

# Looking into Libya

## *Contextualizing Khalifa Haftar's advances on Tripoli in April 2019*

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Since January 2019, Libya has entered a new stage in its post-revolutionary history: the launch, to the dismay of much the international community, of a military campaign led by the self-proclaimed General Khalifa Haftar, commander of the so-called Libyan National Army (LNA).

Over a month after the start of Haftar's offensive in western Libya towards Tripoli, it can be said that the initial aim of a Blitzkrieg or quick "takeover" of the capital has failed. Instead of pushing into the city, the primary base of the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), with a small force followed by anticipated defections, the offensive triggered a humanitarian crisis in Tripoli. Currently, there is a real fear of protracted conflict in the densely populated Tripoli as Haftar is not ready to accept a defeat but instead will have Libya embark on an enduring path of low-level militia clashes for the foreseeable future. At the time of writing the fighting has not halted.

What is the current situation on the ground — who is fighting whom?

Haftar had been anticipating a violent takeover and launched a military advance in southern Libya in early 2019. He also indicated he was preparing for an advance on the western part of Libya, the "last missing piece" as he had already established himself in the eastern and southern parts of the country.

On April 4 then, the LNA forces took the town of Gharyan, 100 km south of Tripoli before advancing to the city's outskirts. Shortly after, the LNA declared operation "Flood of dignity,"<sup>1</sup> which deployed thousands of men and heavy artillery to the west with the stated aim of capturing the

capital and "eradicating terrorism." The GNA in Tripoli, widely considered the sole 'legitimate' authority, proclaimed the counteroffensive "Volcano of anger", spearheaded by a group of loosely aligned militias. Whilst caught by surprise, to a certain degree at least, the military groups in Tripoli were relatively swift in arranging defensive mechanisms and even cooperating in a counter-mobilization of western forces. In military terms of course, this counter-mobilization fuelled the escalation that was, however, triggered first and foremost by the LNA. Additionally, the viral spread of false information, combined with bombastic official rhetoric, added to the confusion besetting the Libyan people, particularly in the strategic Tripolitan region.

The current fighting is not a situation of two rival authorities fighting over resources but has rather been criticized as having been triggered by the actions of one military general with a vision of taking over the country under the guise of eradicating terrorism. Emblematic of the on-the-ground developments are granular advances and retreats by each side. For example, the area around the Yarmouk camp, located in southern Tripoli, has been contested multiple times since the start of the offensive on Tripoli. This shaky standing epitomizes the inconclusiveness of the LNA's strategy.

What to make of Haftar and his military forces?

Haftar has an authoritarian agenda and military understand-



ding of politics. Over the last years, he has disregarded the rule of law and refused to subordinate himself to a political authority. A comrade of Muammar Qaddafi during the 1969 military coup, Haftar returned to his home country in 2011 after decades of exile in the US following a fall-out with his former comrade in arms. He saw in the developments in 2011 a potential opportunity in the post-revolutionary political landscape in Libya. These hopes were dashed rapidly, and he did not become the figurehead of the revolution as he envisioned but rather one of many military commanders in the uprising against Qaddafi. Only in the Libyan civil war of 2014 did he re-emerge, installing himself and his LNA as a committed “anti-Islamist” fighting force.

The prospect of Haftar establishing any sort of Qaddafi-era system is unrealistic as Libya today is fundamentally different than it was in the 1960s. In addition, Haftar has been trying to become the only dominant political and military force in Libya over the last years, but his efforts have been countered domestically by various forces. Neither Haftar nor the LNA are as strong as they like to be portrayed. The LNA is more of a patchwork of militias than a highly disciplined

army united behind a shared ideology or goal. It hinges on a myriad of armed groups, all of which joined for different reasons; some of the militias have committed documented war crimes, such as that of Mahmoud Mustafa Busayf Al-Werfalli who joined the recent fighting on the LNA’s side.<sup>2</sup> While other armed groups have also committed cruelties in Libya or have been accused of seeking blatant self-enrichment, they do not simultaneously claim to be acting as an orderly force that serves as a national army and are therefore not charged with the responsibility to protect or guarantee security to all civilians.

Who are the international and regional power players and brokers?

Different countries have different reasons for supporting Haftar explicitly or, more often, implicitly. On a regional level, countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) subscribe to and foster the anti-Islamist narrative Haftar has been championing, at the least at the level of narrative. In addition, Egypt — while also pursuing an anti-Islamist, especially anti-Muslim Brotherhood, policy — is interested

[Anti-Qaddafi protesters in 2011. General Haftar, Qaddafi’s comrade in the 1969 coup, returned to Libya from exile in 2011. He saw a potential opportunity in the post-revolutionary political landscape in Libya \(photo: Flickr/FreakFrame\)](#)



in having forces on the Libyan side it regards as reliable in controlling the long border it shares with Libya.

On a European level, France is viewed as seeing in Haftar a promising partner in its regional security approach. Haftar succeeded, likely thanks to France's backing, in being included in diplomatic efforts as he was invited to both of last year's international conferences on Libya. Russia has also reportedly given support to Haftar who is said to have visited the country three times since 2016 and was even taken aboard Russia's flagship aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* in 2017.

The US's stance — though consistently supportive of the GNA — has recently become more ambivalent following the publicized phone call between Trump and Haftar in which the former reportedly endorsed the latter as a vital force in countering terrorism. An increasingly accommodative stance towards Haftar was already traceable in the prevalent silence regarding the military advances across southern Libya in early 2019, which could have been interpreted as a "tacit green light."<sup>3</sup>

[US President Donald Trump. The US's stance on Libya has recently become more ambivalent following the publicized phone call between Trump and Haftar in which the former reportedly endorsed the latter as a vital force in countering terrorism \(photo: Flickr/ Brian Copeland \)](#)

On the side of the western militias fighting Haftar, Turkish support is most prevalent, especially in military terms. About a month after the fighting had started alleged breaches of the arms embargo by Turkey could be witnessed in a video, widely shared on social media, that purports to show Turkish-made weaponry reaching Tripoli port.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, explicit and tacit foreign support likely emboldened Haftar to launch the Tripoli offensive. The foreign encouragement was bolstered by talks with the UAE and Saudi Arabia just before his offensive (which the UAE now officially denies<sup>5</sup>) and was fortified by Western intelligence agencies that supposedly stated that militia leaders in the west had increasingly admitted their acceptance of Haftar, as long as he agreed to act under civilian oversight.

Is there a role for the international community?

Haftar's offensive was not entirely surprising as the self-declared General has never held back regarding his intention to rule Libya one day. The moment he chose for his offensive, however, was quite brazen: he commanded his forces to

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advance towards the capital Tripoli around the same time that the UN Secretary-General António Guterres was in Libya for the Libyan National Conference,<sup>6</sup> which carried hopes of laying the groundwork for political progress in the country, including unifying presidential and parliamentary elections this year. Heavier UN involvement, such as in the form of sending UN peacekeeping troops, is extremely unrealistic for two reasons. First, Russia is unlikely to stop using its veto power; second, some Western governments are more reluctant to get involved in Libya today given their 2011 experience. In addition, military and administrative planning is a cumbersome process: which countries would send troops and where in Libya would they be deployed?, etc.

Overall, official statements issued by the UN Security Council and individual UN member countries after the outbreak of fighting have commonly called for restraint, with some denouncing Haftar as the aggressor while others refraining from commenting entirely. On May 13, the European Union called again on all warring groups in Libya to commit to a ceasefire and return to UN-led mediation, while refraining from singling out Haftar as having largely triggered the current infighting.

Whether Haftar's agenda for Libya serves European interests remains to be seen. The continent is almost immediately affected by developments in Libya, and it is in the interest of the European countries to promote a de-escalatory political process. As the recent history of the Middle East and North Africa exhibits, the political absolutism that Haftar embodies is not a formula for stability. Such misrule could once again strengthen terrorist groups like the Islamic State, which carried out a spate of attacks in Libya in 2018 and may have already succeeded<sup>7</sup> in capitalizing on its current momentum.

What is the outlook for a political solution for the ongoing crisis?

On the national level in Libya, the fighting in Tripoli is hindering any political solutions. Haftar's posture appears to be self-defeating and has almost certainly undermined his potential to work as a military leader under a civilian government. However, internationally the UN has not cancelled the long-awaited National Conference that was intended as paving the way for an inclusive political solution in Libya. At the municipal level, some elections took place as planned over the course of the last days. In other words, there are attempts at promoting de-escalation by both local and international actors. However, the violence in the capital would have to stop for any viable attempts at a political

solution at the national level to take root.

Overall, Libya's crisis is not Libya's alone. Foreign powers have been involved and, through their political and military interventions, instrumental in bringing about the current stalemate. The LNA's offensive has changed the calculus by triggering a counter mobilization of previously-fragmented western Libyan armed groups and militias. It is likely, however, that internal fighting and bickering over influence will kick in if the LNA is successfully deterred. An inclusive peace process that involves all relevant political, military and economic actors is thus necessary for Libya to achieve a sense of political normalcy.

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