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What do the Latest Tripoli Clashes Mean for Libya's Political and Security Landscape?

Unit for Political Studies

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On 12 May, gunfights rocked Libya's capital as armed groups backing Abdul Hamid Dbeibah's Government of National Unity (GNU) clashed with others affiliated with the country's Presidential Council. The fighting was sparked by the killing of the commander of the so-called Stabilization Support Apparatus (SSA), Abdul Ghani al-Kikli. It was followed by angry protests, interspersed with clashes in the Abu Salim district – Al-Kikli's stronghold and location of the SSA's headquarters – as well as in the Tajoura area and northwestern neighbourhoods of the capital, home to the Special Deterrence Forces (better known as Rada) and its ally the Judicial Police. The clashes were fuelled by a tense political context, marked by sharp divisions among Libya's many actors and accentuated by growing regional and international interventions.

Armed Clashes and an Angry Street

In the days leading up to the fighting, Tripoli had been on high alert, with a buildup of military vehicles and armed men in various neighbourhoods. Convoys of military vehicles were seen arriving from other cities, particularly Misrata. There were also reports of disputes between the leaders of armed groups nominally under the umbrella of the GNU's Ministry of Defence, most notably the 444th and 111th Brigades, and security agencies outside their control, most notably the SSA and Rada.¹

Reports also emerged of armed groups from Misrata and its neighbouring cities storming the SSA headquarters in Zliten and its surroundings. On the evening of Monday, 12 May, news came of the killing of Al-Kikli and a number of his bodyguards; a number of other fighters and senior figures from armed groups from Misrata were also killed or wounded, in murky circumstances. That reportedly took place while they were attending a meeting of military and security commanders at the Tambala military base south of Tripoli, home to the headquarters of the 444th Combat Brigade, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Defence.

Al-Kikli's killing sparked fierce clashes between the SSA and the 444th Brigade, which – backed by the 111th Brigade, which is also affiliated with the Ministry of Defence – seized every SSA base in the capital, including the group's central headquarters in Abu Salim. These forces also seized most of the SSA's equipment and vehicles and freed a group of prisoners from its detention centres.

The clashes triggered a wave of chaos and looting in Abu Salim, although this subsided after a few hours. The 444th Brigade was now in control of the neighbourhood, and an uneasy calm returned to most of the capital the following morning. However, it was not to last: the 444th Brigade engaged in more clashes that evening with Rada, which – backed by the Judicial Police – controls the northeast of the capital, including Mitiga Airport, the seaport, and several prisons and detention centres.

The 444th Brigade made territorial advances early on in its fight with Rada. Subsequent mediation efforts involving militia commanders and public figures managed to achieve a ceasefire. The Counter-

¹ United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Facebook post, 12/5/2025, accessed 20/5/2025 (in Arabic), at: <http://bit.ly/3YMewQd>.

Terrorism Force, an armed group also affiliated with the Ministry of Defence that draws most of its personnel from Misrata, undertook to keep the belligerents apart. The 444th Brigade withdrew its men from Abu Salim, and patrols from the Security Directorates Support Agency (a GNU-affiliated force that did not participate in the clashes) were deployed in their place.

However, the easing of armed clashes after two days of fighting did not lead to a permanent calm. Libyans took to social media to call for a demonstration at Martyrs' Square in the centre of the capital to denounce the violence and demand the resignation of the GNU and its prime minister. While there was a relatively small response to these calls, it was not free from violence. Security vehicles were set on fire in Abu Salim, and a group of demonstrators attempted to storm Dbeibah's headquarters. Some also opened fire on the security forces protecting the building, killing one guard.²

Reactions Deepen the Divisions

The fighting in the capital and the subsequent demonstrations prompted tense reactions from various factions. After Al-Kikli's killing, Dbeibah asserted that the operation in Abu Salim "was a necessary step to end a presence that had gone too far in violating the law and had been linked to gross human rights violations."³ He accused the leaders of anti-GNU forces of a litany of crimes: extortion, corruption, theft, torture, rape, and unlawful detention.

Dbeibah also launched a broadside against the Speaker of the east-Libya-based House of Representatives (HoR), Aguila Saleh; eastern military chief Major General Khalifa Haftar; and the head of the contested High Council of State, Khaled Al-Mishri, asserting that they "want to keep Libyans at the mercy of the militias so that they can support them and act through them". He claimed that "the bulk of the international community" supported him, pledging to move forward with creating "a Libya free of militias and corruption".⁴ Notably, on the second day of the clashes, Dbeibah issued decrees dissolving security agencies affiliated to Rada and placing others under the command of the Ministry of the Interior.⁵

The head of the Presidential Council, Mohamed Al-Menfi, received delegations from the neighbourhoods that had seen fighting, and warned that "the country is passing through a dangerous phase, which necessitates unifying the domestic front and rallying around a comprehensive national project". He also issued an order to "limit GNU decisions of a military or security nature, regarding the restructuring of security institutions or the assigning of individuals to military or security tasks,

² Osama Ali, "Clashes between security forces and demonstrators demanding resignation of Dbeibah's government in Tripoli," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 17/5/2025, accessed 20/5/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://bit.ly/4j5F5Y1>.

³ Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, Facebook post, 16/5/2025, accessed 20/5/2025 (in Arabic), at: <http://bit.ly/3Y0syAR>

⁴ "Statement by the Prime Minister to the Libyan people," post on Dbeibah's Facebook page, accessed 20/5/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://bit.ly/3H2IL0w>.

⁵ Hakomitna ("Our Government") Facebook page, 14/5/2025, accessed 20/5/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://bit.ly/4dqEILV>.

to within the bounds of the government's transitional powers".⁶ HoR Speaker Aguila Saleh issued a statement condemning "the behaviour of the Government of National Unity, which has lost (a vote of) confidence", saying it had "national, legal, and moral responsibility for the events taking place in Tripoli", and urging the High State Council (HSC) to communicate with him in order to "start working and coordinating to form a unified government as soon as possible".⁷

For his part, Al-Mishri claimed that Dbeibah's government had "lost its political, legal, and popular legitimacy, and no longer represents the will of the Libyan people. Therefore, it is an illegitimate government". He called on Aguila Saleh to "initiate procedures to appoint a national figure to head an interim government".⁸

The reactions of the various actors suggest that the armed clashes and subsequent demonstrations were merely a reflection of intensifying political tensions, with each side insisting on moving forward with its own agenda. This was reflected in Dbeibah's determination to maintain the battlefield gains his loyalists had achieved by removing Al-Kikli, the most powerful militia leader in Tripoli, and taking control of Abu Salim, the capital's largest neighbourhood, with the support of powerful armed groups such as the 444th Brigade and militias from Misrata. Dbeibah's supporters also control several locations in the northeast of the capital. In addition, he has used other means to put his opponents in a difficult position, leveraging a briefing by the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Karim Khan, in which he accused the head of the Judicial Police, a close associate of Rada head Raouf Karah, of corruption, torture, rape, and illegal detention, demanding that he be arrested and handed over to the court.

Haftar, Saleh, and Al-Mishri, meanwhile, appear to be betting on the protest movement, which is demanding the fall of Dbeibah's government and an end to the chaos in certain neighbourhoods in the wake of the fighting. They are also seeking to leverage the divide between the GNU and the Presidential Council, as well as hoping that some armed formations in the east of the capital and the city of Zawiya could switch allegiance. The Haftar-Saleh-Mishri camp also appears to be seeking to benefit from the advisory committee set up by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and its proposal for a roadmap leading to elections, including the formation of a new government. A joint committee from the HoR and the High HSC has even begun holding meetings in Benghazi to vet candidates for prime minister.⁹

⁶ "Al-Menfi suspends Dbeibah's decrees on restructuring security institutions," *Bawabat al-Wasat*, 14/5/2025, accessed 20/5/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://bit.ly/3Zj5gDd>.

⁷ Libyan House of Representatives, "Statement of the House of Representatives regarding events witnessed by the city of Tripoli," 15/5/2025, accessed 20/5/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://bit.ly/4mlQSnP>.

⁸ Khaled al-Mishri, Facebook post, 17/5/2025, accessed 20/5/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://bit.ly/4jaPm50>.

⁹ Libyan House of Representatives' Facebook page, 18/5/2025, accessed 20/5/2025 (in Arabic), at: <http://bit.ly/4doQO2C>.

The Political Context of the Crisis

The recent clashes must be seen in the context of Libya's political landscape in general, and that of the western region in particular, which has been marked by escalating tensions and ever-more frequent initiatives calling for a consensus on a new government to replace the GNU, which emerging from the Libyan Political Dialogue in Tunisia and Geneva in 2020. Although the participants in the dialogue agreed at the time to create a government of national unity, a presidential council, and a roadmap culminating in general elections that would unify Libya's political institutions and end the country's division, this consensus did not last long. The HoR passed a vote of no confidence in Dbeibah's GNU just one year after it was formed,¹⁰ enshrined Fathi Bashagha's government in its place – before withdrawing confidence from his administration too after it failed to enter Tripoli. The HoR then gave its backing to Osama Hammad, thus reinstating the country's east-west division and reviving a contest for legitimacy between two governments: an internationally recognized administration in Tripoli and a parallel government in Benghazi.

Following the failure to hold the elections as stipulated in the roadmap proposed by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, and amid deepening institutional divisions and political stalemate, UNSMIL formed a 20-member advisory committee in February 2025, comprising politicians, academics, civil society activists, and legal experts. The committee was tasked with presenting draft electoral laws, including one for parliamentary polls and another for a presidential vote, with the aim of guiding Libyan stakeholders toward implementing a viable roadmap for holding elections.¹¹

One day before the fighting broke out, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, Hanna S. Tetteh, had announced that the advisory committee had completed its work. She had met with the President of the Presidential Council, his two deputies, and the Prime Minister of the GNU to present the committee's findings and emphasized that the report's recommendations could “form the basis for dialogue with all concerned parties regarding a consensual roadmap leading to elections”.¹²

It is too early to predict the prospects of UNSMIL's latest initiative following the Tripoli clashes, but it is clear that the path ahead will not be easy. A string of previous envoys has presented proposals to resolve the political crisis, but they failed for several reasons, including the deepening gap between the positions of Libyan actors and the UNSMIL's lack of binding mechanisms to put its initiatives into practice.¹³

The May clashes and subsequent demonstrations add a new factor that further deepens Libya's divisions and complicates the path forward. They mark a shift from a dynamic of institutional and

¹⁰ “Libyan House of Representatives endorses Bashagha government... and Dbeibah's government talks of ‘fraud,’” *Al-Araby TV*, 1/3/2022, accessed 20/5/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://bit.ly/3H1hV7E>.

¹¹ “New plan, repeating the same mistakes? Four priorities of the Consultative Committee set up by the UN Support Mission in Libya in order to push for elections,” *Lawyers for Justice in Libya (LFJL)*, 24/2/2024, accessed 20/5/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://bit.ly/4k8J8Ek>.

¹² UNSMIL's Facebook page, 12/5/2025, accessed 20/5/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://bit.ly/43rFk9Z>.

¹³ “The resignation of the United Nations' Libya envoy: Reasons, Context and Repercussions,” *Situation Assessment*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 1/5/2024, accessed 20/5/2025 (in Arabic), at: <https://bit.ly/4k42XMW>.

political fragmentation, pitting the GNU-controlled west against the eastern and southern regions dominated by Haftar and administered by Hamad's parallel government, to one of internal divisions in western Libya and Tripoli itself. This has hobbled efforts to create an institutional or political framework to engage with UNSMIL's initiative.

A Transitional Phase with New Faces?

The latest fighting in Tripoli and the political tensions that ensued represent the most acute standoff in western Libya since the Operation Libya Dawn (Fajr Libya) in 2014. This suggests that the result could be a security, political, and institutional situation sharply removed from the balances that have prevailed in recent years, especially since the agreement to form a national unity government based on the principles agreed at the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in Tunis and Geneva.¹⁴

The latest crisis may prompt pro-Dbeibah forces to seize the opportunity and dismantle their opponents' military apparatus – especially that of Rada – either through carefully planned military operations, through negotiations with their social base and guarantees to integrate their fighters into the Ministries of Defence and the Interior, or by buying the loyalty of key commanders.

Conversely, the Haftar-Saleh camp appears intent on using the media to capitalize on the violence in Tripoli, in order to mobilize the public against the GNU and demonstrate the administration's unpopularity in western Libya in general and Tripoli in particular. The eastern camp also looks determined to move forward with its efforts to form a new government, which it is promoting as representing an end to the current institutional division, in partnership with the HSC. However, absent a green light from world powers, Haftar's forces are unlikely to launch a military operation against the capital as they did in 2019.

Previous experience shows that any attempt to shift the balance of power in Libya cannot succeed without international and UN support or sponsorship. Both the Libyan political dialogue that produced the Presidential Council of the Government of National Accord (GNA) headed by Fayez al-Sarraj in 2015, and that which led to the formation of Dbeibah's GNU and the Presidential Council headed by Menfi in 2021, were conducted under international and UN auspices. Therefore, the proposal prepared by the advisory committee set up by the UN mission may represent a framework for breaking the current deadlock, whether in the proposed form or an amended one with an expanded base of participants.

Conclusion

The fighting in Tripoli in mid-May came as little surprise, given the polarization that has long prevailed in Libya. However, it represented the largest and most consequential armed confrontation inside

¹⁴ "A New Interim Government Elected in Libya: Background and Prospects," Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 8/2/2021, accessed 21/5/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zRQb>



the capital since 2014, killing the leader of Tripoli's largest armed group, who had been a powerful security actor with far-reaching influence over political, financial, and service institutions.

Despite the rapid territorial gains by pro-GNU armed groups, a complete victory on the ground appears elusive. This is likely to lead to further tensions, given the complexity of the divisions and each actor's determination to protect its own interests. However, several indicators suggest that an international or UN-led intervention is imminent, with a package of arrangements that could produce a roadmap toward elections and a transitional authority with new faces. This could include a carefully studied departure of the current political class.

However, such a departure would likely be temporary, representing a phased management of the crisis. It is a mistake to expect world powers to be more committed to preserving the unity and sovereignty of the Libyan state than Libya's main political forces themselves, whose mutual relations are marked by deep mistrust – and who have yet to demonstrate any will to subordinate their disputes and power struggles to the unity and sovereignty of the state, enabling those conflicts to be managed peacefully within the framework of state institutions.