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Issue Brief

Libyan Civil War: A Growing Inferno

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More than six years after Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown, chaos still reigns in Libya. Fighting erupted between rival militias in Tripoli in the last week of May 2017, wrecking a period of somewhat calm that had lasted since March 2017. Sideways, Egyptian air force planes continue to



strike camps near Derna, in East Libya. The air strikes are a rejoinder to a deadly attack against Christians in Egypt that took place on May 28. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi claims that the area hosts 'terrorist camps'.¹

Indeed, the turmoil in Libya has allowed the Islamic State (IS) to gain a foothold in the country. IS has taken control of the area in and around the city of Sirte, the birthplace of Gaddafi. It is feared that this could provide a safe haven for jihadists to train, fund and plan attacks in North Africa and across the Mediterranean.

The past few years, however, have presented Libyans with many challenges. Lack of political accord among the various political actors, and their lack of ability to resolve regional differences through peaceful national dialogue have resulted in two parallel civil wars raging in the east and west of Libya.

The civil wars have been fuelled by negative foreign intervention, while the local actors have been justifying their respective standpoints under the pretext of fighting terrorism.

However, the reality is that Libya has become a scramble for power and wealth, ignited by the inability of the country to craft a new social agreement which will determine a fair sharing of power. Lack of real political change on the ground, the feeling of marginalisation among certain groups and regions, and a weak central authority are factors that have resulted in demands to return to a federal political system of government.

¹ <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/egypt-strikes-at-libyan-terror-camps-after-attack-on-christians>

Libya's peace accord – known as the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), mediated by the UN and signed in Skhirat, Morocco, in December 2015² – has so far failed to solve the country's political problems. The International Crisis Group says the agreement has "reconfigured more than contributed to resolving internal strife" and should be "reset".³

Six years on from the revolution and the removal of former dictator Muammar Gaddafi, three separate governments in the country – as well as many local militia groups such as the Bunyan al Marsous (BAM) and the Benghazi Defence Brigade (BDB) – are competing for authority. Presently, there are three rival governments vying for control of Libya. Tripoli is home to at least three centres of power:

Government of National Accord (GNA)

The first is the UN-backed government, which has struggled to exert authority following the 2015 peace deal. This is mainly due to the refusal of authorities controlling eastern Libya to recognise the GNA as Libya's official government. Led by Fayez al-Sarraj, it has also failed to rein in the militias that have held power on the ground since the 2011 uprising that toppled Libya's ex-ruler, Muammar Gaddafi.

National Salvation Government (NSG)

The second centre of power is the rival Government of National Salvation headed by Prime Minister Khalifa Ghwell, resting on the authority of the remnants of the General National Congress (GNC) - the parliament originally elected in 2012. Although based in Tripoli, it no longer controls any relevant institutions though it has expanded a fair amount of influence to Libya's west. It is not recognised by the international community, but is backed by politicians from the now dissolved GNC.

The Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR)

The third centre of power is made up of the authorities based in Tobruk and al-Bayda, which were also supposed to work under the Libyan Peace Accord. The Tobruk and al-Bayda authorities are under the control of Egypt-aligned, self-proclaimed anti-Islamist General Khalifa Haftar, who leads the Libyan National Army (LNA). Haftar, whose forces control key oil ports, is a central figure for factions in Eastern Libya that have rejected the GNA.

² <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=52845#.WTTMxOvyuUk>

³ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/libyan-political-agreement-time-reset>

After months of pressure from international powers, Sarraj and Haftar finally met in Abu Dhabi on May 2 to discuss resetting the UN-mediated agreement. Following the meeting, a statement issued by Sarraj's office said the meeting with Haftar had been held in order "to achieve a peaceful settlement for the Libyan crisis" and called for "an expanded dialogue to establish national consensus."⁴ A separate statement by Haftar said the two sides had agreed to allow "the military establishment ... to fully play its role in the fight against terrorism."⁵

On May 10, Libya's Foreign Minister, Mohammed Siyala named General Khalifa Haftar as the head of the country's army⁶ - provided that he recognises the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) as the only authority. Haftar, it seems, has not taken the bait.

However, the Sarraj-Haftar meeting has been a complete flop since heavy fighting has ensued in the following weeks. At least 141 people were killed in an attack on an airbase in southern Libya on May 20. LNA blamed forces loyal to the GNA for the attack.⁷ On May 27, at least 52 fighters of the GNA were killed in heavy clashes with rival militiamen in Tripoli.⁸ On June 3, Libyan forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar and Islamic State (IS) fighters launched simultaneous attacks against forces loyal to the GNA,⁹ adding to growing concerns over a permanent fracturing of Libya as various rebel groups vying for power divide the country along political and tribal lines.

The Libyan conflict is a war that has largely been forgotten. Libya's descent into chaos after the fall of Colonel Gaddafi six years ago has created a broken state, turning it into a cradle for terrorism. Libya's problems are hard to decry; rival governments, security issues, and energy shortages. Oil production – once the country's economic vertebrae – is now at less than a quarter of its pre-revolution levels. Moreover, the frail economy has been exploited by the Islamic State who have been drawing in young men like the Manchester bomber Salman Abedi, who had only recently returned from Libya when he blew himself up at the Manchester Arena on May 22, 2017. It goes to show that IS and other like organisations are waiting for the right moment and the right recruit which is why it is key for the international community to take a serious note of the Libyan crisis and put an end to the uprisings as

⁴ <http://mwcnews.net/news/africa/65219-libya-rivals.html>

⁵ <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/5/3/truce-in-libya-haftar-and-serraj-agree-to-elections>

⁶ <http://www.libyanexpress.com/gna-foreign-minister-names-haftar-army-chief-receives-wave-of-criticism/>

⁷ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/libya-141-people-killed-brak-al-shat-airbase-attack-170520082052419.html>

⁸ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/rival-factions-clash-libya-tripoli-170526154255187.html>

⁹ <https://southafricatoday.net/africa-news/north-africa/libya/libya-haftar-and-islamic-state-fighters-launch-attacks-in-libya/>

soon as possible. A comprehensive political dialogue between all parties in Libya is the only way out of this crisis. A military solution is not.