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Clashes in the Libyan capital: Context and Likely Repercussions

Unit for Political Studies

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

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On Saturday, 27 August 2022, violent armed clashes erupted in the Libyan capital and its surroundings between forces loyal to the Government of National Unity (GNU) headed by Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh and others loyal to Tobruk's eastern parliament headed by Fathi Bashagha; This resulted in dozens of deaths and injuries, as well as widespread property and infrastructure damage. The recent clashes, representing the third attempt by Bashagha supporters to enter the capital, raise questions about the prospects for security and political stability in Libya, and about the exit strategy from a crisis that has prevailed since 2014.

The Bashagha Government's Determination to Enter the Capital

Libya's eastern-based parliament appointed Fathi Bashagha as Prime Minister on 1 March 2022, days after withdrawing confidence from the GNU headed by Hamid Dbeibeh. Dbeibeh rejected the move as an illegitimate unilateral measure in contravention of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in Geneva,¹ pledging to hand power over only to an elected government.² The formation of the Bashagha government served to further Libyan divisions, revealing cracks in the western front that had successfully repelled Khalifa Haftar's attack on Tripoli in 2019 and 2020, including in Bashagha and Dbeibeh's hometown of Misurata — the military and economic centre in the western region.³

On 10 March 2022, a few days after Bashagha granted the confidence of the House of Representatives, he directed a military convoy from Misurata towards the government headquarters in Tripoli, via the eastern coastal road, but he was forced to retreat from Castelverde by Dbeibeh affiliated forces without any military clashes.⁴

On 17 May 2022, Bashagha again, accompanied by members of his government, tried and failed to enter the capital through Mitiga Airport, despite having loyalty of the Eighth Force militia (known as the Al-Nawasi Brigade).⁵ On May 17, 2022, Bashagha again, accompanied by members of his government, tried to enter the capital through Mitiga Airport, but this attempt also failed, despite the bias of the "Eighth Force" known as the "Al-Nawasi Brigade". Unlike the first attempt, the second involved clashes with Dbeibeh government affiliated forces, ending with Bashagha's departure to Ash Shwayrif and from there to Sirte, amid reports of Turkish special forces' intervention to secure his withdrawal after being besieged in the As-Sikka Road area in Tripoli. But Sirte proved only a temporary refuge for Bashagha and his followers, who was not deterred from his quest to overturn the capital.

1 "A New Interim Government Elected in Libya: Background and Prospects," Situation Assessment, ACRPS, 8/2/2021, accessed on 28/8/2022 at: <https://bit.ly/3KKeCj7>.

2 "The Libyan House of Representatives grants confidence to the Bashagha government, in competition with the Dbeibeh government," *France 24*, 1/3/2022, accessed on 5/9/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3wBUZnj>.

3 "How Will Fathi Bashagha's New Government Impact Libya's Roadmap to Democracy?" Situation Assessment, ACRPS, 9/3/2022, accessed on 28/8/2022 at: <https://bit.ly/3wWQ7cE>.

4 "Source for 218: Understandings Require the Return of the Bashagha Convoy to Misurata," 218 News, 10/8/2022, accessed on 5/9/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3ToHj96>.

5 Zayed Hadiya, "This is how Bashagha entered and left the Libyan capital 'in a day and a night'", *The Independent Arabia*, 17/5/2022, seen on 5/9/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3QdJJVv>



Bloody Saturday: Conflicting Testimonies

On 24 August 2022, Bashagha gave a speech that came across as a warning to Dbeibeh, asking him to hand over power immediately. Bashagha warned Dbeibeh of the consequences of his refusal, holding him responsible for the bloodshed that might result. It seemed clear, through his words, that a military clash between the two sides was imminent.⁶ Bashagha's warnings to Dbeibeh were accompanied by the mobilization of military groups in Misrata and on the southwestern outskirts of Tripoli, especially in Warshafana.

It was expected that Bashagha's forces' attack on the capital would be orchestrated using two main entries: the first from the east, carried out by forces coming from Misrata via the coastal road, and the second from the southwest, carried out by the forces led by Major General Osama al-Juwaili. Most of the forces come from Zintan, supported by armed groups stationed inside the capital, especially the "92nd Infantry Brigade" led by Haitham al-Tajouri and the Bashagha's allies in the last attempt, "Al-Nawasi Brigade." The possibility remained that other groups changing their allegiance from the Dbeibeh government to the Bashagha government remained a possibility.

In view of the long distance from the east and the slow movement of military columns in open and populated spaces; the supposed attack plan on the capital, with forces coming from Misrata and others from the Warshafana region, lacked any element of surprise. This gave the Dbeibeh government forces the opportunity to mobilize, organize, and send reinforcements. While the clashes were expected to be a prelude to a long war and a series of hit-and-run operations similar to what occurred during the Haftar forces' attack on the capital and the western region in April 2019, the reality turned out to be very different.

In the early hours of 27 August 2022, the Stability Support Force loyal to the Dbeibeh government launched a pre-emptive strike on the headquarters of the 92nd Infantry Brigade; loyal to the Bashagha government, in the centre of Tripoli, and took control of it, after hours of fierce fighting. At the same time, forces from the 444th Brigade attacked and seized control of the headquarters of the Al-Nawasi Brigade. In the southwest of the capital, Dbeibeh government affiliated forces clashed with Major General al-Juwaili's forces, using medium and heavy weapons, and were able to take control of his headquarters in the al-Swani area, amid reports of drone intervention and air strikes targeting al-Juwaili's vehicles. On the coastal road west of the capital, forces from the city of Zawiya confronted Bashagha's gunmen and prevented them from stationing in the area known as "Gate 27."⁷

⁶ Alaa Farouk, "Bashagha to Dbeibeh: Hand Over Power Peacefully, or You Are Responsible for the War," *Arabi 21*, 24/8/2022, accessed 5/9/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3cxbrd9>.

⁷ Abdel-Aziz Al-Wasali, "17 Hours of Bloody Confrontations.. What Happened in Tripoli?," *Al Jazeera Net*, 28/8/2022, accessed on 5/9/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3csFrM5>.



After a bloody day of fighting that left 32 people dead, more than 100 injured and huge damage to infrastructure and public and private property, calm returned to the capital, but without much progress in solving chronic crisis.⁸

Limited Settlement and Enduring Divisions

Forces loyal to the Dbeibeh government were able to claim victory the latest military operation in the capital. The sudden move against the formations loyal to Bashagha inside Tripoli contributed to the confusion of the supposed plan to seize the capital. The fall of the headquarters of the 92nd Infantry Brigade” and of the Al-Nawasi Brigade, and then the targeting of the Juwaili forces’ positions south of the capital, led to a rapid and unorganized movement of armed groups from Misrata to reinforce the battalions in the capital. The quick victory in the last round of fighting ensured the Dbeibeh government’s grip on the capital became tighter than ever, strengthened after testing the loyalty of the most trained and powerful military and security formations in the capital, like the 444th Brigade. The government also benefited from Bashagha’s failure to attract the largest military components in Misrata and Zawiya, most of which maintained their loyalty to the GNU or remained neutral.

This huge blow to Bashagha and his allies has left his chances of entering the capital and taking power by force are weaker than ever. However, this may not prevent him from making future attempts, in the event of new shifts in alliances; He had previously made two failed attempts to enter the capital, and his current involvement with the camp of Haftar and his regional supporters precludes the likeliness of his surrender to the GNU. On the other hand, Dbeibeh’s victory remains limited: it is not a complete military field resolution that would bring about fundamental changes in Libya. The eastern and southern regions and parts of the central region are still outside its control, and the Dbeibeh government does not possess any military weight outside the western region. The temporal and spatial limitations of the victory are clear, Haftar’s camp remaining very much in control of the eastern region, large lawless swathes of the southern region.

Continued military conflict in Libya in recent years has proven the conflicting parties unable to achieve a comprehensive military resolution. Each major military operation was followed by rounds of political dialogue, emerging from which each time a new consensus, political bodies, and road maps to reach elections that lead to legitimate governing institutions. However, these agreements have never stood the test of time nor brought about anything resembling stability. In 2015, following the armed conflict between the Dignity and Libya Dawn camps, the Libyan Political Agreement was signed in Skhirat and the Presidential Council of the Government of National Accord was established, to unify the executive authority and create a political and security context for holding elections. But the attack of Haftar’s forces on Tripoli, only defeated after a year of fighting, led to the organization

⁸ Osama Ali, “Complete Calm in Tripoli after Clashes Left 32 Dead,” *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 28/8/2022, accessed on 5/9/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3pOnqL4>.



of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in Tunisia, and then in Geneva, resulting in the formation of a new executive authority and a road map for organizing presidential and parliamentary elections. Yet this too has failed.

At present, the parties do not appear on the verge of a new dialogue similar to the ones in Skhirat and Geneva. And Dbeibeh's talk about the elections as a solution to the current impasse does not appear to be based on objective data in a context that lacks the minimum security, political and institutional conditions to organize the electoral process. The inability of the Supreme Council of State and the House of Representatives to agree on a constitutional basis for elections, despite repeated rounds of dialogue in Cairo and Rabat, and given ongoing regional interference, also renders any such dialogue unlikely.

The political and military data on the ground indicate that these divisions will continue for the foreseeable future, although the outcome of the last round of fighting will certainly strengthen the control of the GNU over the capital and the western region and remove the spectre of a potential military clash.

Regional factors have also complicated and perpetuated the division even following the Bashagha government's retreat. It is possible that some regional powers interested in the Libyan affairs will push for the option of a "third government" as an alternative to Dbeibeh and Bashagha. But such an option will not guarantee the unification of the executive institutions, and rather only leads to a new division. There is no alternative other than for the parties to commit to the results of any national dialogue or agreement before any elections can be held, and there is no alternative to an agreed constitutional basis for holding elections later. In the current prevailing culture of the Libyan elites, there is no guarantee that the elections will be held or even that the results will be adhered to if they do take place.

Conclusion

The recent clashes in the Libyan capital represented the most violent chapter of the conflict between Dbeibeh's GNU and Bashagha's eastern government. The Dbeibeh government forces' initiative to attack the enclaves loyal to Bashagha inside the capital sped up their victory, confusing the reinforcements coming from Misrata and areas southwest of the capital and forcing them to retreat. However, this victory does not indicate any monumental change for the ongoing crisis Libya, however weak the Bashagha government, Haftar's camp and his regional backers may now seem. At the same time, with no dialogue to reach a new consensus between the disputants on the horizon, and with the minimum security, political and constitutional conditions for holding elections not met, talk about holding elections will remain just talk. This means the continuation of political and institutional divisions for the foreseeable future, even if it takes a new shape.