opposition to the LAAF. For example, ISA Benghazi members abducted Haneen al-Abduli, the daughter of assassinated lawyer Hanan al-Barassi, on 25 March 2021 from the street and detained her until 28 June 2021 solely due to her public calls for accountability for her mother’s killing.

[Hundreds](#) of those detained by the ISA, some for years without trial, were eventually referred to military trials across eastern Libya. Others were released without charge after being forced to sign statements promising not to criticize the LAAF and affiliated armed groups, including on social media, or to refrain from leaving certain areas. Members of the ISA have also maintained their stranglehold on eastern Libya through the harassment and intimidation of political opponents, LAAF critics, pro-democracy activists, and human rights defenders, through threatening phone calls, summoning for questioning and warning them of prolonged detention, torture or even death if they continue their activism. Former detainees and activists told Amnesty International that as a result and out of fear of reprisals, they refrained from publicly exercising their rights to freedom of expression or wanted to leave eastern Libya.

The ISA in Ajdabiya had summoned activist and director of the Ajdabiya branch of the Red Crescent, Mansour Atti, multiple times in the months leading to his abduction on 3 June 2021 by unidentified armed men. His fate and whereabouts remain unknown.

“The Government of National Unity and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces must immediately take steps to press for the releases of all those held solely for expressing critical views or for their tribal affiliations. It is outrageous that instead of pursuing accountability and putting an end of the cycle of abuse by the Internal Security Agency, the Libyan authorities are yet again legitimizing and appeasing unaccountable militias and armed groups,” said Heba Morayef.

GNU Legitimizing and financing abusive militias and armed groups

The GNU’s latest proposed [budget](#) presented on 3 August, which has yet to be approved by Libya’s parliament, allocates funds to militias and armed groups operating across Libya. The proposal allocates 260 million LYD (57 million USD) to the [ISA](#) and 2.5 billion LYD (550 million USD) to [the LAAF](#).

The budget also allocates funds to other abusive and unaccountable militias nominally under control of the GNU and operating in western Libya, including 146 million LYD (32 million USD) to the [Special Deterrence Forces \(Radaa\)](#), under the command of Abdel Raouf Kara, 40 million LYD (8.9 million USD) to the [Stability Support Agency](#), led by Abdulghani al-Kikli, known as Gheniwa and 35 million LYD (7.8 million USD) to the [Public Security Agency](#) led by Emad al-Tarabulsi.

Background

Libya had been divided between two entities and parallel institutions competing for legitimacy and control in the east and west of the country since 2014, until the [GNU](#) was appointed in March 2021. However, it has been struggling to exercise effective control over Libyan territory, as armed groups still control large swathes of the east and south of Libya.

The collection of armed groups known as the ISA in eastern Libya began operating after the LAAF seized control of the area following the launch of Operation Dignity by General Khalifa Haftar in early 2014. They included in their ranks several Gaddafi-era ISA members. These groups formally operated under the name of General Investigations Agency (GIA), but were colloquially referred to as *Jihaz Al-Amn al-Dakhli* (Internal Security Agency). In June 2018, the interim government of Abudallah al-Thinni in eastern Libya, which was allied to the LAAF, formally [changed](#) their name to ISA.

In 2017, the LAAF-allied House of Representatives issued a decree bringing ISA forces under the command of the LAAF. Testimonies and [other](#) information collected by Amnesty International point to the cooperation and handover of detainees between ISA and other LAAF-affiliated armed groups including the military police and the 128th and the Tarek Ibn Zeyad brigades.

The ISA armed groups operating under the *de facto* authority of the LAAF each have their own commanders, all nominally answering to one top commander, Imhamed Kamel, since his appointment in [December 2020](#) by the House of Representatives.

A separate entity also named ISA, led by [Lotfi al-Harari](#) nominally under the authority of the GNU Prime Minister, operates in western Libya.

ecoi.net summary:

Eastern Libya: Members of Internal Security Agency, a collection of armed groups, have committed human rights abuses, including arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and torture, against their critics and opponents

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