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Subject: Benghazi Weekly Report, Special Eid al-Fitr Edition - August 20, 2012

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TAGS: PGOV, PREL, PHUM, KDEM, KISL, LY  
Captions: SENSITIVE, SIPDIS  
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1. (SBU) This is Benghazi's weekly round-up of political, economic, and social issues not included in previous reporting.
2. (SBU) **Municipal Council Chair Resigns:** Benghazi Municipal Council Chair Shahat Awami announced his resignation August 16, amid rumors of death threats from employees and widespread complaints regarding the GOL's failure to provide the council with promised budgetary support. Awami, who met with visiting NSS Libya Country Director Ben Fishman last month, ultimately found his unclear authorities no match for Benghazi's obvious problems. Although other council members tell us a replacement will be selected shortly after Eid, Awami's departure after only a few months in office begs the fundamental question of "who is actually in charge?" With only a fraction of its promised budgetary allotment on hand and no consensus on the municipality's right to raise revenues directly, municipal workers are not being paid, and municipal services are not being delivered. The city's Department of Social Affairs has been a particular black hole, announcing August 18 that it will be unable to disburse payments promised to poor families for Eid. Trash removal remains the most visible symbol of the city's straits; the much-heralded arrival of five new trash trucks this week will double the city's fleet. Comment: The municipality's stumbles reinforce partisan loyalties, undermine confidence in government institutions, and open the door to political parties interested in increasing their profile by providing social services. End comment.
3. (SBU) **Barasi Bandwagon:** Minister of Electricity Awad Barasi, a Benghazi native, is reportedly recovering from exhaustion after a week spent trying to address the country's rolling blackouts. Before public disclosure that he had gone to a local hospital for treatment, Barasi was trying to keep a low profile despite media speculation that he is on the short list of potential candidates for Prime Minister. Local contacts across the political spectrum speak highly of Barasi, praising his technical competence, his personal modesty, and his strong commitment to maintaining his ties to Benghazi. Human rights activist Hana el-Ghallal described Barasi as "the only candidate who is new and not simply recycled." Although supporters acknowledge that his selection would put easterners in the two most senior positions in government (given Magariaf's origins in Ajdabiya), many here are still hopeful that Barasi will emerge from the field, suggesting that only leaders from the East will have the credibility to cement a deal on decentralization. Still, one contact remarked with regret that this "might only make sense to easterners."

4. (SBU) **Security Dialogue:** Women's rights activist Wafa Bugaighis is leading efforts to begin a public campaign against the recent spate of violent incidents. After being briefly detained along with other local and international attendees at a seminar in Benghazi last week, Bugaighis told us that "for the first time since the revolution, I am scared." Nonetheless, she has met with the leadership of the militia responsible for the incident, trying to establish an inclusive dialogue about security and human rights as "everyone's responsibility." She asked in exasperation, "How can we be the commercial capital if we can't keep our streets safe?" Bugaighis is particularly concerned by the lack of public remorse over the killings of former regime officials, which she sees as a reflection of concern that the government is too weak to bring them to justice.

5. (SBU) **Security Incidents:**

- Protesting the recent series of incidents at local hospitals, staff at Benghazi's Hawari Hospital have been on strike since August 15.
- The border with Egypt was briefly closed following a reported exchange of gunfire between Egyptian forces and smugglers late in the week.
- Rumors of a strike of security personnel at Benghazi Airport – reportedly prompted by prolonged non-payment of salaries – ran rampant during the week.
- UN officials believe the Supreme Security Council is "fading away," unwilling to take on "anyone with powerful patrons or from powerful tribes."
- Incidents continue in this security vacuum, including a grenade attack on Army Colonel Abdullah el-Shaafi on August 14 and the reported storming of the al-Bilad newspaper by unidentified armed men on August 16.
- On a positive note, the local police did respond informally to acknowledge receipt of our request for a permanent presence in Benghazi; we will follow up with them in the days ahead. Also of note, the war veterans who had been occupying the Tibesti hotel lobby have departed and the hotel is said to be preparing to reopen on August 22.

Signature: HICKS

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