

Civil war surges in Libya after legislative elections

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The situation in Libya after last month's legislative elections constitutes a political indictment of the 2011 NATO war in Libya. Libya's main cities have become war zones with the various Islamist-led militias, previously denounced as terrorists, which the Obama administration and the European powers funded in their bid to topple the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 and install a more pro-Western government, battling it out for control of the country's oil wealth.

The country is in a state of collapse, with the government existing in name only. Oil production, the life blood of the economy, is down by at least 80 percent, and more than one million people have been forced to flee the country. Thousands are incarcerated and tortured in jails run by armed militias, many of which are criminal enterprises involved in narcotics smuggling and drug and people-trafficking.

On Sunday, rival militias from Zintan and Misrata—both of which are on the state payroll, in a bid to secure their support and cooperation—fought for control of the international airport in the capital city of Tripoli, killing at least seven people and wounding at least 36.

The fighting appears to have started when the Misrata militia attacked the Zintan militia which has held the airport since Gaddafi's ouster, ostensibly to hand it over to government authorities. The government of acting Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thinni issued a statement denouncing the attack as illegal, however, declaring: "The operation is led by civil leaders belonging to brigades and troops ... moving without orders and legal cover."

On Monday, the authorities also suspended all flights to and from Libya's third city, Misrata, to the west of Tripoli as it is dependent on Tripoli airport for its operations, effectively cutting it off from the outside

world.

The United Nations mission in Libya, which withdrew dozens of its staff last week because of fears about security, pulled out its remaining staff on Monday as a temporary measure.

The main violence, however, is taking place in the eastern port city of Benghazi, Libya's second largest city near the main oil exporting terminals. Buildings and infrastructure have been destroyed and whole areas deserted as residents flee kidnappings, extortion, the constant shelling and killing.

Clashes between various Islamist groups and forces loyal to the renegade general Khalifa Hifter, once close to Gaddafi and later the CIA, have killed hundreds of people since the start of Hifter's Operation Dignity, while assassinations are increasing. On Sunday, five people were killed and nine wounded when Hifter's forces bombarded Islamist bases in the city in a bid to oust armed groups.

These include Ansar al-Sharia, a former US proxy which led the 2012 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, killing the US ambassador and three staffers; Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM); and al-Mulathameen (masked) Brigade, an Al Qaeda split off loyal to the Algerian Mokhtar Bel Mokhtar.

In an interview with the London *Times*, Hifter said he wanted to rule Libya as a military strongman, like military dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt. He claimed that his forces, organised in the so-called Libyan National Army, had destroyed all the militia bases around the eastern cities, and locked up jihadists from Tunisia, Egypt, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Mali. Next, he said, he would tackle Derna, the east of Benghazi, a transit point for jihadists traveling to Iraq and dominated by Ansar al-Sharia, and then Tripoli.

However, his interview with the *Times* took place in

his fortified headquarters in Marj, east of Benghazi, and he has yet to set foot in central Benghazi.

Virulently opposed to the outgoing General National Congress (GNC), which he said was “supporting terrorism in Libya by bringing in and foreign groups, faking passports and brainwashing the youth,” Hifter plans to put it and the cabinet on trial, although he would protect the new parliament when the results of the June 25 elections are announced later this month.

While he claims to have 70,000 troops under his command, and was widely believed to have backing from regional allies of the US, notably Egypt and Algeria, this support has evidently gone cold. Money is in short supply, with Hifter admitting that his troops have not been paid for months and that he is dependent on local tribes and anti-Islamist brigades in western Libya, in contrast to the well-funded Islamist forces, many of which are on the government payroll and are backed by Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey. Last month, Hifter expelled the Turkish and Qatari diplomatic missions in Benghazi, accusing them of espionage and working with the militias against him.

The violence follows the June 25 legislative elections, which were held amid chaos and lawlessness. In Benghazi, the prominent human rights lawyer and critic of the militias Salwa Bughaighis was killed by gunmen. Her Egyptian housekeeper, the only witness to her murder, who was wounded in the attack, was killed while under police protection. Her husband remains missing.

The elections themselves were characterised by widespread voter disaffection. Fewer than 1.6 million bothered to register to vote, compared with 3 million for the 2012 elections; even fewer—42 percent of registered voters—voted at all. Voting could not take place for 16 seats due to ongoing violence. Several MPs in the 200 seat parliament were elected with less than 1,000 votes. The electoral commission has postponed the announcement of the results for the 184 seats till July 20 and said it was scrapping the results from 24 polling stations due to fraud and launching an investigation.

But the future composition of the new legislature, which like its predecessor will be a transitional one until a new constitution is approved, will only be known after the formation of political blocs. Party lists were banned, and voters could only vote for

individuals, who are expected to win most seats in the new parliament, in contrast to the outgoing General National Congress (GNC), elected in 2012, which was dominated by Islamists.

The GNC has been mired in controversy, amid accusations of monopolising power, particularly after it extended its mandate, due to expire in February, until December, sparking demonstrations and forcing the June election.

Following the attack on the airport, the government issued a statement saying it was “looking into the possibility of making an appeal for international forces on the ground to re-establish security and help the government impose its authority” and help protect civilians, prevent anarchy and allow the government to build up the army and police. It opens up the spectre of a renewed Western intervention into the country already devastated by the turmoil unleashed by the NATO-backed war.

The US has been making its own preparations. Last November, the head of US Special Operations Command Admiral William McRaven said that Washington would aid Libya by training 5,000 to 7,000 troops to build up Libya’s security forces to counter terrorism and the hundreds of competing militias, at Novo Selo in Bulgaria. But since Libya’s army has these same militias on its payroll, this was an admission that the US would be training recruits who would not necessarily have “the most clean record.”

Two months later, after former Prime Minister Ali Zeidan had put in a request for help with training Libya’s security forces, the Pentagon formally notified Congress of Libya’s request for a \$600 million training package to create a general purpose force (GPF). In addition, thousands of Libyan troops would be trained by Morocco, Britain, Turkey and Italy.

In effect, rather than having “boots on the ground”, the US is preparing a proxy force to fight on its behalf in Libya, alongside drones, Special Operations Forces and military sub-contractors in pursuit of its own commercial and strategic interests.



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