

# Libya's Other Battle

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

## The escalation in and around Tripoli holds troubling parallels with the tribal divisions that precipitated Libya's bloody 1936 civil war.

Libya is a fractured country whose long-simmering violence is threatening to boil over. Internecine fighting once mostly limited to Benghazi -- where Maj. Gen. Khalifa Haftar launched "Operation Dignity" against U.S.-designated terrorist group Ansar al-Sharia and other armed Islamists -- has now spread to Tripoli. The U.S. embassy was hurriedly evacuated on July 26, and foreign governments have urged their nationals to flee the country.

The Tripoli fighting erupted on July 12, pitting largely Islamist militias from the Muslim Brotherhood stronghold of Misratah and their northwestern allies against well-equipped and trained nationalist brigades from Zintan. The latter factions -- the Qaaqaa, Sawaiq, and Madani Brigades -- are tribal and back the more secular-leaning political alliance, the National Forces Alliance (NFA), but ostensibly belong to the Libyan army. The Misratan and Islamist militias have since bombarded Tripoli International Airport, which has been held by Zintani forces since the revolution ended. This battle -- in which 90 percent of aircraft on the ground were destroyed, costing over \$1.5 billion -- marks a dark turn for Libya, increasing the likelihood of the country repeating its brutal 1936 intertribal civil war.

## TROUBLING PATTERNS

The fighting in Benghazi is fairly straightforward: extremist groups are using guerrilla warfare in a bid to replace the state with their illiberal order. But northwest Libya is far more complicated, akin to the political power plays seen in television dramas -- if they were facilitated with heavy weaponry.

Historically, tribal divisions in this area led to Libya's first modern civil war between major tribes such as the Warfallah (who fought against Misratah) and the Mashasha (who fought against Zintan). Today, this pattern is repeating. In contrast, tribes in eastern Libya have tended to be more ethnically homogenous and politically unified,

as reflected in their past front against Italian colonial forces and, more recently, the federalist alliance with Haftar's forces against Islamists and extremists.

Another important contemporary aspect is the international scene: the nationalists supposedly receive backing from the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, while Islamists who rely on Misratah are supported by Turkey, Qatar, and Sudan. In other words, the battle for Tripoli is also a proxy war for broader regional currents.

## **POLITICAL PROBLEMS PRECIPITATING THE FIGHTING**

**S**everal political trends helped stoke the latest clashes. First, political stalemate paralyzed the defunct, soon-to-be disbanded General National Congress (GNC), upon which the country's transition to democracy depended. On July 7, 2012, 120 individual candidates and 80 others running on party lists were elected in a free and fair election. Considerable elation greeted the results, with the NFA winning thirty-nine seats to become the largest party in the GNC, while the Muslim Brotherhood's Justice and Construction Party (JCP) trailed with seventeen seats. Yet studies showed that independent Islamist and Salafist candidates held at least a modest margin over NFA-aligned independents, with some estimates suggesting that 80 percent of individual candidates were Islamist or religiously conservative in outlook. These Islamists gained favor with traditionally non-Islamist actors (e.g., the Amazigh community) by promising greater cultural rights. They also manipulated tribal, regional, and ethnic feuds to marginalize opposition. In the end, there were not enough independents with whom the NFA could ally.

Islamist and Salafist independents then formed the third largest political bloc, called al-Wafa. This hardline faction was led by Abdul Wahab al-Qayed, a former member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). His brother, Abu Yahya al-Libi, was a deputy al-Qaeda leader killed in a 2012 drone strike in Pakistan. These and other factors led Haftar to accuse Qayed and fellow GNC representative Muhammad Abu Sidra of supporting terrorism.

The political stalemate proved disastrous in a country without developed democratic institutions, norms, and procedures. Unable to achieve successes in parliament through typical means, the Islamist and revolutionary bloc employed extralegal tactics to force the passage of legislation that advanced their agenda, most notoriously the 2013 Political Isolation Law. One anecdote holds that a revolutionary even pulled the pin on a grenade in former prime minister Ali Zidan's office during negotiations on this poorly worded law, which bans individuals from participating in government if they have even the most tenuous connections with the former regime. The law was so deleterious to the country's body politic that Human Rights Watch urged Libyans to reject it. Indeed, its passage led to an untold number of resignations across government and severely weakened the NFA.

Without an effective NFA counterbalance, the Islamist agenda in the GNC stymied the rebuilding of Libya's nascent national security apparatus. For example, Islamists granted GNC head Nuri Abu Sahmain ill-defined commander-in-chief powers in December 2013 after he had previously tried to claim them for himself in August, allowing him to counter Prime Minister Zidan and implement the Islamist agenda directly. These powers were supposed to expire after one month, but this sunset provision was quickly ignored. Islamists in the GNC also promoted, legitimized, and funded Islamist militias, overturning previous laws tasking official government forces with securing the country.

In addition, the Islamist bloc sought to place its own commanders within the security apparatus. Soon after the revolution, former LIFG member Khaled Sharif became commander of the Libyan National Guard and undersecretary at the Ministry of Defense, and al-Wafa bloc member Salah Badi was later nominated as head of military intelligence. Badi is known for his ill conduct in the GNC, such as infamously striking a female representative, and his men were complicit in the November 2013 Gharghour massacre in Tripoli. More recently, he spearheaded the attack against the Tripoli airport.

## **SECURITY PROBLEMS PRECIPITATING THE FIGHTING**

**N**otwithstanding the highly publicized problems in Benghazi, the increasing Islamist control over Libya's semblance of government coincided with growing instability and abductions in Tripoli. Nationalist forces do not view this as a coincidence. In addition to increasing attacks against media outlets critical of Islamists and all-too-common kidnapping schemes against average Libyans, several high-profile officials have been abducted, including:

- former prime minister Zidan in October 2013; after he was freed, he accused GNC representatives Muhammad al-Kilani and Mustafa al-Triki of complicity
- five Egyptian diplomats and an embassy employee in January 2014; in exchange, Cairo was forced to release the leader of the Islamist Libyan Revolutionaries Operations Room, who had claimed responsibility for Zidan's abduction
- two Tunisian diplomats in March and April 2014, abducted by an Islamist outfit
- the Jordanian ambassador in April 2014; in exchange, Amman was forced to release an al-Qaeda operative.

## DANGEROUS TAILSPIN

**L**ibyan nationalists believe that all Islamists share the same ultimate goal: eventual establishment of an Islamic caliphate. According to common nationalist rhetoric, Islamists only "wore the robes of democracy" temporarily, shedding them after faring poorly in recent elections for a constitutional drafting committee and the new House of Representatives, which is supposed to replace the GNC. Now that the Zintanis and several other major tribes have endorsed Operation Dignity and various defensive measures, Benghazi-style street fighting could emerge in the capital.

This escalation leaves Libya in a dangerous tailspin. Each side claims to speak for the nation but suffers from internal contradictions: nationalists such as the Zintanis are hobbled by their seeming tribal exclusivity, while ongoing violence has begun to blur the lines between Islamists who favor democracy and those who favor violence. Leading Brotherhood members, for example, endorsed the Tripoli airport attack and recently acknowledged that they will not help defuse tensions unless Haftar is "eliminated."

## CONCLUSION

**I**nternally, Libya's only hope is to make progress with a true national dialogue process, and within the constitutional drafting committee and the newly elected House of Representatives -- assuming acceptance by Islamists and other revolutionaries. Externally, the United States, European Union, Friends of Libya, and UN Support Mission in Libya should insist on an immediate ceasefire and withdrawal of militias from the capital, similar to the limited progress made against militias after the Gharghour massacre. Such an initiative would allow the return of U.S. personnel to the capital so that Washington can better cooperate with allies in monitoring the ceasefire and liaise with Zintani and Misratan brigades. Pressure should also be brought to bear on foreign countries that provide material support to Libyan proxies without going through proper Libyan government channels. Finally, the United States should work with newly elected House of Representatives members in Tripoli to establish a mechanism for supervising a longer-term ceasefire, and for transferring control of certain institutions from militia groups and tribal-centric army brigades to the state.

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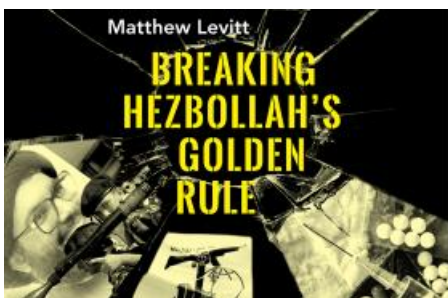
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