

Fighting between militias intensifies in Libya

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Three weeks before a general election set for June 25, Libya is at the point of disintegration. Militias supporting rival interim prime ministers are battling it out for control of Libya's energy resources in the east of the country and its huge currency reserves based on oil and gas.

There is the very real possibility of a military coup and civil war in a country already devastated by the NATO-led war to overthrow Col. Muammar Gaddafi, followed by three years of infighting among hundreds of rival militias.

On Wednesday, a suicide bomb attack on the home of former general Khalifa Hifter, who has been leading an offensive against the Islamist-backed interim prime minister, Ahmed Maitiq, killed four of Hifter's guards. Hifter himself was unharmed. The attack took place in Abyar, 60 kilometres east of the Eastern port city of Benghazi, close to Benghazi's military command.

Hifter, who broke with Gaddafi in the 1980s and lived for years in Langley, Virginia, close to the CIA's headquarters, has emerged as a would-be strong man, reportedly with backing from the US, Egypt, Algeria, and the United Arab Emirates.

Following the line of Egypt's military leader Abdul Fattah al-Sisi against the Muslim Brotherhood, he has accused the government headed by Ahmed Miitig of fostering terrorism and called for it to step down in favour of an emergency government supervised by Libya's Supreme Court.

Miitig, a 42-year-old businessman, was elected by an Islamist-dominated parliament that has been boycotted by the secularist parties for months. Last February, his government arbitrarily extended its mandate until the end of the year. His appointment is now being challenged through the courts.

The previous prime minister, Abdullah al-Thani, resigned in April following an armed attack on his family.

Hifter and his so-called National Army have support from some militias in the east of country that control the key oil export terminals, as well as some members of the air force and some of al-Thani's supporters, if not al-

Thani himself. He also appears to have support among a population opposed to the hundreds of armed militias whose intimidation, extortion and kidnapping have caused widespread insecurity and hardship.

He has focused his attacks on the Islamist militias Ansar al-Sharia, now designated a terrorist group by the US, the 17th Brigade, the Libya Shield Force and Al Qaeda-linked forces that the US and NATO had backed in their fight against Gaddafi in 2011.

The Islamists, for their part, accuse Hifter of seeking to restore former regime figures to power. Ansar al-Sharia warned Washington against interfering in Libya, accusing the Obama administration of backing Hifter and threatening to "open the gates of hell" if Hifter continued his assaults on Islamist groups. The authorities in Tripoli have denounced Hifter as an outlaw.

The suicide attack follows fierce clashes between Hifter's forces and Islamist fighters in Benghazi on Monday. These battles erupted after three Islamist groups attacked one of Hifter's bases. Helicopters from the air force loyal to Hifter hit back at the attackers, causing widespread panic. Residents said that Monday's fighting was the worst they had seen since March 2011.

The education minister ordered the closure of schools and universities amid end-of-year examinations, and shops and businesses were shuttered. The airport remains closed. Twenty people were reported to have been killed and nearly 70 wounded.

Fighting was also reported in al-Marj, east of Benghazi, where eighteen were wounded. On Sunday, one of Hifter's warplanes bombed a university building during a raid on an Islamist camp nearby, wounding two people. On Tuesday, the Prime Minister's headquarters in Tripoli was attacked, causing minor damage but no casualties.

The ongoing power struggle has halted all attempts to reopen two key oil terminals in eastern Libya, depriving the government of the revenues on which it depends. At the same time, strikes at the oil refineries have led to petrol shortages. While the government had struck a deal with the rebels and retaken control of the oil, production

is little more than 10 percent of its capacity.

Some 1.5 million of Libya's 6 million population are employed by the state, including an additional 400,000 taken on after the NATO-led war against Gaddafi and 250,000 armed militiamen ostensibly under the Ministries of Defence and the Interior. Many Libyans depend upon food and energy subsidies to eke out an existence.

According to Sadiq al-Kabir, the governor of the Central Bank, Libya earned only \$6 billion from energy exports in the first four months of this year, less than a quarter of the \$18 billion budgeted and less than the state salaries. This has led to friction between the Central Bank and parliament, which has been unable to set a budget and had to call on the bank to release cash from its \$110 billion reserves to keep the country running.

Former prime minister al-Thani accused Kabir of acting like "Libya's absolute ruler" by blocking even spending approved by parliament. Deputy Governor Ali Mohamed el-Hebri has called for the number of state employees to be slashed. With the premiership itself a matter of legal dispute, tensions are running high.

Libya's currency is under pressure as a result of the collapse of oil revenues and the widespread insecurity. The dinar has fallen 7 percent against the dollar on the black market, leading to calls for the dinar to be devalued. Any devaluation would hit Libya's \$30 billion import bill for basic foodstuffs from Europe, Tunisia and Turkey.

The disruption to Libya's oil production comes at a particularly crucial time, when the European powers are looking to minimise their dependency on Russia's energy resources and secure the oil and gas pipelines of ENI-Italy from Libya for their needs.

But the instability in Libya is the direct result of the NATO-led war to overthrow the Gaddafi regime and replace it with a puppet regime that would enable Washington to control Libya's oil reserves and use the strategically located country to project US power into Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

The instability now threatens to spread beyond Libya's borders and destabilise its neighbours in resource-rich North Africa and the Sahel, as the proliferation of weapons paid for by NATO and its Gulf allies permits its neighbours' opponents to arm themselves, while Libya's vast deserts provide bases for them to launch their attacks. Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia have all closed their borders with Libya.

Under these circumstances, the US, in a move reminiscent of the build-up to the 2011 intervention, has deployed the warship USS Bataan, with 1,000 troops, off

the Libyan coast "in case the US embassy needs to be evacuated," and sent nine planes and 250 soldiers to its base in Sicily. The State Department also issued a travel warning advising Americans in Libya to "depart immediately." But this time, unlike 2011, there will be no popular backing for any US intervention.

The private intelligence firm Stratfor in a March 19 analysis noted that "France, the US and NATO had sent small groups of technical experts to help with military and intelligence organisation and structuring, including some military training in Libya." In other words, under the guise of "training", the major powers already have boots on the ground in Libya.

Statfor noted that at the same time, Western intelligence agencies were "actively monitoring Libyan territory and collecting data on militant movements, including surveillance with unarmed, unmanned aerial vehicles." It said that US special operations forces in a covert operation had captured suspected Al Qaeda member Anas al-Libi. Warning that such covert operations had only limited usefulness, Stratfor said that "A much more coordinated, comprehensive security plan for the region needs to be in place to constrain regional militias such as Al Qaeda affiliates."

The escalating clashes in Libya and the US response come just a week after Egypt's former military leader Abdul Fattah el-Sisi assumed the presidency with Washington's support, pledging to "root out terrorism"—a euphemism for a reign of terror against all opposition to the plans of the Egyptian bourgeoisie to slash public subsidies upon which the impoverished working class and rural poor depend.

There have been reports of potential Egyptian intervention in Libya. On Sunday, a gang of arms traffickers killed six Egyptian border guards after crossing into Egypt from Libya.



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