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Libya After Haftar

by [Ben Fishman](#)

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Brief Analysis

Given the potentially imminent demise of a key powerbroker, Washington will need to refocus on transition issues in Libya and help the UN implement its action plan.

On April 10, rumors reverberated through Libya and Washington that influential military figure and possible presidential candidate Khalifa Haftar had been evacuated to Paris for medical treatment due to a health emergency. Following subsequent reports that the septuagenarian commander may have died or suffered a major stroke, UN representative Ghassan Salame announced that he had "communicated by phone" with Haftar and discussed "the general situation in Libya"—a statement that confirmed he was alive but little else. Haftar's spokespeople and allies insist he is well, but the disappearance of the normally media-friendly leader suggests otherwise.

Whether or not Haftar returns home, his reputation as a strongman and his prospects for leading postwar Libya have been damaged—a development that could affect the country's political balance, the stability of its oil-producing eastern regions, the chances of holding elections this year, and the activity of jihadist groups. To forestall these scenarios, Washington should work with France, Britain, and other allies to formulate a comprehensive post-Haftar strategy.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING HAFTAR

In 1969, Haftar was a military officer who conspired with Col. Muammar Qadhafi to overthrow King Idris. By 1987,

he was commanding forces in Libya's ill-fated war against Chad, which resulted in his capture. Qadhafi disavowed Haftar and hundreds of other prisoners from that conflict—a perceived betrayal that turned the commander against the regime and spurred him to join an opposition group based in Chad. This group later received covert training from the United States as part of the Reagan administration's attempts to oust Qadhafi. When that scheme failed, Haftar fled Chad and eventually resettled in the United States, where he lived for nearly two decades before returning to Benghazi once the 2011 revolt began.

Haftar did not play an influential role in the revolution. In 2014, however, after a spate of assassinations targeting former regime members, security officials, and activists, he seized on the growing despair in Benghazi by announcing "Operation Dignity," a military campaign intended to purge Libya of what he called Islamist terrorists. In response, the revolutionaries who had borne the brunt of the fighting—including many Islamists—formed their own militia, Libya Dawn. The ensuing war cost several thousand lives, destroyed significant infrastructure, and enabled Libya's nascent Islamic State (IS) chapter to expand. The fighting drew to close in late 2015 with the UN-sponsored Libya Political Agreement (LPA) and subsequent formation of the Government of National Accord (GNA), but Haftar and his political allies ultimately rejected both initiatives, undercutting the chance for an enduring political solution.

Throughout this period, Haftar was supported by outside actors such as the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, which shared his vehemently anti-Islamist ideology. Both countries bombed Libya Dawn positions in Tripoli on at least one occasion, while Egypt targeted Islamists in eastern Libya in retaliation for IS attacks in the Sinai Peninsula. They also sent Haftar weapons and supplies in violation of the UN arms embargo.

Russia courted him as well, reportedly dispatching trainers to his forces in the east. France took the courtship a step further—in addition to operating counterterrorism missions out of a Haftar-controlled airbase, President Emmanuel Macron hosted him in Paris last July, the first European leader to treat him as a co-equal to Libya's prime minister.

Over the past year, however, Haftar's international allies began to sour on him for repeatedly promising total victory and bragging about his vast territorial control without backing his words up on the ground. Benghazi was never fully secured from terrorism, as evidenced by an apparent assassination attempt targeting a Libyan National Army general earlier today. Haftar's forces never captured the eastern city of Darnah despite a brutal siege, and his faction entirely avoided the 2016 anti-IS campaign in Sirte, leaving the fighting to an Islamist-led coalition of militias from Misratah.

As Haftar's stature abroad weakened, his local coalition also begun to fracture, since much of his internal strength derived from his foreign relationships. Yet his name recognition and reputation as a strongman still made him a potentially strong presidential candidate before his illness. Likewise, his network of influence in the east and his control of oil-producing territory positioned him as a powerbroker (or spoiler) in any effort to stabilize the country.

ADVANCING THE UN ACTION PLAN

In September, the UN Security Council approved an action plan prepared by the Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) to move the political transition forward. The plan set an ambitious timeline for adopting a constitution, convening a national dialogue, and holding legislative and presidential elections, all in 2018.

For Haftar, the prospect of ruling Libya through legitimate electoral means rather than unachievable military conquest was highly appealing. He tried to position himself as indispensable to the action plan, just as he did in 2015-2016 with the LPA and GNA. Last December, he suggested that he might participate in upcoming elections, but two months later he warned ominously that Libya may not be ready for democracy. In other words, he was seemingly positioning himself to either run for president or prevent the elections from happening.

On April 12, UNSMIL envoy Ghassan Salame updated Arab foreign ministers on the action plan during a meeting in Saudi Arabia. After expressing hope that Libya would soon pass a law to initiate a constitutional referendum, he

noted that the national dialogue had begun in some cities, with a national conference planned for the summer. He also stated that local elections would proceed soon, and parliamentary elections thereafter. At the same time, he admitted that UNSMIL's "broad dialogue with the various armed formations in Libya" remained challenging, particularly on issues such as enabling elections, demobilizing their forces, and creating a national military.

POST-HAFTAR ALTERNATIVES

Even if Haftar recovers and returns to Benghazi, his status seems irreparably damaged, and he has no clear successor. If he is incapacitated or otherwise sidelined, his potential heirs will probably fight each other for access to the foreign and local funding that was so critical to his influence, while his anti-Islamist allies in the west and south will likely reassert their independence until another leader emerges to offer them funds and arms. In Libya, ideology alone does not sufficiently predict a faction's strategic alliances.

Going forward, Salame and the UN have two choices. They can adhere to the action plan, negotiating with a wider range of actors to facilitate a peaceful referendum and elections. Or they can explore amending the plan's timeline and sequence, working with the GNA, with the civilian leaders of the eastern-based, Haftar-influenced House of Representatives, and with Khaled al-Mishri, the newly elected head of the High State Council, a legislative body with ill-defined authority under the LPA. Salame has already stated that he needs each party's cooperation to pass referendum legislation.

In the latter scenario, UNSMIL could encourage Libyan authorities to take preparatory steps before the referendum and national elections—namely, holding municipal elections, empowering locally driven development initiatives funded by an agreed budget, and convening the national conference. Locally elected officials and conference participants might then be able to shape the preparation of an electoral law and build momentum toward national elections.

For its part, the United States has been loath to engage in Libyan politics during the Trump administration, instead focusing on periodic airstrikes against IS and al-Qaeda targets. Given Haftar's potentially imminent demise, however, Washington will need to refocus on transition issues. If the commander's allies split, violence will increase and IS or other jihadists will benefit, as occurred in 2014. The key is to minimize any such outbreaks so that UNSMIL can implement the action plan.

To this end, Washington should send advisors to UNSMIL's militia integration effort. It should also ask allies to help fund the UN Development Programme's Stabilization Facility for Libya, so that municipal councils have new projects to launch immediately after local elections. Finally, the administration should press European and Arab partners to increase their broader political and financial support for the UN and avoid courting would-be successors to Haftar—a policy mistake that contributed to Libya's current divisions.

Ben Fishman, an associate fellow with The Washington Institute, served as director for North Africa at the National Security Council from 2011 to 2013. ❖



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