



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Fears of Libya Slipping into Full-Scale Civil War

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | June 2014

Fears of Libya Slipping into Full Civil War

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## Introduction

On May 16, after the failure of his first attempted “TV coup” in February 2014, retired Major General Khalifa Haftar made a second, more resolute attempt at overthrowing the General National Congress and seizing power. Forces under his command launched an attack on the largest and most powerful revolutionary battalions in Benghazi and Libya—“Rafallah Sihati” and “February 17”. With that, Haftar announced his “Operation Dignity” (“Karamah”) to “rid Libya of terrorists,” after he had been discredited by the General National Congress in his campaign to restore legitimacy of the government and seize power.

## Background to the Crisis

Three years after Libya was ridden of the Gaddafi regime, it remains unable to achieve the stable security and political consensus that would enable its transition to democracy. Since the General National Congress elections during the summer of 2012, the country has lurched from one crisis to another in a conflict pitting the two largest political blocs against one another, namely the Muslim Brotherhood with their independent allies and the Alliance of National Forces, led by Mahmoud Jibril. The National Congress, and the interim government it established, faced structural challenges that were reflected in the utter absence of a state with functioning institutions, as well as any form of political life or vision of how the transitional period should be managed. This situation was aggravated when attempts to disarm the militias and integrate them into an inclusive national army failed, not to mention the increasing rates of corruption. To make matters worse, the General National Congress itself faced a crisis over the renewal of its mandate as it had exceeded the time limit set by the Constitutional Declaration, without having completed the drafting of the constitution. This failure further weakened what was the only democratically elected authority in the country, diminishing its popularity and allowing circles that had been sidelined by the fall of the Gaddafi regime and the political quarantine that exploited growing dissatisfaction with the situation to come forward as an alternative source for the country’s salvation, a step facilitated by the ready availability of regional support.

## The Map of Libyan Fragmentation

There are a variety of political organizations and armed factions with differing ideological and intellectual dispositions and military capabilities vying for power in Libya. The most important of these forces include:

### Haftar and Allies

Haftar's forces are essentially former military men who served with Gaddafi's army, and are seconded by various militias working under Haftar's command. Haftar calls his forces "The Libyan National Army," despite their being nothing more than a private militia, even with the inclusion of high-ranking military men who possibly afford it a greater measure of discipline. Otherwise, it is similar to many other private militias on the scene in Libya. Haftar has a number of principle allies, such as:

### The Lightning and Thunder Brigade

This is composed of a mix of residents of the Western region, primarily from the Zintan tribe, along with elements from Gaddafi's battalions, in particular the 32<sup>nd</sup> Reinforced Brigade that had been under the command of Khamis al-Gaddafi. This brigade was formed by previous minister of defense Osama al-Juwaili, at a time when the national army chief of staff, Youssef al-Manqoush, founded the 14,000 strong "Central" Brigade in Misrata, to the east of Tripoli, consisting mostly of armed rebels.

### The Federalists

Ibrahim al-Jadharan leads this so-called "Army of Cyrenaica," and calls for Barqa to be incorporated as a federal territory. His forces took control of the oil fields and ports to force the National Congress to accept this demand, and a group of these from al-Marj, a city in the Green Mountains, joined Haftar's forces in their attack against the Benghazi city brigades on May 16, 2014.

### The National Forces Alliance

This alliance was established by Mahmoud Jibril, and brings together 58 parties and factions, some of which have no clear ideology. Despite enjoying the support of the largest parliamentary bloc in the National General Congress, Mahmoud Jibril announced his support for the coup led by Haftar, indicating that he himself supported the coup. If blame is to be apportioned for the poor performance of the National General Congress, his bloc bears the bulk of the responsibility.

### Gaddafi's Tribes

The tribes of Rashfana, Tarhouna, Warfalah, and the city of Zliten in the west of Libya all announced their full support for Haftar. It is known that these same circles supported Gaddafi during the revolution, and took part in several uprisings in support of the remnants of his regime, after his death. Some Libyan intelligence agencies, commando forces, and air defense units also announced their allegiance to Haftar's forces, thereby according him a measure of comparative advantage over other militias, with more regular troops enlisted, the broadest network of allies, particularly in the western region, abundant armaments, and the support of regional and international powers.

### The General National Congress and the Rebel Brigades

This camp, led by the National Congress and the transitional government, includes moderate Islamist brigades, the Muslim Brotherhood, and militias from cities in the Nafusa Mountains, particularly from the Amazigh regions, and brigades from the city of Misrata. While this camp enjoys legitimacy, its slow-moving and coordination between its differing components is weak.

### The General National Congress

The congress is comprised of 200 publically-elected members, and it forms the interim government to take up administration of the country's affairs. This is the sole legal elected body in Libya, according to the Constitutional Declaration that outlined a process of democratic transition. The Muslim Brotherhood, the National Forces Alliance, and the Independents are the primary political blocs represented.

### The Libyan Rebels Chamber

Membership of this includes each of the Rafallah al-Sihati Brigades, the February 17 Brigades, the Zintan Martyrs Brigades, the Omar Mukhtar Brigades, and the Martyrs of Free Libya. These five major battalions played a lead role in the defeat of Gaddafi's forces through their liberation of the eastern region and their victory in Sirte, the last major battle. They are known for their considerable combat prowess, their substantial artillery, and their large numbers of fighters. Given their predominantly youthful composition, it was expected that they would contribute the basic core from which to build up the new Libyan Army. These battalions were united under the command of Ziad Balam, one of the most important rebel leaders and a commander held in high regard by all rebel fighters. The Rafallah al-Sihati Brigade (), recognized as being

aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, was a primary target of Haftar's recent attack on Benghazi.

#### The Muslim Brotherhood

The Justice and Development Party, established along the lines of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, represents the Brotherhood in Libya. A patriotic national party with Islamic credentials, it seeks to implement a reform project in the country. It has successfully garnered 41 seats in parliament (20.5%), with 17 seats out of 80 designated for parliamentary blocs and 24 seats out of 120 designated for individuals.

#### Nafusa Mountain Rebels

Groups of rebels from the Nafusa Mountains, principally from Nalut, Gharyan, and a number of Amazigh areas, such as al-Qalaah, Yifran, and Jado, announced their support for the legitimacy of the General National Congress, against Haftar's coup.

#### Misrata Brigades

Owing to the presence of politically skilled military elements, such as head of the Misrata Military Council, Salem Joha, these are the most disciplined and coordinated brigades in the western region. Wealthy Misrata merchants financed the arming of these battalions, enabling them to take shape; consequently, they are overseen by the Misrata council of elders. There are about 35,000 fighters affiliated with the Misrata Brigades, in a city with a population of 300,000. In addition to light weapons, these two battalions with a total of 26 tanks and one brigade with 39 tanks, are expected to be part of the Libyan National Army. Misrata declared its opposition to Haftar's coup, while calling for restraint to avoid slipping into civil war. However, the city's local council confirmed that it would intervene if necessary.

#### Libyan Shield Forces in the South

These well-armed forces comprise recruits from Fezzan and Barqa (Cyrenaica), and stood in opposition to Haftar's coup in support of the legitimacy of the National Congress.

In sum, the General National Council along with its allies enjoys the advantages of retaining legitimacy and possessing effective heavy weapons, particularly among troops in the Benghazi region. It also has the direct support of forces distributed across Libyan

territory, including Misrata, the Nafusa mountains and the south. In addition, it retains a large number of combat-proven fighters, especially in Benghazi and the eastern region.

#### Jihadist Forces

The jihadists are mostly concentrated in the east of Libya and in the Green Mountains, particularly in the city of Derna, and represent a third party in the crisis. They denounce the state for heresy and have no regard for democracy or the legitimacy of the National Congress; they also denounce Haftar and his allies.

#### Ansar al-Sharia

Accused of involvement in the murder of the US ambassador in Benghazi in 2012, they were classified as a terrorist group by the US administration. Though they call for the implementation of Islamic law, the group is seen as less extreme when compared with other Derna militias.

#### Derna Militias

These are recognized as jihadist *takfiri* militias, who are dedicated to the “expiation of sin,” control the city of Derna and have links to al-Qaeda.

#### Neutral Parties

Some local parties announced their neutrality in the on-going conflict, rejecting Haftar’s coup and criticizing the performance of the National Congress. The Tripoli Military Council is among these groups, and declared, in a meeting of all of the various rebel factions, that it would respond to any attempt to undermine security in the city. At the same time, despite their criticism of the performance of the National Congress, the Libyan Shield force ( ) deployed between Sirte and Misrata announced that it would guarantee the security of Tripoli and reject any coup attempt against the legitimate authority in the country.

## Regional Dimensions

Even though there are attempts to draw comparisons between the situation in Libya and events in Egypt over the past year, there is no real similarity between the two cases, in terms of political divisions within the society or the roles of the army, security forces, and “deep state”. What exists in Libya is a conflict between the Muslim Brotherhood and the National Forces Alliance, under the leadership of Jibril, bound together with the transitional authority’s weak performance. This is exacerbated by the

absence of any agreed road map for democratic transition, which gave way to insecurity and exploitation by regional powers seeking to mount a coup against the revolution in an effort to abort it, ending, once and for all, any progress on a path to democracy. There is no “deep state” in Libya, but there are attempts to call up deep tribal social structures, along with forces of the *ancien regime*, in counterrevolution.

Cairo’s new regime makes no secret of its stance regarding the political forces controlling the National Congress in Libya, or its ambitions in the country; according to reports in the Egyptian official and private media, Cairo was encouraged by some Gulf states to voice clear support for Haftar. On more than one occasion, Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi proclaimed the need to prevent terrorism from coming into Egypt across the Libyan-Egyptian frontier, and, consequently, his support for Major General Haftar’s effort to combat “terrorism and extremism”.

## Scenarios for the Evolution of the Crisis

### Settlement

One scenario would see an agreement being reached over the organization of new parliamentary elections under the supervision of a caretaker government. Holding such elections in a state of chaotic security breakdown and political polarization, however, seems unlikely; therefore, there must be a genuine national dialogue prior to the elections, engaging all of the parties, except the *takfiri* extremists and the old regime. If this is the optimal solution, it is far from realistic at this stage, with Haftar rushing toward a military resolution.

### Containment

Containment of the clashes in Benghazi is the most likely scenario, given the high political and military cost should they spread to the western and central regions, in addition to the unwillingness of cities such as Misrata and Tripoli to get involved in the fighting. It seems clear now that the cities in the West are trying to avoid fighting among themselves, and there are suggestions of an imminent truce between Zintan and Misrata. The confrontation could thus remain confined to the Benghazi Brigades and the forces of Haftar, with his Federalist allies. This could turn into street-fighting, rallying fighters from all over the country: Haftar could obtain support from his allies in the west as well as from Libya’s regional neighbors, while Benghazi could appeal for help from its allies in the Nafusa Mountains and the powerful Ali Hassan al-Jaber

Brigade in Baida city, which could lead to a disastrous humanitarian situation in a city of nearly one million.

#### Full-Scale Civil War

This may be an unlikely scenario, but the possibility remains, given the conflict over control of the situation in Libya, after three years of violence. Such violence has been over control of, and between, the country's regions, and includes the settling of scores among rebels and Gaddafi supporters alike, as well as between residents of regions that have entered into conflict with one another. If fighting erupts on a widespread basis, it would likely engulf Misrata, in addition to Benghazi, and embroil powerful enmities found among Bani Walid, Tarhouna and neighboring Zliten, the Lightning and Thunder Brigade, and the Sirte Brigades. Misrata could find itself fighting on three fronts to prevent it from being cut off and besieged; fighting could also erupt in the west in the Nafusa Mountains, especially between Zintan and other mountain areas, such as Nalut, Ifrane, and al-Qalaa. Zintan would find it difficult to take on all of the mountain cities, and the same applies to Misrata. Should matters deteriorate in this fashion, the warfare would be devastating, with each side attempting to annihilate the other.

#### External Intervention

Though unlikely, it is not out of the question for regional powers, such as Egypt, Algeria, or the Gulf states, to intervene at the behest of their allies. If this were to occur the situation would only become more complicated, with the possible spread of violence to the neighboring countries. In any event, it is very likely that Egypt will play a vital and influential role in supporting Haftar, who seeks to build an alliance with the new regime in Cairo in an effort to consolidate efforts in combatting the Muslim Brotherhood.

In any case, Libya today is at a dangerous crossroads. If the situation is not remedied through dialogue, national consensus-building, and a completion of the democratic transition based upon the popular will, expressed peacefully through the ballot box, then it is likely that the country will enter into a state of armed conflict that will engulf the entire country or large parts of it with consequences that could only be more than the word "catastrophic" could ever hint at.