

SOLACE GLOBAL

CONFLICT ANALYSIS

UNDERSTANDING THE LIBYAN IMPASSE





What is the situation right now?

On 14 April, the Libyan National Conference should have begun in Ghadames, welcoming all the major players in Libya, with high hopes for a possible peaceful settlement of the ongoing hostilities. Instead, the Libyan National Army (LNA), under the command of General Khalifa Haftar, launched a blitzkrieg-like advance on Tripoli, which has resulted in a month-long military impasse that is increasingly looking like it's going to escalate in a war of attrition. As of 20 May, the city remains under siege as forces loyal to the Government of National Accord (GNA) managed to halt the advance just under 25km (15mi) south of Tripoli and approximately 400 people have died since.

The offensive, which has been code-named "Operation Flood of Dignity", aimed to bring the west of the country under Libyan National Army (LNA) control. Victory would have been the closing move in a high-stakes winner-takes-all campaign initiated by Haftar to take control of the country. Prior to the advance towards the capital, the LNA conducted a skilful military campaign across Libya's oil-rich Fezzan region; swiftly capturing two of the country's largest oil fields – the Sahara and El-Feel. The campaign involved a great deal of negotiation with local militias, many of whom were bought off in exchange for loyalty. The strategy's success was, fundamentally, due to the complexity of the inter-tribal conflict affecting Fezzan, which has impacted and destabilised the south of Libya for years.

Oil plays an important role in the Libyan conflict and serves as a catalysing force for international interests and factions. While General Haftar has secured the majority of the oil-producing territories and facilities, he remains unable to sell it internationally without breaching the United Nation ban on any trade in oil that doesn't go through the National Oil Corporation, which is based in Tripoli and aligned with the GNA. This is especially relevant in the context of the strategy applied in the occupation of Fezzan, which is likely to require a continuous stream in financial support to maintain stability and the loyalty of the local tribes.

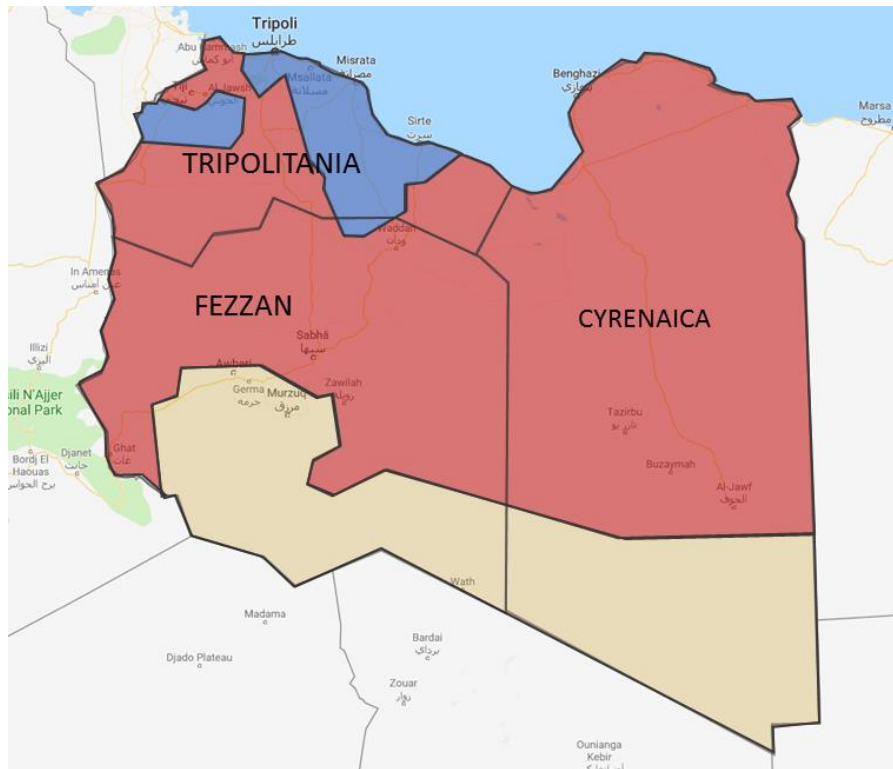
Due to his successful occupation of the east and the south of Libya, Haftar decided to use the momentum to conduct a military campaign designed to capture the strategically important town of Gharyan; just under 50 km (30 miles) south of Tripoli. The geostrategic location of the town gave the General a perfect launching pad to potentially win the civil war, an opportunity to end the deadlock and internal strife in Libya quickly.

However, after the initial successes, Haftar's offensive on Tripoli has been stalled by the unexpected resistance by local militias, as well as the similarly matched military capabilities of the two sides. As a result, the forces have been locked in a military stalemate over the past month unable to make any decisive advance. Additionally, the GNA forces have been joined by militias from Misrata, while the fighting for the capital has also resulted in the uniting of the fractious militant groups that are normally engaged in internal struggles for resources and territory. The siege for the capital has now become a grinding war of attrition; with victory for neither side looking likely at this time.

While the unifying drive to defend the capital may have halted the military advance, it now remains unclear how much longer the GNA can withstand the LNA assault, and how long the LNA can sustain their offensive. The UN and the international community have been exercising pressures on both sides in an attempt to facilitate a truce, so far unsuccessfully. Instead, both sides seem set on defying the United Nations arms embargo, which the GNA reportedly receiving a large shipment in weaponry from Turkey on 19 May, which might allow them to tip the balance in their favour.



The conflict also has a wider geopolitical context, Haftar is supported by a number of regional powers, notably Egypt and Saudi Arabia, while Turkey and the UN continue to support the GNA. The fighting has also drawn in European powers, especially France and Italy. France’s President Macron, though calling for a ceasefire and meeting with the GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, has been accused of siding with Haftar. Indeed, French Special Forces had been involved in the training of Haftar’s forces.



Libya has been historically divided in three provinces:

- **Tripolitania**, the most populous region, where cities of Tripoli, Misrata and Sirte are located.
- **Cyrenaica**, which became a semi-autonomous region after the Arab Spring and has most of the oil resources, located in the south west, and main pipeline routes.
- **Fezzan** is a vast and scarcely populated area. It has been used by migrant flows as a corridor to reach the coast and attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Illicit economy is widespread, and the region suffers with strong tribal tensions.

Areas of Control



What has happened since the end of the Arab Spring?



Since 2011, marking the end of the civil conflict against Moammar Gaddafi, Libya has been experiencing almost a decade of military and political turmoil, that is looking increasingly like another civil war. The power vacuum created by the fall of the Gaddafi regime immediately revived the rivalries and ambitions of the hundreds of local tribes and groups, causing the eruption of violent clashes throughout a country that was militarised during the civil war.

In 2012, a significant attempt to stabilise Libya through elections led to the creation of a General National Congress (GNC) based in Tripoli, which was given 18 months to implement a constitutional reform that was meant to root the democratisation process of Libya. However, the GNC failed to achieve that objective before the agreed deadline, prompting General Khalif Haftar to make a televised announcement



2012

requesting the government to step down and announcing his control over the military forces. The failure to secure a meaningful agreement was fundamentally due to internal rivalries within the GNC, which revealed a growing divide between secular and Islamist factions within the already complex political environment plagued with local rivalries and rising clashes. While the GNC managed to temporarily extend its mandate, Haftar's statement resonated with many, which were frustrated with the government's inability to oversee a peaceful transition and tackle the Islamist militant groups that had taken over key Libyan cities like Benghazi and Sirte.

2014

The year 2014 marks the beginning of the second Libyan civil war and the start of Haftar's rival government in the east of the country. In May 2014, General Haftar and its newly formed Libyan National Army launched "Operation Dignity", a campaign with the initial objective of liberating the city of Benghazi from the occupation of Islamist militants that grew over the years into a large-scale counter-terrorism operation in various parts of the country. Islamic militias, IS in particular, had taken advantage of the power vacuum to assert control over Sirte, Derna and a number of provinces in southern Fezzan.

Through "Operation Dignity", Haftar succeeded in securing the support of both local armed groups, as well as regional and international actors concerned with the rise of Islamic terrorism like France, Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The battle for Benghazi lasted approximately 3 years, but thanks to the military support of the UAE, Haftar accomplished his mission in 2016, managing to liberate almost the entirety of the eastern region of Cyrenaica and pushing back the Islamic militias to the coastal city of Derma. His effort also allowed him to take control of the oil production capabilities of the region, gaining economic leverage and additional political legitimacy.

A month after the start of "Operation Dignity", the General National Congress in Tripoli held parliamentary elections, in fear of a coup attempt by forces frustrated with the lack of results and widespread controversy surrounding the Congress. The election would determine the membership of a new parliament that was intended to replace the GNC: the House of Representatives (HoR). However, the results were rejected by a new faction of Islamist forces based in Misrata called "Libyan Dawn", which attempted to overtake the new government that they perceived lacked legitimacy due to the extremely low turnout in the election (only 18 percent, compared to 62% in the 2012 elections). Libyan Dawn successfully took Tripoli, forcing the HoR to flee eastwards, to the city of Tobruk, de facto establishing a rival government with the support of General Haftar. This gave him, the Libyan National Army and Operation Dignity the legitimacy to claim sovereignty over the territories of Cyrenaica and, soon after, the southern region of Fezzan.

2015

The international community and several regional players, concerned about the instability, the rise of IS, the clashes between Libyan Dawn and the Libyan National Army, as well as their impact on Libya's oil production capabilities and migration in the Mediterranean Sea, initiated a reconciliation effort aimed at creating a unified government. The result was the signing in December 2015 of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), creating the Government of National Accord (GNA), designed to be representative of all the competing forces, and exercised unified sovereignty over the nation. Fayeze al-Serraj was nominated interim Prime Minister and UN-recognised leader, his authority supported by a nine-member Presidency Council created to be fully geographically and ideologically balanced. The House of Representatives, however, refused to ratify the agreement, effectively questioning the legitimacy of the new government, and proceeded to nominate General Haftar as the head of the Libyan Armed Forces.



2016

2018

Despite the growing rivalry between the two parallel governments, their military efforts were focused almost exclusively on tackling the rise of Islamic militancy Libya’s coastal strongholds. In 2016 the GNA, supported by the US forces, launched “Operation Impenetrable Wall” against Islamist militias stationed in the coastal city of Sirte, while the Libyan National Army in the east was engaged in the battle against IS in Derna. The UAE provided military support to both campaigns and were successful; by December 2016 they had achieved their goal of recapturing the cities.

In the following years, several attempts were made to achieve a political accord and, through that, legitimate elections. In 2018, the two factions did agree on a UN-facilitated plan to hold elections the following year, as well as to hold a National Conference on 14 April 2019, which led to the Secretary General Antonio Guterres’ visit to Tripoli at the time of the offensive.

X Who are the main factions?

The **Government of National Accord (GNA)** was created in a national and UN-facilitated effort culminating with the signature of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) in December 2015. With the declared objective of establishing unified and representative governing bodies to guide Libya through its transitional period, the institutional legitimacy of the LPA, and thereby its institutions, was damaged by the refusal to ratify the accord by the House of Representatives. This action fundamentally prevented the government in Tripoli from gaining nationwide legitimacy and was considered an endorsement of the legitimacy claims of General Khalif Haftar, backed by the House of Representative residing in the Eastern city of Tobruk.



Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj (GNA)

The GNA is also characterised by severe internal power struggles and is led by acting Prime Minister Fayeze al-Sarraj and the Presidency Council (PC) members; who are representatives of the country’s different regional and institutional interests. In particular, his deputy, Ahmed Maiteeq serves as representative of the key city of Misrata, whose military forces are currently among the biggest two in Libya, making Maiteeq’s support fundamental for the survival of the Tripoli government. Prime Minister al-Sarraj has also pledged his support to the Central Bank and the National Oil Corporation, both strong symbolic and economic institutions, particularly as Libya has an economy heavily-reliant on oil production.

As a government that was established through the signature of the Libyan Political Agreement, the GNA enjoys the UN-backing and, for a time, the support of the USA in its counter-terrorism operations against the city of Sirte, overtaken by IS in 2016. The GNA also enjoys the widespread support of Turkey and Qatar, who provide significant political and military support to the government in what appears to be another proxy confrontation against regional rivals like Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which support the opposing LNA.



*General Khalifa Haftar
(LNA)*

The **Libyan National Army (LNA)** and its leader, General Khalifa Haftar, are the main opposition force and parallel government based in the east of the country backed by the House of Representatives in Tobruk. Haftar, whose authority has been established through several successful military and counter-terrorism campaigns, is recognised as the commander of the armed forces by the House of Representatives. The Libyan National Army is not considered the official Libyan armed forces due to its composition that includes a variety of local militant and tribal groups alongside traditional military units. Due to its declared aversion to Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, currently integrated in the Tripoli government, he enjoys the backing of regional powers such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and, in particular, the UAE. In the past years, Haftar has fully taken advantage of this political and military support in order to gain legitimacy by repeatedly meeting with the allied leaders, as evident by his last visit to Saudi Arabia as recently as the 27 March.

Haftar is generally considered a more cohesive leader, especially due to his extensive military experience and his authority over one of the two biggest armed forces in the country, but his ability to swiftly achieve victory over Tripoli and to exercise the same amount of control over a fragmented country is often questioned. Moreover, his status as a General with a past in Gaddafi's armed forces fuels concerns over the resurgence of a military state in Libya, both internationally and by the populous, whose uprising in the 2011 Arab Spring was motivated by a desire for a pluralist political system.

Since taking power in 2014, Khalifa Haftar has successfully conducted several counter-terrorism initiatives, including prolonged battles, under the umbrella of "Operation Dignity", which was first launched to reclaim the city of Benghazi from the control of Islamist forces. His success in retaking Benghazi after three years of fighting was followed by a campaign in the south of Libya, where fragmented insurgent cells are known to operate, which has also allowed him to establish control over approximately two-thirds of the country. In 2016, Haftar also conducted a successful campaign against the National Petroleum Guard in several cities on the coast, successfully taking over and allowing the restart of the oil production in the country.

While confrontation between the two rival governments has definitive ideological and political undertones, it is increasingly shaping up to be a battle of resources, where one faction enjoys the backing of the United Nations, key institutions and the majority of the population, while the other can count on its authority over the military forces, key foreign allies and the oil-production capabilities.





The Libyan conflict is characterised by a myriad of local militant and rebel groups, as well as two main competing governments both claiming sovereignty over the nation and its institutions. The highly fragmented and tribal composition of the Libyan population is grounded in historical and ethnic divides and has often represented a cause of instability. These groups truly transitioned into armed militant and tribal factions during and after the 2011 civil war against Gaddafi. While at the end of that conflict most of the localised insurgent groups went back to civilian life, their military value was not lost to those attempting to establish sovereignty over the new Libyan state.

In 2014, the emergence of two rival powers and governments and the effort by General Khalifa Haftar to integrate these groups in his self-styled Libyan National Army, has caused a re-militarization of many tribal groups. However, these allegiances are, for the most part, based on very practical promises, such as resources, payments, and promise of support in a local conflict, making them highly volatile and dependent on the fulfillment of these assurances. Alliances are often complex with groups prone to switching sides.

The south of Libya is also characterised by a variety of different local tribes, which are also fighting to establish their control over territory and resources. In fact, since the Arab Spring and the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, local tribes have fought at least 5 different wars. The repeated ceasefires are evidently volatile and highly dependent on several forms of material compensation, which is promised to the factions in exchange for temporary peace.



What are their military capabilities?

Neither side has a particular advantage over the other, with LNA reinforcements likely to give them at least unit partiality, or a possible slight advantage, in the capital region. Both factions can rely on air force capabilities and heavy artillery, the latter of which have been deployed in various battles over the past years. Uploads on social media show the LNA is using BM-21 Grad rocket platforms extensively throughout the outskirts of Tripoli.

The LNA consists of roughly 25,000 men; however, only around 7,000 men form the regular core of the military, with the rest of the force coming from tribal militias, mercenaries and Salafist fighters. The GNA has a similar make-up, its forces are mostly made up of local militias with very different backgrounds. The Tripoli-based militias number around 5,000 fighters, while forces from Misrata could contribute up to 18,000 additional men if they choose to fully deploy their forces. However, it is unlikely that groups in Misrata would want to leave the country's third largest city too exposed.





The LNA is also believed to currently control three Su-22s, two Mirage F1s, three operational MiG-23s and a few MiG-21s; though one is understood to have been shot down on 14 April. The main bulk of the LNA air force is currently stationed at two airbases; Jufra south of Sirte and the Al Watyah facility near the Tunisian border. This allows them to easily fly sorties over Tripoli from relatively safe locations. According to an Airwars/New America assessment, the LNA had conducted 1,405 airstrikes in Libya since 2012, prior to the start of the offensive.

The GNA has a similarly sized but less capable aerial force, currently operating one Mirage F1ED, two MiG-23 MLDs as well as approximately a dozen L-39 and G-2 light-attack aircraft. The aircraft are currently based at Mitiga airport in Tripoli and at Misurata. Mitiga, which doubles as Tripoli's only working civilian airport, has been bombed by the LNA; however, only superficial damage was recorded. The GNA have rarely used their aircraft in the past years, with only some 38 strikes being recorded.

Despite the LNA being able to command a higher overall number of forces, the concentration of GNA military resources around Tripoli gives them local superiority. This may require Haftar to deploy a greater part of his air fleet to the conflict; leaving other areas of the country without air cover. The LNA is also required to protect its supply lines between Jufra and the west; as they remain exposed by both land and air assets in Misrata.

Who else is fighting for Libya?

