

Between Democracy and State Collapse: Libya's Uncertain Future

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Factional fighting in Tripoli and the declaration of an Islamic emirate in Benghazi suggest a bleak future for Libya. Can the new House of Representatives right the country's course?

In July, militia battles that had previously been limited mainly to Benghazi spread to Libya's capital, Tripoli, and they show no signs of abating. According to Libya Body Count, which began tracking violent deaths in January 2014, July saw at least 469 such fatalities across the country, more than nine times the figure for June. The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) has alleged "mass crimes" and attacks against civilians in Tripoli and Benghazi, and two neighbors with powerful armies, Egypt and Algeria, have called vocally for intervention, whether by Western powers or Egypt and Algeria themselves. A former British ambassador to Libya, Sir Richard Dalton, said British and European Union members could send troops if the Libyan authorities made such a request.

Tripoli

Around Tripoli International Airport and in southern and southwestern Tripoli, Islamist militias from Misratah and their regional allies are fighting against nationalist Zintani forces and their allies. Well over a hundred people have been killed, and large fuel depots have twice been hit and set ablaze, sparking fears of a humanitarian and environmental crisis.

The mood across Tripoli is desperate. Grocery shelves have been emptied, fuel is in short supply, and residents face water and electricity cuts that last hours. Students are highly unlikely to return to school in September. Some locals claim the fighting is worse than in 2011. Moreover, Misratan forces have vowed that the battle will not end in Tripoli, but in Zintan, suggesting the fighting will likely continue.

The security breakdown has prompted a mass exodus from Libya over the past month. Some 50,000 Egyptians have fled, and more than 25,000 Libyans have escaped to Tunisia, which by some accounts had already absorbed more than a million Libyan refugees from the 2011 Libyan revolution. This time, fatal clashes and stampedes occurred at

the Ras al-Jadir crossing, spurring Tunisia to seal its border on August 1. Previously, Tunisia had called on its estimated 50,000-60,000 nationals in Libya to return, but how they will manage with the border closed is unclear.

Other countries seeking to remove their nationals from Libya include China, which has evacuated 700 Chinese. The Philippines hopes to evacuate its 13,000 nationals, who make up 60 percent of Libya's hospital workers, foretelling a heavy strain on the country's health care system. In the other direction, Algeria has announced it will deport Libyan refugees through Tunisia.

And major embassies -- including those of the United States, France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, Japan, and Britain -- have closed their doors, further isolating Tripoli from international actors. UN staffers have also left the country.

Benghazi

Violence meanwhile continues in Benghazi, a city torn between nationalist and Islamist forces of varying degrees of extremism. Gen. Khalifa Haftar and his Operation Dignity, which claims to be the state's sole legitimate army and is supported by federalists and large eastern tribes, is suffering losses at the hands of the U.S.-designated terrorist group Ansar al-Sharia and its Islamist allies. Libya's foreign minister, Mohamed Abdel Aziz, recently claimed to have proof that Libyans and foreign fighters are traveling to Benghazi from other battlefields, such as Syria and Iraq, to support Ansar al-Sharia and the Benghazi Shura Council.

On July 29, a reported one thousand Ansar al-Sharia and allied fighters overran Camp 36 of the al-Saiqa Special Forces in Benghazi's Bou Atni district. The Islamist fighters seized military hardware and ammunition, and compelled the special forces into a "tactical withdrawal" to the city's outskirts. In celebration, Ansar al-Sharia leader Muhammad al-Zahawi announced to Radio Tawhid that "Benghazi has become an Islamic emirate" -- certainly a premature announcement, but worrying nonetheless.

A Return to the Democratic Process?

Eyes are now turned to Libya's recently elected House of Representatives, one remaining state vestige that may prove able to dampen the violence, even if partially. On August 2, two days before its officially scheduled meeting, 158 of 188 members participated in an emergency session in Tobruk, Libya's eighth-largest and easternmost city -- a locale that indicates how widespread the instability has become in larger population centers.

While the emergency meeting was intended "to unite the nation," divisions quickly emerged. The head of the outgoing General National Congress (GNC), Nuri Abu Sahmain, derided the session as illegitimate, insisting that the handover ceremony be held in Tripoli. Moreover, the thirty absent representatives, most of them Islamists affiliated with the Misratah-based Muslim Brotherhood, had boycotted or simply failed to attend, with some choosing instead to meet in Misratah.

Conjectures vary, but the House of Representatives looks set to bring together some 50-60 nationalists, 26-28 federalists, and 30 Islamists, with the remaining members independents. Even without precise numbers, it is clear that the Islamist trend did not fare as well in this round as in the 2013 GNC vote. Ageela Issa, a nationalist from Guba hostile to Islamists, was even elected to lead the House.

The Islamist boycott, along with bickering over the handover ceremony, indicates that a national unity government may be hard to achieve, but given the Islamist opposition's smaller numbers than in the GNC, this outcome is not impossible. Such a government would provide greater operating space and legitimacy to Libya's other directly elected body, the Constitution Drafting Committee, which has yet to produce the country's first constitution in more than four decades.

More Assistance Needed

As fighting enters its third week in Tripoli and Islamist militants gain ground in Benghazi, Libyans increasingly speak in terms of town and tribe, and they fear their country risks going the route of Somalia. To prevent state failure, Libyan foreign minister Abdel Aziz warned that he will request the expansion of UNSMIL and greater assistance from the United States to confront extremism and build state institutions.

On July 28, in response to the deteriorating situation, a U.S. State Department spokesperson remarked that Libya's "challenges are inherently political and must be solved through dialogue." On August 4, France, Italy, Germany, Britain, and the United States issued a joint statement calling for an immediate ceasefire and peaceful political dialogue. U.S. secretary of state John Kerry, in remarks delivered with Libyan prime minister Abdullah al-Thini, added that "Libya's challenges can only be solved by Libyans themselves."

Indeed, political dialogue could ostensibly halt the fighting in northwestern Libya, where the various factions have paid lip service to the political process. Furthermore, coordinated international efforts to broker a ceasefire through UNSMIL and the House of Representatives could boost the latter's perceived effectiveness and legitimacy. Toward this end, an encouraging move came in the UN's assertion that it will not recognize any party that boycotts the House of Representatives.

But political dialogue alone will not solve the conflict in Benghazi, Darnah -- which has long been lost to shadowy extremists groups -- and elsewhere in northeastern Libya, where the challenges are primarily security driven. Groups like Ansar al-Sharia not only categorically reject democracy and dialogue, but they have pursued a campaign of irregular warfare against the postrevolution transitional process.

All the same, political dialogue can and should be pursued between General Haftar and the House of Representatives to achieve three goals: (1) affirm the general's support for the democratic process, which was undermined by his past threats to dissolve the GNC; (2) encourage Haftar to deescalate his rhetoric against Islamist political parties, which he has conflated with all agents of Islamic extremism, thereby possibly helping end their House boycott; and (3) eventually realign Haftar's forces, which are primarily from the army and police, with the House of Representatives and its nascent legitimacy.

The United States should leverage its contacts with Haftar, which presumably date to the late 1980s when he turned against the Qadhafi regime, to bring about such an accord with the House. In exchange for unifying Haftar's armed forces with the House and the new government it will form, the United States could then deliver greater security assistance in line with what is being sought by Abdel Aziz to combat Ansar al-Sharia and its allies in northeastern Libya.

The U.S. National Security Strategy states that "America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones." If not for its newly elected House of Representatives, Libya would be a prime candidate for identification as a collapsed state. In viewing Libya as a state verging on collapse, officials will see with increasing clarity the need for both political and security solutions.

Andrew Engel, a former research assistant at The Washington Institute, currently works as an Africa analyst. He traveled across Libya after its official liberation and recently received his master's degree in security studies from Georgetown University. ❖



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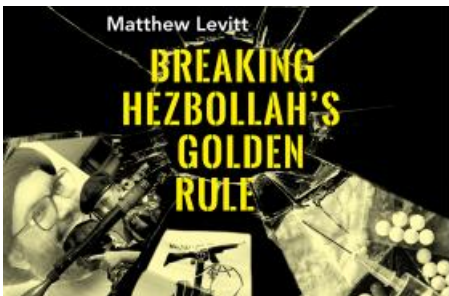
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