

After the Islamic State in Libya: All-Out War?

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Andrew Engel, a former research assistant at The Washington Institute, recently received his master's degree in security studies at Georgetown University and currently works as an Africa analyst.



Brief Analysis

The battle against the Islamic State in Sirte distracted many observers from Libya's ongoing political dysfunction, failed reconciliation process, and growing potential for renewed inter-militia warfare.

Last month, Misratah-based hardline revolutionary forces scored a high-profile victory against the Libyan branch of the Islamic State in Sirte. Far from easing the country's dire security situation, however, the outcome has once again left rival militias sharing a frontline. Following his own military successes against extremists in Benghazi, Gen. Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army (LNA) in the east are now set for renewed conflict against the Misratah camp and Islamist forces based in Tripoli, spurring a January 4 statement from the UN special representative to Libya urging "all parties to act with restraint." Each of the political mechanisms intended to heal the country's divisions has failed, including the UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement of December 2015 and the subsequent Presidential Council (PC), which has tried to get a Government of National Accord (GNA) up and running. Skirmishes are breaking out, and both the political agreement and the GNA risk becoming irrelevant.

EDGING TOWARD CONFLICT

On January 3, Haftar dismissed a proposed meeting with PC chairman and GNA prime minister Fayeze al-Sarraj, arguing that extremism must be defeated before Libya can consider instituting democratic processes. He then threatened to march on Tripoli and "liberate" the southwestern oil fields -- a warning that should be taken seriously given his previous capture of Libya's "Oil Crescent" from the GNA-aligned Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) in September. In response, former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group leader Sami al-Saadi wrote on January 8, "Don't blame the revolutionaries [in Tripoli and Misratah] for the war to come."

Other Tripoli Islamists are urging war against Haftar, and Misratan commanders have vowed resistance as well. Factions from both cities provided material support to the unsavory Islamist and jihadist groups that fought the LNA in Benghazi, such as the Benghazi Defense Brigades (BDB) and the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, which

includes the designated terrorist organization Ansar al-Sharia. The BDB has also received support from jihadists in Darnah, and both groups likely cooperate with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State against the LNA.

Such support for extremists is not without consequence. In response to the Misratah Military Council's cooperation with the BDB at al-Jufrah Air Base in central Libya, including a reported December 25 meeting there, the LNA carried out an airstrike on one of the council's C-130 aircraft on January 3 and imposed a no-fly zone over the area. Meanwhile, clashes broke out near the southwestern Temenhent Air Base between fighters loyal to the LNA and Misratah's Third Force.

THE GNA'S SHORTCOMINGS

The GNA was established to be a caretaker third government superimposed on two competing governments: the House of Representatives (HOR) in Tobruk (which is under Haftar and includes the "Interim Government" in Bayda), and the predominantly Islamist remnants of the General National Congress (GNC) in Tripoli. Both sides have acted as spoilers.

Under the Libyan Political Agreement, the HOR is required to approve the GNA and the constitution, yet it has twice **voted against (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-twin-battle-in-libya-against-the-islamic-state-and-for-unity>)** the PC's list of GNA ministers and chronically lacks a quorum. Although many HOR representatives reportedly wanted to ratify the GNA (with reservations over its military and security provisions), Speaker Aguila Saleh has blocked such a vote. And because the GNA is limited by a one-year term upon HOR approval, or two years if the new constitution is not yet finalized, spoilers can wait it out.

In the meantime, most of the GNC has reconstituted itself as the High State Council, with Misratah hardliner Abdulrahman al-Swehli as chairman. While this advisory body was envisioned under the Libyan Political Agreement, the GNC took control of it under questionable legal authority and without HOR ratification. The council later attempted to seize the HOR's legislative powers, with at least one rival spokesman describing the incident as a "coup." In mid-October, some GNC remnants even tried to resurrect the old National Salvation Government in Tripoli, which had rivaled the Interim Government in Bayda prior to the December 2015 agreement.

The PC is also dealing with internal divisions. Two of its nine members, Ali al-Qatrani and Omar al-Aswad, have boycotted its meetings. Remarking on Qatrani, pro-GNA member Muhammad Ammari stated, "The strange thing about those who say the political agreement has collapsed is that they are not committed to its application." Indeed, Qatrani has publicly called for military rule under Haftar. On January 2, PC member Musa al-Koni resigned because the council "failed to unite state institutions." Previously, member Fathi Majibri had attempted to stack the GNA with new appointees while the prime minister was out of the country; Sarraj later annulled the appointments.

On the security front, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has noted that hundreds of thousands of Libyans continue to live in unsafe conditions -- a situation exacerbated by the PC's lack of progress on disarming, demobilizing, and reintegrating militiamen into a new army. The GNA is also divided on who will lead that army. Per the Libyan Political Agreement, the PC is supposed to act as supreme commander of the army, but there is little command and control over the armed groups ostensibly loyal to the GNA. The Interim Government in Bayda has called for citizens to support the LNA in "cleansing Libya of terrorism," while the GNA's proposed foreign minister, Taha Siala, insisted that Haftar's LNA form the nucleus of the new army. Yet the High State Council dismissed Siala's idea. Proposed GNA defense minister al-Mahdi al-Barghathi, a former LNA officer from the east, also opposes Haftar, while Grand Mufti Sadiq al-Gharyani and other Tripoli Islamists have called for a national army to fight the general. And in Tobruk, HOR speaker Saleh reportedly refuses to relinquish his technical role as LNA supreme commander, just as Haftar is opposed to giving up his practical control of the army.

The PC has likewise failed to consolidate competing armed groups in Tripoli. In mid-October, some of the council's

own Presidential Guard defected to the remnants of the GNC and National Salvation Government, seizing the High State Council's headquarters. December saw the city's most violent clashes since 2014, which could benefit Haftar by weakening his rivals and convincing more people to favor his opposition to the PC and GNA.

Amid these rampant security problems, the World Bank described Libya's economy as "near collapse" in October. The country has a budget deficit of 70 percent, and it has suffered from runaway inflation, a liquidity crisis, and water and electricity shortages over the past year. According to the UN, 1.3 million Libyans are in need of humanitarian assistance.

The GNA has also been unable to resume oil exports, further undermining its legitimacy. Last summer, the government paid the PFG tens of millions of dollars to reopen the oil ports, but the guard failed to make good on its promises. Exports from the Oil Crescent only resumed after two years of inactivity because the LNA forcibly ended the PFG's extortion racket.

CONCLUSION

Many observers originally hoped that the Presidential Council could bring political and armed factions together through its control of Libya's oil revenue and its ability to receive security assistance via exemptions to the UN arms embargo. Yet that premise has collapsed. The PFG chose extortion over exporting oil, and the GNA's attempts to streamline security have only brought more chaos.

If the current circumstances persist, General Haftar's faction will hold more cards than its rivals, giving it little incentive to implement the Libyan Political Agreement. By seizing oil fields, the LNA will have the opportunity to resume oil exports and bring tangible economic benefits to Libyans, likely bolstering its reputation and further increasing its superior cohesiveness compared to other armed groups. Factions aligned with Haftar also continue to receive greater political, security, and intelligence support from foreign backers, making it easier for them to abstain from reconciliation. These backers include Russia, which may build on its growing influence in Syria and Egypt to further empower Haftar.

Yet the general's successes in the east cannot be replicated in Misratah and Tripoli, and marching on the west would only bring more devastation to Libya. Renegotiating the political agreement to focus on military and security provisions as a starting point, and not an end point, may help prevent a renewed civil war.

Andrew Engel is an associate senior analyst with the Navanti Group, where he specializes in failed states in the Middle East and North Africa. He traveled across Libya after its official liberation and received his master's degree from Georgetown University's Security Studies Program. ❖

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