

Libya disintegrates as rival governments vie for control

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Last week, Libya's House of Representatives (HoR) agreed to a second attempt by Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thinni to form a cabinet. Instead of an oil minister, the industry will be run by the state-run National Oil Corporation, while the Ministry of Defence will be run by the armed forces' chief of staff.

Within days, the Shura Council of Warshefana, just south-west of Tripoli, demanded its representatives withdraw from HoR meetings in protest at attacks launched by the anti-government Libya Dawn that led to the evacuation of Zahra hospital. It called on the government to restore order.

The government and the HoR are now based in the city of Tobruk in the far eastern part of Libya, isolated and exercising little control over the country. It is holding on to Tobruk and Beida, Libya's seventh and fourth most populous cities. At the beginning of September, there were reports that the HoR had hired a Greek car ferry, anchored off Tobruk, as a venue for its meetings.

The HoR was forced to flee from the capital Tripoli in August when Libya Dawn, a coalition of anti-government forces including the Misrata and Libya Shield militias and Amazigh (Berber) tribes, seized control of the city, government institutions and the international airport, which now lies in ruins, from Zintan militias aligned with the government.

After losing the elections in June, in which barely 16 percent turned out to vote, the Islamist opposition forces in Tripoli resurrected the HoR's unpopular and discredited predecessor, the General National Congress (GNC). In August the GNC, in control of the western part of the country, appointed Omar al-Hassi, a failed prime ministerial candidate, to form a government in a direct challenge to the government of al-Thinni.

Opposition forces now have control over Libya's

Central Bank (CBL), which holds the country's \$100 billion of foreign currency reserves and the payments for oil exports, which accounts for 95 percent of state revenues and 65 percent of the country's GDP. Following the CBL's refusal to pay anything more than the day-to-day running costs of the government—salaries, benefits and subsidies—the HoR attempted to regain control of the bank by sacking its governor Saddek Omar Elkaber. He has announced a legal challenge to the decision.

Libya's Audit Bureau in Tripoli, which apparently has the power to block government expenditure to limit deficit spending, also announced new restrictions on transfers between the CBL and the HoR.

Until the NATO-led war to overthrow the Gaddafi regime, the CBL held reserves of \$150 billion thanks to oil export revenue. Last year it ran a \$6.5 billion deficit as a wave of protests cut into crude output. While oil production had risen to 900,000 bpd, following an agreement in July with insurgents who had taken over oil facilities in the east, production has again fallen due to the shutdown of the Sharara oilfield in the south west when clashes broke out in nearby Zawia. Last week, a senior lawmaker said that the deficit could more than double to \$15 billion this year.

In a further sign of splits, on September 11 the Tobruk-based government recalled its ambassadors to Turkey, Jordan, Sudan, Kuwait, Belarus and Serbia after the Libyan diplomats recognised the Islamist-controlled government in Tripoli.

In the last week, Tripoli has again been rocked by explosions and fierce fighting. Air strikes, the fourth set by unidentified warplanes in the last month, targeted sites linked to Libya Dawn, south of Tripoli.

The eastern port city of Benghazi, which controls the import and export of food and oil, is not under

government control. It too has been rocked by violence, kidnappings, extortion and assassinations. Islamist forces led by Ansar al-Sharia, a former US proxy group which then led the 2012 bombing of the US consulate that killed the US Ambassador and three consular staffers, now hold sway.

Last week, forces led by renegade General Khalifa Hifter, who was once close to murdered Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, and later the CIA, and has now joined forces with the government, launched air strikes on rebel positions near the port of Benghazi. Saqer al-Jouroushi, head of Hifter's air force, said that an umbrella group of Islamist fighters, Majlis al-Shura, was using the port to bring in supplies and weapons.

The HoR has passed an anti-terrorism law defining the threat of terrorism to include members of Libya Dawn. At the same time, the Constituent Assembly has announced that the much delayed constitution will be ready by December, further alienating opposition forces.

In response to the country's disintegration, al-Thinni has called for international support from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. They have launched air strikes against the Islamists in Tripoli and in support of Hifter, who is very much "their man" in Libya. This is the first time for decades that Egypt has launched strikes beyond its borders. Egypt's military dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is determined to prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from using Libya, Egypt's neighbour, as a political base.

In effect a proxy war is now being fought out in Libya between government forces backed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and UAE, and the Islamists and their supporters backed by Qatar, Turkey and Sudan. In a clear appeal for US backing, government forces are calling for civil war to be viewed as part of the wider war in the Middle East and North Africa against "terrorism".

Documents leaked to *Al-Jazeera* reveal details of a military pact between Egypt and the Libyan Parliament in Tobruk that authorises the use of armed force in the event of any "direct or indirect threat or armed aggression that occurs against either two parties or their armed forces."

On September 15, al-Thinni accused Qatar of sending three planes loaded with weapons to Tripoli. The previous week, the Libyan House of Representatives

accused Sudan of sending weapons for "terrorist groups" in breach of Libya's sovereignty. On Saturday, the al-Thinni government called on the United Nations to either give it more weapons and support to help restore security, or state publicly that Libya "must face terrorism alone." Aguila Saleh Iissa, president of the Libyan House of Representatives, said, "This would not have happened had the international community taken the situation in Libya seriously."

Last August, the UN Security Council tightened the international arms embargo on Libya, extending sanctions to groups and individuals that threaten the country's peace and stability. But Saleh Iissa said that the UN's "failure to provide arms and training to the Libyan army in its war against terrorism serves the interest of extremism."

Talks between the rival factions, brokered by the recently-appointed UN special envoy to Libya, Bernardino Leon, were held Monday in the south western oasis town of Ghadames. The militias controlling Tripoli rejected the UN's call for a ceasefire, insisting that their rivals be disarmed. More than 500,000 people have been displaced by the fighting in the last three months.



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