



Haftar's Calculus for Libya: What Happened, and What is Next?

ICSR Insight by Inga Kristina Trauthig

In recent days, a battle for Tripoli has been raging that bears the forlorn possibility of regression for Libya as a whole. A military offensive led by General Khalifa Haftar, commander of the so-called “Libyan National Army” (LNA) that mostly controls eastern Libya, was launched on April 3, to the dismay of much the international community. A few days after the launch of the military campaign by Haftar, some analysts have already concluded that “Libya is (...) [in] its third civil war since 2011”. The LNA forces first took the town of Gharyan, 100 km south of Tripoli, before advancing to the city’s outskirts.

At the time of writing, fighting is ongoing. On Sunday, 8 April, Tripoli’s only functioning civilian airport at Mitiga was forced to be evacuated as it was hit with air strikes attributed to the LNA. These airstrikes took place the same day that the “Tripoli International Fair” occurred, signalling the formidable level of resilience Libyans have attained after eight years of turbulence following Qaddafi’s overthrow.



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What is happening?

Haftar had been building his forces in central Libya for months. At the beginning of the year, he claimed to have “[taken control](#)” of southern Libya, indicating that he was prepping for an advance on the western part of Libya, the last piece missing. However, the timing of his offensive on the Libyan capital was quite brazen and left some Western Libyan forces puzzled as to why he would explicitly act counter to the stated position of his external allies, the US in particular (the US has been considered one of the main backers of the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA)).

Even though Haftar should be singled out as the aggressor in this unravelling civil war, the swift counter-mobilisation of Western forces fuelled the escalation. Additionally, the viral spread of false information, joined with bombastic official rhetoric has contaminated the discourse that weighs on the Libyan people next to the hardships that any fighting brings for civilians. Shortly after the LNA spokesperson al-Mismari declared operation “Flood of dignity”, which deployed thousands of men and heavy artillery from their home grounds in eastern Libya to the West with the stated aim of capturing the capital and “eradicating terrorism”, the GNA in Tripoli, the considered sole ‘legitimate’ authority, proclaimed the counteroffensive “Volcano of anger” spearheaded by a group of loosely-aligned militias.

This comparatively prompt counter-mobilisation also meant that Haftar’s original battle plan failed within the first few days: instead of capitalising on the momentum of surprise and relying on the divides between the various militias dominating in western Libya, Haftar and the LNA, as an external



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threat, became a bounding element of sorts, at least momentarily, for most western militias. Hence, instead of a brief, tactical enticement of some Tripolitanian armed groups and security officials which would have directed the spotlight on his adversaries, Haftar has now triggered intense fighting in one of Libya's most densely populated areas. In addition, Haftar's offensive has brought many men back to the battle ground that had not been fighting for years. Some of the most prominent militias in this regard are from Misrata who were last involved in the harrowing battles against Islamic State in Sirte in 2016.

On the one hand this exceptional mobilisation can be attributed to the Machiavellian need to defend established spheres of political and economic influence; on the other, many fighters are attributed with having followed this call to arms as they [fear](#) a profound and dire threat to post-Qaddafi Libya and the connected vision they fought for in 2011 – a civilian state pitted against the outlook of another authoritarian leader that threatens to nullify the country's revolutionary legacy.

Who is Haftar? And who supports him?

Khalifa Haftar initially was part of the group of army officers that positioned Muammar al-Qaddafi as head of Libya in 1969. However, Haftar and Qaddafi's relationship slowly unravelled and the former escaped to the US in the 1980s after allegedly [having received US government support](#). He settled in Virginia, became a US citizen and only returned to Libya shortly before the NATO intervention in 2011. The – by that time almost seventy-year-old –



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military man saw his chance of participating in the fight against the supreme leader, always connected to the perspective of ending up in a high position of the post-revolutionary political landscape. These hopes were dismantled rapidly, and he did not become the primary leader of the revolution as he envisioned but rather one of many military commanders in the uprising against Qaddafi.

Only in the Libyan civil war of 2014 did he re-emerge, installing himself and his LNA as a committed “anti-Islamist” fighting force. This narrative of “Islamist forces” fighting “anti-Islamist” or “liberal” forces in Libya – with Haftar leading the latter group – has been attacked, delegitimised and proven untenable by many analysts over the last years. While there have been occasions on which the LNA was fighting against Jihadi groups for example, the narrative is still simplified and omits that many [Salafi-Madkhalis are fighting in his ranks](#). However, while disregarding the shallowness of his claims, Haftar received and still receives [international](#) and regional support for his alleged fight against Islamists, allegedly linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, or what he subsumes under “Islamist Terrorist Groups”.

In recent years, Haftar has managed to entrench himself in eastern Libya and could claim to have taken control of crucial cities such as Derna or Benghazi. Politically, he managed to claim legitimacy in national as well as international terms: In Libya he gained affiliation with the Parliament in the Eastern city of Tobruk that never accepted the GNA. On the international stage, he has been courted by regional powers such as the UAE and Egypt that accredit him with being a major bulwark against a feared “Islamist take-over” of Libya – and hence worthy of [heavy military assistance](#) as the UN Panel of Experts



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has shown repeatedly. Additionally, Haftar succeeded in being included in diplomatic efforts in Libya as he was invited to both of last year's international conferences on Libya – in this regard he can mainly rely on France which has been particularly forthcoming. Russia, a country notorious for aligning itself with ostensible strong men in the Middle East, could also be easily traced in their support of Haftar, who has [visited](#) the country three times since 2016 and was even taken aboard Russia's flagship aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov in 2017.

Next to these international and regional dynamics, Haftar also has Libyan supporters. Whereas many Libyans have suffered directly in the context of battles the LNA has fought over the last years, or more abstractly fear the military rule he will likely establish after securing control over the country, there are also outspoken as well as hidden supporters of the General scattered throughout Libya. Often, he is endorsed as being the only figure that at least theoretically carries the potential of unifying Libya and ending the rule of militias. His promise to establish order has been welcomed by Libyans worn out by years of chaos and outraged at the failings of the weak Government of National Accord. While these apparent calls for another “strongman” need to be viewed with caution and rationalised within a local and regional framework, the world also needs to accept that for many Libyans the years following the last Libya Treaty, the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA or Skhirat Accord) did not result in a melioration and improvement in their daily lives, which now makes many of them open to almost any option that promises a better future.



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What does he want?

In short, Haftar envisions himself as the leader who will unite Libya again and rule the country in an orderly manner. While this might be what he aspires to, the vision has a number of flaws.

First of all, Haftar is not as strong as he likes to portray himself. His LNA is more a patchwork of militias than a highly disciplined army united behind a shared ideology or goal. It hinges on a myriad of armed groups, all of which joined for different reasons.; some of the militias have provenly committed war crimes, [such as al-Werfalli](#) who has [re-surfaced](#) and joined the recent fighting on the LNA's side again. While other forces have also committed cruelties, they are not claiming to be acting as an orderly force that serves as a national army which resultingly means they are not accredited with the responsibility to protect all civilians and guarantee security.

Secondly, fuelled by the foreign encouragement he received in the preceding years, Haftar definitely fell into a state of hubris preceding the Tripoli offensive. This encouragement was bolstered by talks with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and was [fortified by Western intelligence agencies](#) that supposedly stated that militia leaders in the West had increasingly admitted their acceptance of Haftar, so long as he would act under civilian oversight. Plus, they grew confident about the prospect of friendly reactions within a population that have grown embittered by the militias' power in the capital. By early April, then, he apparently thought himself capable of countering ongoing international efforts of negotiating the country's future and aimed instead to influence proceedings on the ground by force.



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Haftar's offensive was not entirely surprising as the General has never held back regarding his intention to rule Libya one day. The time at which he started his offensive, however, was quite brazen: he commanded his forces to advance towards the capital Tripoli around the same time that UN Secretary-General António Guterres was in Libya for the Libyan [National Conference](#), which carried hopes of laying the groundwork for political progress in the country, including unifying presidential and parliamentary elections this year. Guterres went to see Haftar the day after he launched his offensive but instead of proclaiming a conciliatory stance on the issue or commitment to negotiations from Haftar, Guterres left the country shortly after, [tweeting](#) that he left "Libya with a heavy heart and deeply concerned" while "still hop[ing] it is possible to avoid a bloody confrontation in and around Tripoli." He added that "The UN is committed to facilitating a political solution and, whatever happens, the UN is committed to supporting the Libyan people." This tweet has earned notorious prominence and was overwhelmingly interpreted as the UN presumably giving up on Libya.

What is the current outlook?

At the time of writing, it can be presumed that Haftar's original battle plan of taking over Tripoli in a short period of time has failed, while prolonged fighting in the city's South seems likely. The mobilised militias appear to be attempting to expel LNA forces not only from western Libya but also beyond the positions they held before the attack in order to further weaken them. Hence the fighting could spread to other parts of the country, as counter-



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attacks in LNA territory have been threatened. Furthermore, the fighting carries the potential of turning into a proxy war between regional powers, while the location of the fighting almost guarantees many civilian casualties and egregious devastation, thus amplifying Libya's post-2011 troubled status. This weekend's news of grad rockets falling on one of Tripoli's most populous areas and the surges in civilians fleeing hostilities in the hundreds are harrowing bellwethers.

So far, official statements from the UN Security Council as well as individual UN countries have commonly called for restraint, with some denouncing Haftar as the aggressor, and others refraining from commenting entirely. However, none of them have undertaken more concrete steps. Although these statements are necessary, continued ambivalence towards Libya, or worse, active support for Haftar, could push Libya into greater conflict. Despite Haftar's allure, and the easily deceivable image that he might bring stability to Libya, such an interpretation is increasingly unrealistic. Haftar's agenda does not serve European interests. The continent is almost immediately affected by developments in Libya and if Haftar is not contained, Libya will tumble, one more, into violence. Additionally, Haftar has emphasised multiple times that Libya is "[not ripe for democracy](#)" while openly expressing his disdain for electoral politics and an inclusive future for Libya as a whole. However, this outlook would in the long-term be the only option to stabilise the country, as the recent history of the Middle East and North Africa exhibits that such absolutism is not a formula for stability. Overall, the instability in Western Libya is similar to that experienced in 2014, as the fighting might continue if and when Haftar is defeated.



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This misrule could once again strengthen terrorist groups like the Islamic State, which carried out [a spate of attacks](#) in Libya in 2018 and has [already succeeded in capitalising](#) on its current momentum. Working together the EU and the US have already [proven](#) that they can contain Haftar in both 2014 and 2018, when they refused to let him sell oil outside the sanctioned structures. Foreign powers cannot solve Libya's manifold problems (and they shouldn't seek to), but the next few weeks will prove that crucial and decisive action could make all the difference. Without concerted efforts, Libya risks spiralling into wider violence. If foreign governments fail to both denounce or support/accept Haftar, Libyans are likely to interpret this as tacit approval of the General's ascendancy.