



**Libya:**  
*On the Brink*

ASP

American Security Project



Perspective

—  
Giancarlo Lima  
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## In this Report:

Since the removal of longtime leader Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, Libya has struggled to rebuild itself. Currently, warring factions are vying for control over the country following the dissolution of the country's government.

This report analyzes the recent events that have placed Libya on its current path. In order to understand events on the ground, this report includes a breakdown of key Libyan parties and figures as well as an examination of the economic and energy dimensions of the conflict. The report then concludes with a look forward for Libya and recommendations for the U.S. and international community.

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## IN BRIEF

- Libya is currently divided between two governments, an Islamist-aligned one based in Tripoli and non-Islamist one in eastern Libya.
- Since 2012, militias that are connected to each government have been battling each other across the country for control of major cities and oil facilities.
- The UN and international community are working to mediate a cease-fire and further dialogue between both sides.

## About the Author

Giancarlo Lima is a researcher at the American Security Project specializing in international security and democracy and governance of the Middle East. A recent graduate of the University of Amsterdam, he has significant experience living and working in post-revolution Egypt.

## Introduction

While ISIL continues to grab the daily headlines as it marauds through what is left of Iraq and Syria, there are equally disturbing events currently taking place in Libya. Three years on from the international community's intervention into the North African country, Libya finds itself in complete disarray. With news of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates conducting military operations in Libya against Islamist militias in recent months and even discussions on the formation of a broader Middle East security alliance, Libya will be a testing ground for the U.S. and the region to compose a strategy to grapple with deteriorating security conditions of a failing state in a post-conflict environment.<sup>1 2</sup>



In 2011, following the seven month long NATO-led international military operations in Libya that ended with the killing of long-time Libyan ruler Muammar Qaddafi, the state apparatus crumbled.<sup>3</sup> Although an interim government in Tripoli was established, it was not strong enough to bring order to the fractured country. Fighting ensued between rival factions representing different sections of Libyan society, from Islamist militant organizations to disaffected former Qaddafi officials. Libya was a country torn apart by the uprisings in 2011 and various parties and tribal networks began to take advantage of the vacuum in the wake of Qaddafi's ouster.

During the Libyan revolution, the National Transitional Council (NTC) was formed. The NTC provided a unified voice of opposition to the Qaddafi regime and the international community gave political and, subsequently, military support to the organization. Following the cessation of military operations by NATO in October 2011, the NTC gave way to the elected General National Congress (GNC) in mid-2012. At this point, the Libyan political arena began to succumb to the pressures of having to rebuild the formal structures of the state and actually govern the country. The GNC, wracked with disorganization and unable to create a constitution within the 18 month timeframe given to the body, was disbanded in August 2014 leading to another election for a House of Representatives (HoR).

Prior to being disbanded, the GNC was a 200 seat legislative body based in Tripoli. The National Forces Alliance (NFA), a coalition of what can be described as, in the Libyan context, liberal political organizations, beat out the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Justice and Construction Party for the majority. This rivalry, between Islamists and anti-Islamists, is one of many layers of the current conflict playing out not just in Libya but across the entire region as well.

With the GNC crippled by infighting and unable to fulfill its mandate, many parts of Libyan society strengthened their call for the body to be dissolved. Prior to the formal dissolution of the GNC in August 2014, former Qaddafi general turned anti-Qaddafi rebel leader, Khalifa Haftar launched a military campaign against Islamist forces in May 2014.<sup>4</sup> The campaign, entitled Operation Dignity, began targeting the forces of internationally designated terrorist organization Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi and has since expanded to going

after any Islamist-leaning forces that Haftar and those around him deem to be a threat to Libya. Operation Dignity became an amalgamation of various militias and eastern tribes many of whom are loyal to former Libyan Army officials and old regime figures.

In response to Operation Dignity, militias aligned with Islamist parties in the dissolved and now reformulated GNC launched a counterattack on Haftar's forces beginning with the shelling of neighborhoods in Tripoli. With the initiation of Operation Libyan Dawn in July, Libya's ongoing political crisis officially devolved into an increasingly disastrous security conflict. The campaign by Islamist-aligned forces came after the new elections for the HoR produced terrible results for the Islamist parties in the GNC. By the time the GNC was dissolved and the HOR was elected, fighting had broken out in several cities across the country. The ensuing conflict and deteriorating security conditions forced the internationally recognized government of the HoR, led by Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thanni to move to the eastern cities of Bayda and Tobrouk where they have support from militias aligned with Haftar. As of late 2014, neither side has been able to overtake the other, and without mediation, the intensity of the conflict could increase further.

## The Security Situation: Libya's Rival Governments and Militias

While the political arena is somewhat clear in its composition, the militias that are attached to each side are less clearly defined. They represent a hodgepodge of groups and movements that arose during the revolution and many have either merged with like-minded groups or have continued to fight their rivals. As the UN and international community try to bring the rival factions together to formulate a ceasefire and path toward reconciliation, here is a breakdown of the most important players in the current conflict.<sup>5</sup>



Two members of Ansar al Sharia fighting in Benghazi

### Tripoli Based Government:

Libya stands divided between two governments each claiming to represent the legitimate will of the people. The results of the June elections to replace the GNC were a blow to the Islamist coalitions in the body. Although elections took place and the HoR was internationally recognized as having replaced the GNC, the GNC reconvened and extended its mandate to continue operating and govern the country.

**Prime Minister Omar al-Hasi:** A Libyan politician who was elected as Prime Minister of the reformulated GNC following the June elections.

### Islamist Militias under the Libyan Dawn umbrella aligned with Tripoli:

**Libyan Revolutionaries' Operations Room (LROR):** This group, formed in 2013 by an alliance of Islamist members in the GNC is the main militia for the Tripoli-based Islamist government. It has orchestrated kidnappings and assassinations of former Qaddafi-era officials and is believed to be the beneficiary of external aid.

**Ansar al-Sharia:** An internationally designated terrorist organization that is accused of killing U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and 3 other Americans in September 2012. While not a registered political organization, the group can be categorized as a rejectionist entity that is aligned with Islamist factions. Estimates for the size of the group range from several hundred up to 3,000.

**Libyan Shield Militia:** A militia from the Benghazi area that is closely aligned with the Justice and Construction Party. The militia was established in 2012 in an attempt to unite several post-revolution militias

**The February 17 Martyrs Brigade:** Also a participant in Operation Libyan Dawn, the February 17 Martyrs Brigade is thought to be one of the larger militias of eastern Libya. It has an estimated size of between 1,500 and 3,000 militiamen.

### **Tobrouk and Bayda Based Government:**

Following the elections for the HoR, the newly elected representative body fled to eastern Libya and has settled in the cities of Tobrouk and Bayda. Internationally recognized, the HoR recently received a hit to its legitimacy when Libya's Supreme Court issued a ruling that declared the body to have been seated unconstitutionally.<sup>6</sup>

**Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thanni:** In March 2014 former Prime Minister Ali Zeidan was ousted by the Libyan parliament upon which time al-Thanni was elected to Prime Minister. Following the controversy of the GNC and HoR elections, al-Thanni moved with the newly elected legislative body to eastern Libya.

**General Khalifa Haftar Forces:** Commander of the reconstituted Libyan National Army, Haftar has united several eastern Libya tribes and federalists against the Islamist coalitions. Within this armed force is a ground army, air force and navy. Haftar's forces have conducted aerial bombardments and benefit from the material support provided by Egypt and the UAE.

**Zintan Militia:** Based in the western Libyan city of Zintan, it is one of the key allies of the core of Hiftar's reconstructed Libyan National Army. It has an estimated size of up to 4,000 militiamen.

## **The Economic Situation**

The many militias that are battling across Libya are not just fighting for who will govern the country but also who will control the vast amount of oil that Libya produces. Libya's energy production is crucial to understanding the events that have transpired since the ouster of Qaddafi. Neither side is relenting in their military campaigns because they understand that by gaining political control over the country they will also preside over the enormous revenues that Libya's oil brings.

At the annual 2014 OPEC summit, controversy ensued after the Tripoli-based government wanted to send its representative to the meeting even though that government is not recognized by the UN or OPEC as a legitimate representative of Libya.<sup>7</sup> This led Rival Prime Minister Omar al-Hassi to declare to Reuters, "Libya's oil has become part of the war. We had hoped that oil would not be part of this conflict."<sup>8</sup> While foot soldiers

## Libya Economic Data:

Population: 6.3 million

Unemployment Total Population: 26%

Youth Unemployment: 32%

GDP/capita: \$11,700

Value of exports (in millions): \$40,723

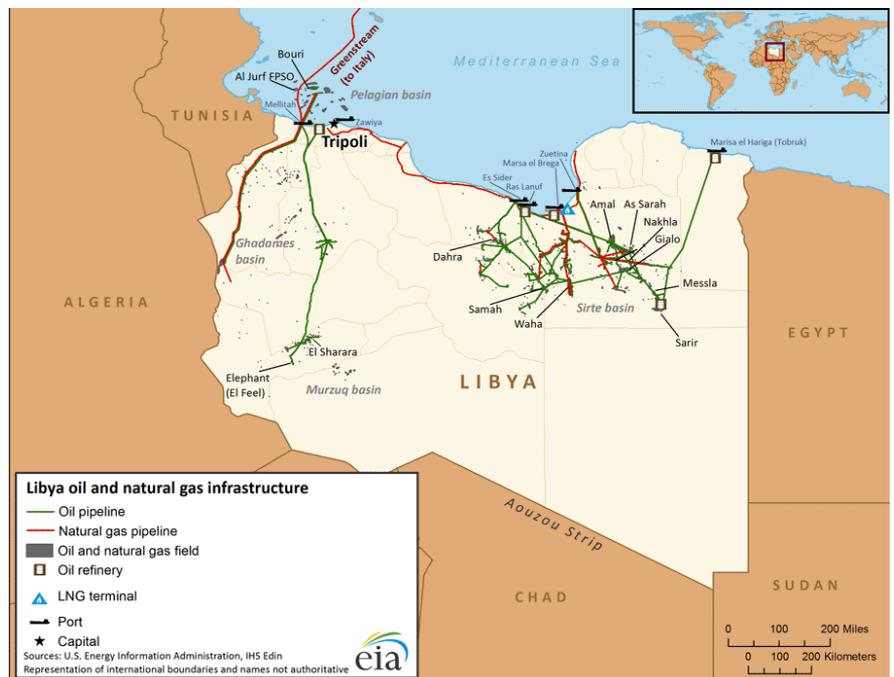
Value of petroleum exports (in millions): \$40,163

do battle in the streets throughout the country, Libyan politicians and bureaucrats are waging a war over the country's oil reserves.

Not only does Libya have the largest proven oil reserves in all of Africa at 47.1 billion barrels but it also has considerable natural gas reserves as well.<sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup>As is the case for many oil producers, especially those in the Middle East, the vast amounts of oil and gas are an enormous portion of Libya's exports and gross domestic product (GDP). At least 70 percent of Libya's GDP and over 95 percent of its export earnings come from oil.<sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup>In 2011 when the Libyan revolution was raging, oil production collapsed to 22,000 barrels per day (b/d) but elevated to 1.6 million b/d once the conflict had subsided, a figure close to the country's peak production of 1.7 million b/d.<sup>13</sup>

As political tensions mounted and violence erupted once again in 2013, oil production dropped to 160,000 b/d by the end of the year. Recent information coming out of Libya suggested that oil production has increased significantly since the low of 2013 but still remained far short of peak levels. The U.S. Energy Information Administration has said that in the period from January to November 2014, Libya averaged 450,000 b/d, a significant drop off from pre-revolution levels. While Libyan officials optimistically expect the country to reach 1.5 million b/d by the end of 2014, it is reasonable to expect continued high volatility in Libya's oil production as militias attempt to seize oil ports as part of their larger military campaign.<sup>14</sup>

Almost all government activities are financed through the revenue gained from oil production. The state is the sole owner of oil produced in Libya. The National Oil Corporation (NOC) is entirely responsible for the sale and export of Libyan oil. Throughout the conflict the NOC has remained neutral while each side tries to exert control over the state-run corporation. As can be seen in the graphic at right, eastern Libya contains a significant portion of the country's oil infrastructure as well as its largest reserves located in the Sirte Basin. Throughout the past three years there have been strikes by oil workers demanding larger shares of oil revenues, leading to interruptions in production. Militias have



also gained control of the oil terminals of Es Sider, Ras Lanuf, and Marsa el Brega as recently as December 2014.<sup>15</sup>

Libya's overreliance on hydrocarbons is both a long term and short term problem. In the short term, the weak oil market will create problems for the country's oil revenues. In the long term, an undiversified economy means that sectors outside the state-run oil industry, such as the private sector, will remain underdeveloped. Corruption within the NOC and government is also a major concern if there is no transparency in the management of revenues. This overreliance will pose further challenges to democratization and governance efforts if the industry is not reformed. As both sides in the conflict continue to clash over political control, for better or for worse, the viability of Libya's economic future will be heavily tied to its oil production capabilities regardless of who is in power.

## Conclusions & Recommendations

The United Nations special envoy to Libya recently issued a dire warning that Libya is nearing a "point of no return."<sup>16</sup> The UN is currently working to mediate between the factions on the ground who are clashing over who should rightfully govern the country. Further complicating matters is the 6 November Supreme Court ruling declaring the internationally recognized government as unconstitutional. The ousted government of al-Thinni has of course denied the ruling by declaring that the Supreme Court, based in Tripoli, was pressured into making such a decision. In the eyes of the parties involved, neither side has the legitimacy to govern.

In order to begin constructing an inclusive and legitimate government the security conditions must be resolved. The first step to this would be the agreement of a ceasefire so all parties involved can have productive negotiations. The goal is to have a peaceful end to hostilities so a national reconciliation can begin and a clear path for Libya's future can be charted. Currently, Libyan civilians are caught amongst the fighting which has resulted in hundreds, if not thousands of casualties.<sup>17</sup>

Bringing about a ceasefire is of course very challenging which is why regional players such as Egypt and the Gulf states need to exert their influence to bring their sides to the table. The U.S., the African Union, the Arab League, and other allies such as France, Germany and the U.K. will also need to be involved to provide support and guidance to Libyan authorities and mediators.

Today Libya stands at the brink of a full-fledged civil war, and if there is any hope for the country then there needs to be dialogue between the al-Thanni government and the Islamist parties situated in Tripoli. The U.S. and the international community can make good on the well-intentioned humanitarian intervention of 2011 by putting together a strategic framework for the resolution of armed hostilities and a roadmap for the formation of an inclusive and representative Libyan government.<sup>18</sup> Farther down the line there will have to be elections, however, they should only be held once a constitution is agreed upon and the underlying issues, such as whether former Qaddafi officials can run for office, are resolved. Holding elections before the foundation is properly established would likely lead to a restart of the current hostilities.

Libya in many ways is a microcosm of the region-wide struggles currently taking place across the Arab world. The battles being waged both with bullets and ballots across the region are giving shape to the futures of these

societies. Libyan factions, aided by external forces, are trying to exert their control but ultimately there is no military solution to the current state of affairs. To bring a cessation of hostilities and restore stability in Libya there will need to be serious engagement by all parties involved so that for the sake of the Libyan people, they can live in a country that is representative and responsive to their needs and aspirations. At stake in Libya is the risk of further death and destruction of Libyan society, increased instability on Libya's borders, as well as the fate of the country itself.

While inclusivity is key, there may be those who will continue to use violence, especially against civilians. If this is the case, the international community should give thought to supporting security operations that will bring stability to Libya. This should be seen as a last resort if the situation continues to deteriorate. Creating a dialogue without bullets flying is necessary for Libya's future.

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