

Libya's Growing Risk of Civil War

by [Andrew Engel \(/experts/andrew-engel-0\)](/experts/andrew-engel-0)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Andrew Engel \(/experts/andrew-engel-0\)](/experts/andrew-engel-0)

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

Long-simmering tensions between non-Islamist and Islamist forces have boiled over into military actions centered around Benghazi and Tripoli, entrenching the country's rival alliances and bringing them ever closer to civil war.

On May 16, former Libyan army general Khalifa Haftar launched "Operation Dignity of Libya" in Benghazi, aiming to "cleanse the city of terrorists." The move came three months after he announced the overthrow of the government but failed to act on his proclamation. Since Friday, however, army units loyal to Haftar have actively defied armed forces chief of staff Maj. Gen. Salem al-Obeidi, who called the operation "a coup." And on Monday, sympathetic forces based in Zintan extended the operation to Tripoli. These and other developments are edging the country closer to civil war, complicating U.S. efforts to stabilize post-Qadhafi Libya.

DIVIDING LINES

Islamists and non-Islamist forces have long been contesting each other's claims to being the legitimate heart of the 2011 revolution. Islamist factions such as the Muslim Brotherhood-related Justice and Construction Party and the Loyalty to the Martyrs Bloc have dominated the General National Congress (GNC) since summer 2013, when the forcibly passed Political Isolation Law effectively barred all former Qadhafi regime members -- even those who had fought the regime -- from participating in government for ten years. Some members of the more-secular National Forces Alliance were subsequently pushed out of the GNC or resigned, and mid-level and senior personnel within the bureaucracy and armed forces were marginalized. Either by design or consequence, the armed forces have been forced to remain on the sidelines while the GNC authorized Islamist militias, both semiofficial and unofficial, to secure the country.

These Islamist forces largely operate under the Interior Ministry or Chief of Staff Obeidi, and they continue to support GNC head Nuri Abu Sahmain. Relevant units include the powerful nationwide Libya Shield, hardline brigades in Benghazi, and various brigades in eastern Tripoli such as the Libyan Revolutionaries Operating Room (LROR) and former units of the Supreme Security Committee. Non-Islamists generally operate under the Defense

Ministry and are best represented by western Libyan forces such as the al-Qaaqaa, Sawaiq, and al-Madani Brigades (based in Zintan and south-southwestern Tripoli) as well as the Benghazi-based al-Saiqa Special Forces. Rogue federalists led by Ibrahim al-Jathran also oppose the Islamists.

The GNC's mandate was legislated to end on February 7, but the body controversially extended it through year's end. Prior to the extension, Zintan-based non-Islamist militias that opposed the Political Isolation Law and the Islamist current as a whole had threatened to dissolve the GNC and came close to battling Islamist forces. Since then, procedurally questionable GNC votes have led to the ousting of former prime minister Ali Zeidan on March 11 and his replacement by Islamist-backed candidate Ahmed Maiteeq on May 4.

On May 18, Zintani forces attacked the GNC, attempting to detain representatives and forcibly dissolve the body. Haftar's spokesman, Muhammad al-Hijazi, explained the move to Libya al-Ahrar television: "This parliament supports these extremist Islamist entities...The goal is to arrest these Islamist bodies who wear the cloak of politics."

THE EASTERN THEATRE

Haftar's proclaimed February 14 coup was widely ridiculed throughout Libya for its bold fecklessness. The since-disbarred officer -- who formerly led the army during Muammar Qadhafi's disastrous war with Chad and is now viewed by some as the Libyan version of Egyptian military leader Abdul Fatah al-Sisi -- recuperated from his setback by heading to eastern Libya. There, he traveled from Sirte all the way to Tobruk near the Egyptian border, stumping for his anti-Islamist cause and recruiting disaffected soldiers and tribesmen. Among other things, he accused Islamist parties in the GNC of stymying the army's rehabilitation and doing nothing to counter the assassination campaign against current and former members of the security establishment. He also spoke of creating counterterrorism training camps and earned the loyalty of forces manning the air bases at Labraq, Benina, and, most recently, Tobruk.

Haftar's latest move against Islamists in Benghazi is focused on the U.S.-designated terrorist group Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL) and two Islamist militias: the Rafallah al-Sahati and February 17 Brigades. According to Aljazeera, Haftar's forces reportedly include airpower, some 6,000 soldiers, and tribal supporters who have established checkpoints outside Benghazi. In response, the Islamist-dominated GNC imposed a no-fly zone over Benghazi against its own fighter jets, but to little effect; the real threat to Haftar's airpower is the widespread presence of anti-aircraft weaponry, including MANPADS in possession of the February 17 Brigade.

Haftar's operation came on the heels of escalating clashes between the Saiqa Special Forces and ASL, including a recent suicide bombing (an escalatory tactic rarely seen in Libya) and the assassination of Benghazi general intelligence director Ibrahim al-Senussi the day after he appeared on television to warn of an Islamist conspiracy. Fighting between the Saiqa and ASL had even led to loose military cooperation with federalist commander Jathran's militia.

The degree to which Haftar coordinated with Jathran and Saiqa commander Wanes Boukhmade over the past few days is unclear, but both parties officially endorsed Haftar's operation on May 19. Since the beginning of the campaign, Saiqa units have gone on the offensive against ASL in Sidi Faraj, al-Hawari, al-Guarsha, and the Tikka areas of Benghazi, calling on all Libyans to demonstrate in support of "this national movement to defend the homeland."

THE WESTERN THEATRE

Tensions in Tripoli had been rising prior to Haftar's military operation. Islamist abductions of foreign diplomats -- most notably the Jordanian ambassador, held by a group demanding the release of an al-Qaeda operative -- were a worrisome new development in a city largely spared the excesses of Benghazi. Ibrahim al-Madani, leader of the al-Madani Brigade, justified Haftar's operation by blaming the LROR for the abduction and for "killing and destroying

Libya."

On May 18, a delegation calling itself "the Leadership of the Libyan Army" -- led by military police chief Col. Mukhtar Farnana, from Zintan -- read a statement on Libya al-Ahrar calling for the GNC's suspension, a temporary takeover by the sixty-person constitutional drafting committee based in Bayda, activation of the armed forces and police, a renewed national dialogue process, and the return of displaced Libyans. The statement also pledged that Libya would not be a cradle for terrorism.

In addition, Farnana claimed that Haftar's operation was "not a coup, but rather the expression of the people's will to end the GNC." The Facebook page representing al-Qaaqaa, Sawaiq, and al-Madani is making a concerted effort to portray the battle as neither tribally based nor an attempt to seize power, but rather a fight against a legislature that "has lost its legitimacy, marginalizes the army, and supports terrorist militias." Predictably, the LROR's own official statement described the entire operation as a coup. While leaders in Zintan share similar goals with Haftar, the degree to which the two fronts are coordinating or share a specific political vision is unclear; the Zintanis may yet oppose any attempt by Haftar to establish himself as the political leader of this battle.

Thus far, fighting has taken place from the Zintani-controlled Airport Road to Abu Salim and Bab Ben Ghashir. Zintani forces have attacked the LROR, while the Islamist Special Deterrent Force based at Mitiga Air Base in Suq al-Juma claimed to have repelled an attack as well. Grad rockets have been fired at Airport Road from the east, near Wadi al-Rabiyah in Islamist-dominated territory, with one allegedly striking the U.S. embassy. Battle lines continue to develop in and around Tripoli, with Libya Shield's central and western divisions threatening to enter the capital and Zintani forces reporting the movement of heavy artillery and tanks.

CHALLENGES FOR U.S. POLICYMAKERS

The latest offensive raises serious challenges for U.S. efforts to deescalate violence in Libya and mediate the conflict, since each side believes it possesses legitimacy and seeks to punish the other for transgressions. The fighting further complicates the familiar and uncomfortable balancing act of pursuing stability on the one hand, and a tumultuous and ostensibly democratic political process on the other. While Washington has a strong interest in defeating extremists, the actions of Haftar, the federalists, and the Zintani militias that oppose the GNC are nominally undermining Libya's primary representative institution, as tattered as it has become. Accordingly, U.S. officials and other parties should consider focusing on the elected sixty-person constitutional drafting committee and the national dialogue process instead of the GNC, since they may offer better vehicles for pursuing reconciliation.

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. He traveled across Libya after its official liberation. ❖

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