

Libya's Armed Group Catch-22

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Articles & Testimony

Because the government ceded too much authority to local militias and tribal intermediaries, no one can dismantle them without risking their lives.

Libya's endemic stalemate stems from three interrelated factors. The first is a political leadership that prefers the perks of power to the needs of the population. The second is a financial system that keeps money flowing through oil revenues, enabling an opaque distribution network benefiting political and armed actors. And the third is a network of "hybrid" or semi-official, mostly state-funded armed groups that enjoy both state privileges and mafia-like control of territory, resources, and smuggling.

The UN and international actors sought to break this cycle with national elections two years ago. Still, the eventual postponement of the vote demonstrated how deeply engrained this anti-democratic system remains. Unfortunately, Libya did not realise the hopes of the early post-Gaddafi years in 2011 and 2012.

The UN and Western partners are again trying to renew an electoral process. October's Security Council Resolution 2702 reiterated support for Abdoulaye Bathily, the head of the UN Support Mission in Libya, "to further an inclusive political process in line with relevant Security Council resolutions, building based on (previous agreements) and building on the updated electoral laws." However, much of the political focus on holding elections has been on reaching a consensus among political actors who have been "95%" agreed for two years and always managed to disagree on the final 5%. But even if the legal framework for holding elections does proceed, armed groups will have the ultimate veto if they choose to intervene at any stage of the voting process, from protecting polling locations to safeguarding counting procedures and ensuring winners—and losers—are safe.

A security sector reform (SSR) process cannot proceed without a new government, yet a new government requires security sector reform, at least the beginnings of one. In the past, Libyan political and security actors have been averse to participating in SSR. Further, two intervening civil wars supported by outside actors have significantly

undermined the prospects of unifying security institutions. Bathily will require support from Western and regional powers to ensure armed actors allow a free election to take place.

Origins

The roots of Libya's challenge with armed groups stem from the divergent uprisings against Gaddafi that were only loosely coordinated. As Libya scholar Wolfram Lacher describes, "Armed groups mostly organise around individual cities, neighbourhoods or tribes and often define themselves by their local affiliation." **Stephanie Williams** (<https://en.majalla.com/taxonomy/term/246586>), a previous UN representative, suggested that "the number of hybrid armed group actors in Western Libya had mushroomed by several orders of magnitude from the approximately 30,000 on the books" since 2011.

In Benghazi, the site of the initial revolution, the defection of key regime units helped propel the uprising in addition to the support of Islamist-leaning militias. The grouping made for strange bedfellows. Islamists were widely suspected of assassinating the rebel military leader General Abdul Fattah Younis in July 2011. Fast forward to 2014, and General Khalifa Haftar, who had returned to Libya during the revolution but played no role, emerged in Benghazi as the counterforce to the Islamist-leaning armed groups, eventually defeating them locally in what Haftar termed Operation Dignity.

Misrata, Libya's third-largest city, suffered some of the most intense fighting of the revolution. Its resistance formed the basis of some of the most powerful groups that can be mobilised today, such as the Halbous Brigade, the Joint Operations Force, and the Nimr Brigade.

The third major front of fighting was in the mountains southwest of Tripoli. As the months drew on and with NATO support, the Zintanis won the initial race to Tripoli. They remained in the southern part of the capital for the coming years, along with more Islamist-leaning militias that emerged locally and with the frequent deployment of groups from Misrata to assert their influence.

When confronted with this array of revolutionary actors, Libya's nascent political authorities chose to defer the issue of armed groups until elections put a more legitimate government in place. At the same time, the transitional actors also chose not to engage international supporters of the revolution on the issue.

The UN was not prepared, authorised, or staffed to pursue or implement a disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programme (DDR). Nor did NATO or allied forces insist that Libya's first transitional government prioritise trying to attempt some kind of SSR or DDR process when the groups were less entrenched.

One initial Libyan-led attempt was made during early 2012, termed the Warrior Affairs Commission, which attempted to register any fighter or associate in the revolution and determine whether they were interested in education, work, or formal incorporation into the formal military structure. While the effort registered over 250,000 (actual participants in the fights were estimated to be far fewer), the programme was discredited and eventually suspended.

Another early effort created broad umbrellas under the Ministry of Defense (Libyan Shield Forces) and the Ministry of Interior (the Supreme Security Forces), each with tens of thousands of personnel nominally affiliated groups but with limited command and control. Instead, the National Transition Council did what Libyans knew best from the Gaddafi era: they put armed groups on the public payroll. This decision created a terrible precedent from which Libya has not yet recovered.

More Failures

Among the tragedies of the September 2012 attacks against the US special mission in Benghazi (perpetrated by Ansar al-Sharia, an Islamist militant group at the time) was that Libya was still going through a government

formation process after the free elections that June. Under the rules, the elected General National Congress had to pick a prime minister who would select the executive body to govern the country.

When the attacks transpired, there was no national—or even local—authority for the US to talk to. Regardless, politicians had little reach into Benghazi, where a group of brigades and defected remnants of the Gaddafi army essentially ruled the streets.

Eventually, Ali Zeidan was selected by the GNC as prime minister in late 2012. One of his priorities, encouraged by Western partners, was to begin a DDR process in large part by establishing a state-led force that could protect the government against militias.

After a visit to Washington and European capitals, Zeidan was invited to the G8 summit hosted by UK Prime Minister David Cameron, who announced a commitment by allies to train 7,000 Libya forces, later termed the General Purpose Force. The project was doomed from the start. Ignoring disastrous ad-hoc experiments in training in Jordan and Turkey where recruits trashed facilities, a first round of unvetted trainees destroyed a military facility in Cambridge, England and assaulted local personnel. The US insisted Libya pay for the training, so the process never began.

Other more limited engagements did not change the fundamental character of the militia landscape. Zeidan approached NATO with an uncoordinated request in 2013 to help with security “defence institution building,” which NATO defence ministers approved. Nearly a year later, NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen said, “We have had some difficulties engaging with the Libyan authorities.”

While Zeidan attempted to form some kind of government force in the West, Khalifa Haftar was consolidating power in the East in Benghazi and then Derna. Haftar managed to unite former Gaddafi-era military and tribal-affiliated groups in response to a campaign of assassinations against former regime members. Once he consolidated control of the East with the support of Egypt and the UAE, he sought to take on the so-called Islamists in the West, leading to the 2014-2015 civil war between Haftar’s Dignity Coalition and Tripoli’s Dawn Coalition with support from Misrata.

The war was eventually stopped by international mediation and the agreement in early 2015, known as the Libya Political Agreement. The agreement was never fully implemented but created the split institutions, the House of Representatives and the High State Council, that still exist and bear significant responsibility for Libya’s stasis since.

Uniting Against a Common Threat

One significant factor that led to the coordination and consolidation of armed groups was the presence of a larger threat. Operation Dawn was formed against Haftar in 2014-2015 when Misrata and Tripoli-based militias united against him.

Misrata’s Military Council and its sub-units carried out the Bunyan al-Marsous operation against the Islamic State (IS), which had formed a base in Sirte. Misratan and Tripoli forces came together again when Haftar attacked Tripoli again in 2019.

In each case, external actors participated in the fighting. The UAE and Egypt helped Haftar’s Operation Dignity, in one case bombing sites in Tripoli. On their part, Western forces, including US air strikes and British Special Forces, helped Misratan units overcome IS-Sirte after months of intense fighting.

Tripoli government-aligned forces depended on Turkey’s intervention in early 2020 as Haftar’s forces were fighting in the city’s outskirts. Turkey used superior drones and anti-aircraft systems to defeat the ones Wagner operated on Haftar’s behalf. Even after the October 2020 ceasefire that stipulated the departure of foreign forces, Turkey remains in Libya, training Tripoli-affiliated soldiers and operating in a relatively low-key manner out of military bases in the West.

Meanwhile, the post-Prigozhin Wagner Group remains in Libya, operating out of the strategic Jufra Airbase, which it uses as a transit hub for its profitable African operations. The Russians also provide personal protection for Haftar—and are most likely responsible for shooting down a US collection drone last year. Since Prigozhin's death, Russia's deputy defence minister has visited Haftar repeatedly to ensure he remains in Russia's orbit.

The last round of militia consolidation in the capital occurred in August 2022 when former Interior Minister Fathi Beshagha attempted to enter Tripoli and unseat Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, citing the expiration of his term since elections did not transpire in December 2021. Beshagha, who had previously worked closely with the Tripoli groups, expected their support, but the Deterrence Apparatus (the Salafi group Radaa) and Stability Support Apparatus, led by Abdelghani al-Kikli or Ghnaiwa, pushed the Nawasi Brigade, Beshagha's proponents, out of the city, leaving Dbeibeh in power but all the more beholden to Radaa and the SSA.

Radaa controls the Mitiga Airport, giving them enormous leverage over the government but also over international actors accessing the city. These two groups clashed in August 2023 but avoided wider escalation.

In the East, Haftar's Libyan National Army is the most vertically integrated; there are rivalries among his brigades, including those led by his sons. His son Saddam oversees the Tarek bin Ziyad Brigade, which is documented for committing war crimes. Meanwhile, Khalid heads the 106th Battalion.

According to the UN Panel of Experts on Libya's 2023 report, "The Haftar family took control over most social and economic life in eastern Libya" as they recovered from their military defeat in 2020. Saddam also seized control of Derna's rescue and reconstruction apparatus, where the family and its allies stand to gain huge sums. There has been ongoing speculation of what will happen in eastern Libya when Haftar, who is 80, leaves the scene. The family is attempting to quell any doubts, but the authoritarian manner in which it operates may propel opponents within and beyond the army.

To build on the October 2020 ceasefire agreement, the UN established a Joint Military Commission representing five military officers from East and West whose goal would be to unify the Libya army, known as the 5 + 5. But while Haftar's representatives represent their commander, the Western generals are geographically representative of the major cities (Tripoli, Misrata, Zawiya, Zintan, and Gharyan), given the formal military's dependence on the region's militias. Although DDR is not formally on the commission's mandate, Spain hosted a meeting on militia demobilisation in May 2022.

Dim Prospects

In 2012, Libya expert and scholar Fred Wehery presciently wrote, "The strategy of trying to dismantle the regional militias while simultaneously using them as hired guns might be sowing the seeds for the country's descent into warlordism. All of this points to a government that has ceded an unhealthy degree of authority to local militias and tribal intermediaries." The problem was—then as it is now—that no independent government can take on a real DDR process without risking their own lives.

Ali Zeidan, the prime minister who attempted to create a military loyal to the government, was kidnapped twice. Without some sort of international protection, a newly elected government will be at a similar disadvantage or, worse, spark another civil war.

If any progress on the elections does occur, armed groups must be part of the agreement to hold the voting. This will require significant pressure from outside actors who have influence over the local parties to ensure they do not get involved in pre or post-election violence.

This process will be all the more challenging given the region's overwhelming focus on Gaza and rising tensions in Lebanon and the Red Sea. Bathily must pay more attention to the militia paradox than prioritising political

agreements.

Ben Fishman is a senior fellow in The Washington Institute's Rubin Program on Arab Politics. This article was originally published on Al Majalla's website (<https://en.majalla.com/node/310716/politics/libya%E2%80%99s-armed-group-catch-22>). ♦

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