

Libya plunging towards civil war

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Three years after the NATO-led campaign backed armed Islamist militias to overthrow the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, Libya teeters on the brink of all-out civil war.

With rival militias fighting for control of Libya's vast energy resources, the coup bid by retired general Khalifa Hifter's Libyan National Army killed at least 79 and wounded more than 140 in attacks in the eastern port city of Benghazi and the capital Tripoli.

Three of the most important air bases in the east of the country joined him, and used government warplanes and helicopters to bombard Islamist bases. One of the targets, along with the Al Qaeda-linked February 17 Martyrs and Rafallah Al Sahati Brigades, was Ansar al-Sharia, the group implicated in the September 2012 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi and the CIA annex that resulted in the deaths of the US ambassador and three other Americans.

The Qaaqaa militia allied to Hifter stormed the parliament building in Tripoli and suspended the Islamist-dominated General National Congress (GNC)—whose term expired in February. They kidnapped about 20 lawmakers and government officials to prevent a vote approving the cabinet of recently appointed Prime Minister Ahmad Maiteeg.

Born in Benghazi, Hifter had been an army chief of staff under Gaddafi. Falling out with Gaddafi after his capture during the Libyan intervention in Chad in the 1980s, he moved to the US, spending nearly 30 years in Langley, Virginia, where he was trained by the CIA.

Last Wednesday, Hifter called on the Supreme Court to appoint a civilian council to oversee new elections on June 25. With a line dictated by Washington, he accused the government of fostering terrorism and called for a ban on Islamist parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood. He said he would run for president, an office that has remained vacant since Gaddafi's ouster.

All but declaring support for the coup, the US

ambassador to Libya, Deborah Jones, insisted that while the Obama administration did not support or have any advance knowledge of Hifter's actions, "It's very difficult to step up and condemn" Hifter, given that his forces are "going after very specific groups...on our list of terrorists."

"I am not going to come out and condemn blanketly what he did," she added.

Hifter's move against the government came as the US relocated 200 Marines from Spain to Sicily so as to be able to intervene if necessary. NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen said that NATO was ready to assist Libya, should the government request help.

In reality, according to Debkafile, which has close ties with Israeli intelligence services, unidentified American organisations are providing Hifter with funds and intelligence while sources in Abu Dhabi are providing them with weapons, or financing their purchase in Libya's flourishing arms market. Some of the Islamist militias in Benghazi claim that foreign support even extends to providing the aircraft to carry out the bombing.

In January, the US State Department designated three chapters of Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi, Derna, and Tunisia as terrorist organisations, and three of the groups' leaders, Sufian Ben Qumu, Ahmed Abu Khattalah, and Seifallah Ben Hassine, as "global terrorists."

Hifter's campaign, "Operation Dignity", apparently has support from the powerful Zintan militia, based in the city of Zintan, southwest of Tripoli, and militias in the eastern province of Cyrenaica. Some of the government's armed forces, including the air force, dozens of state bodies, and even some members of the government itself, including Libya's ambassador to the UN, have rallied to him, as well as former elements of the Gaddafi regime. But his disparate coalition agrees on little other than its opposition to the Islamist-led

government.

The government, now hopelessly split, has called Operation Dignity an attempted coup, ordered the arrest of those taking part and has refused to step down. But it has been powerless to restore order under conditions where some of the national armed forces—made up of numerous militias—have turned against it. While it wanted to impose a state of emergency in the capital with a dusk-to-dawn curfew, it was incapable of implementing it.

Libya has for months been without a functioning political or legal system, ever since the former Prime Minister Ali Zeidan, in office for barely a year, was kidnapped briefly last October. He resigned in March and fled the country in fear of his life following the inability of his government's forces to prevent the rogue oil tanker Morning Glory leaving the rebel-held port of Sidra with Libyan oil. His successor resigned weeks after his appointment following an armed attack on his family.

The government and the GNC, made up of Islamist forces, former Gaddafi-regime figures and criminal elements, are widely reviled for their inability to rein in the hundreds of lawless militias and criminal gangs that control the country, and intimidate, kidnap, imprison and assassinate people to extort ransoms. According to the Atlantic Council, at least 250,000 men under arms are members of militias, in a country of six million people, and on the government payroll even though only 30,000 took part in Gaddafi's ouster. Millions of people have fled the country to escape the chronic insecurity, unemployment, poverty and power shortages.

Rebels have taken control of energy-rich Cyrenaica, declaring it an autonomous province, blockading oil facilities, and cutting off one of Libya's last remaining pipelines in the west of the country. Strikes at the oil refineries have led to petrol shortages. While the government has struck a deal with the rebels and retaken control of the oil, production is little more than 10 percent of its capacity.

Tribal leaders in Fezzan in the south are also opposed to the government and are seeking autonomy in a federal state.

Libya's 17 most powerful militias are mostly tribal or regional units that broke away from the army after the overthrow of Gaddafi. The strongest group, the Misrata

Brigade, itself a coalition of 200 small militias, has as yet played no part in the current conflict.

When asked his opinion about Libya's future, Michael Morell, a former deputy director and acting director of the CIA, admitted that it was on the point of disintegration, saying, "It is one of the biggest nation-building challenges that I have seen."

Egypt's military leader and presidential candidate Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, whose government is waging an all-out war on the Muslim Brotherhood, is also believed to be backing Hifter. Al-Sisi has previously called on the Western powers to intervene militarily in Libya. He is seeking to form a broader alliance including the US, France, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Algeria to pre-empt the emergence of an Islamist government in Libya.

Algeria has reinforced security on its southern border with Libya and recalled oil workers. It has faced attacks by Al Qaeda-linked groups in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In April, 11 soldiers were killed in Tizi Ouzou, 100 kilometres east of the Algerian capital. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika asked US Secretary of State John Kerry during his visit to Algeria in April to provide security intelligence to Washington's North African partners and establish, through a program of military cooperation with the Sahel countries, a joint headquarters in the city of Tamanrasset with military representatives from five countries in the region.



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