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## **The Conflict in Libya**

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Testimony before the House of Representatives  
Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on  
Middle East, North Africa, and International  
Terrorism

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Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you here today on Libya's war.

The crisis is Libya's worst in half a decade and, potentially, since the 2011 revolution. In over a month of fighting, more than four hundred people, including many civilians, have been killed and tens of thousands have been displaced. The clashes threaten to disrupt oil production and boost the Islamic State and other radical groups. Most tragically, it is fueling a toxic polarization and fraying the social bonds of this country of six million. Unless swift action is taken to end the clashes and return to a political process, the damage may be irreparable.

I join you here today as someone who has been visiting Libya regularly for a decade, first a U.S. military officer assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli during the Qadhafi regime and then, after the 2011 revolution, as a researcher. In the latter capacity, I've traveled across the country and interviewed most of the key players, including the man at the center of the conflict, Khalifa Haftar, whom I met at his field headquarters outside Benghazi in June 2014. I was one of the few Westerners researchers or journalists who traveled to Benghazi during Haftar's military campaign in the city, spending three weeks with his Libyan National Army (LNA) and their supporters. During repeated trips to Tripoli, I've also felt Libyans' frustration at the internationally-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) and seen the misery inflicted by the predatory militias that are nominally aligned to that government.

In the remarks that follow, I'll offer a brief analysis of the run-up to the war and assess the risks for a wider conflict that threatens Libya's political and geographic unity, as well as American interests. I'll conclude with some recommendations for how the U.S. and especially Congress can help stop the fighting and get Libya back on the path to peace and stability.

## **The Backdrop to the Crisis**

The current fighting is partly the outcome of exclusionary politics, economic corruption, and unresolved social fractures stemming back to the aftermath of the 2011 revolution. Since that time, Libya's elites and militia bosses have scrambled for economic and political spoils to the detriment of Libya's citizens. On top of this, a mix of indifference and interference by international and regional states brought Libya to this point. But the ultimate blame for this war rests on the shoulders of General Khalifa Haftar and his April 4<sup>th</sup> assault on the capital and the internationally-recognized government.

A former Qadhafi-era officer and dissident, Khalifa Haftar launched an unsanctioned military attack in the eastern city of Benghazi in the summer of 2014. Dubbed *Operation Dignity* and comprising disaffected Libyan military units and tribal militias, the campaign was intended to remove the city's Islamist and jihadists militias and restore order. But its effects were far-reaching and not confined to the east. It sparked a national civil war that continues to the present. We also now know that this 2014 battle marked the start of Haftar's long struggle for national dominance. Even back then, he expressed his desire to attack Tripoli.

He has told numerous foreign interlocutors of his intention to implement military rule, often disparaging civilian-led electoral politics. He has made repeated threats against Libya's democratic institutions, starting in February 2014 when he announced the dissolution of Libya's first elected legislature, the General National Congress. When I asked him once about efforts to draft a Libyan constitution he waved his hand. "Just talk," he said. He is also a committed foe of political Islamists of all shades, making no distinction between hard-core jihadists and more moderate figures who support the Libyan state and elections.

Haftar has proven adept at harnessing the fears and frustrations of a broad swathe of Libyans. Some tribes and towns backed him to gain ascendancy over their local rivals. Qadhafi loyalists supported him as a counterweight to Libya's new revolutionary class and Islamists. Anti-Islamists cheered him because of his promise to crush the Muslim Brotherhood. Other

Libyans welcomed him simply to restore order and a sense of normalcy after years of militia violence. Some did so uneasily, wary of his ambitions.

Haftar has also skillfully played on competing foreign agendas in Libya. Drawn to his promise to crush political Islamists, the UAE and Egypt have sent weapons, advisors, money, and conducted airstrikes on his behalf, according to UN investigators. France has been crucial as well: despite its diplomatic recognition of his rival, the GNA, Paris has provided him with battlefield intelligence support. For their part, Russia has viewed him opportunistically, plying him with military aid and printing banknotes to fund his political allies, even while it engaged with other factions.

In 2017, partly due to military support from the UAE and France, he finally won the battle for Benghazi. The grinding war had lasted much longer than he expected and at great cost, killing hundreds and displacing thousands. But all the while, he kept his sights on Tripoli. When he finally moved on the capital last month he advanced a variety of arguments. He was replacing the illegitimate GNA with a regime that was more widely accepted and efficient. He was freeing Tripoli's citizens from the grip of militias. He was going after terrorists. He was building professional security institutions. Yet a deeper look reveals a number of problems with these arguments.

There is no question that the deeply flawed GNA needs to be replaced. Yet that is exactly what the UN's roadmap was supposed to do. The UN was working on a national conference and planning for national elections that would finally move Libya beyond its troubled transitional period. It also supported an interim governing arrangement that would have included Haftar in a prominent position, provided he subordinate himself to a civilian authority. Haftar rejected these offers. And, just ten days before the national conference, he launched his attack on Tripoli.

Similarly, there is also no question that the militias in Tripoli need to be dismantled. But here again, before the attack, there was steady and modest progress being made to curtail their power. Under the leadership of a pragmatic Minister of Interior, supported by the UN, European states, and the U.S., the militias' access to government funding and the parallel illicit economy was being squeezed. Efforts were underway to train police as well. Yet now, that progress has

come undone: the battle against Haftar has given the militias increased latitude and a prominence that will be difficult to reverse.

Then there is the counter-terrorism argument. It is certainly true that when Haftar launched his 2014 operation in Benghazi he was going after some violent terrorist groups, including those that had attacked the U.S. diplomatic mission. But he also attacked factions that supported the state and elections—and by lumping them together, he ended up radicalizing them. Moreover, five years later, the landscape has changed. The radical and Islamist militia presence has diminished across the country, partially because of Haftar's wars in the east but also because other militias and political elites in western Libya have sidelined them. Many of the most militant figures are now imprisoned, exiled, or dead. Thus, it is a mistake to assume that Tripoli is a base for Islamist extremism and that Haftar is needed to come and eradicate it.

In addition, the most significant U.S.-backed counterterrorism campaign in Libya was not undertaken by Haftar but by some of the militias he is now fighting. This was the 2016 assault on the Islamic State's stronghold in Sirte, led by GNA-aligned militias from Misrata, supported by American airpower. I was embedded with these forces for three weeks and saw firsthand the ferocity of the fighting and the extent of their sacrifices. With his soldiers sitting just east of Sirte, Haftar had been offered a chance to join this campaign by American officials. But he refused.

Perhaps more importantly, the Islamic State will try to exploit the political and security vacuum created by Haftar's attack. After the 2016 Sirte campaign, the terrorist group has been confined to mobile desert bands and urban cells. Even so, it was able to mount over two dozen attacks in Libya last year alone, including against important institutions in Tripoli like the National Oil Corporation, the election headquarters, and the foreign ministry. Since the current clashes started, there has been a noticeable uptick, especially in Libya's desert south. We can expect a further escalation as Libyan militias on both sides of this war that were previously deployed to contain the Islamic State are now focused on fighting one another.

Another mistaken notion concerns the nature of Haftar's Libyan National Army or LNA (its actual Arabic name is the Libyan Arab Armed Forces, a title that excludes and incenses Libya's non-Arab ethno-linguistic minorities). It is true that the LNA contains a nucleus of

regular infantry, armor, air force, and military police, and this professional face accounts for the public approval it has secured, according to previous polling. But surrounding this core, Haftar has enlisted a sizeable percentage—estimates range between forty to sixty percent—of tribal and local militias, as well as foreign fighters from Chad and Sudan. He has also elevated his sons to command well-equipped brigades. Added to this, Haftar's soldiers have committed abuses against civilians. The International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for one of his officers, charging him with the unlawful execution of thirty-three prisoners. Haftar himself was filmed exhorting his troops to grant no quarter to the enemy.

Some in the West might be drawn to Haftar's image as a secularist. But this too is mistaken. Ever since he launched his campaign in 2014, Haftar has co-opted and empowered conservative, Saudi-inspired Salafists as political and military allies. I've met several of them over the years. While they are certainly not al-Qaeda or the Islamic State as their opponents allege, their growing influence has stirred alarm across Libya. In recent fighting, they have been among Haftar's staunchest combatants. And in cities and towns that he has taken over he has given them some latitude to enforce their interpretation of Islamic social mores.

But perhaps the biggest fallacy about Haftar's attack on the capital concerns its decisiveness—the mistaken notion that he could quickly win Tripoli and control Libya's western region.

### **Risks of a Protracted Conflict**

Haftar's assault on Tripoli was clearly a risky gambit. He had planned to use the strength of his narrative—and cash—to flip local militias and political blocs to his side. To be sure, some have joined him, such as those from the town of Tarhuna south of the capital. Armed groups in other towns, like Zintan in the Nafusa mountains, are split. Other militias have half-heartedly committed their forces against him, hoping to hedge in the event he becomes the dominant force. But overall, his attack on Tripoli has not gone according to plan. Disparate armed groups the capital and its environs have rallied against him. Lacking sufficient strength to

seize and hold urban terrain, Haftar has resorted to rocket and artillery attacks and airstrikes. As civilian casualties mount, citizens who might've welcomed his forces are turning against him.

Haftar seems unlikely to take the capital anytime soon. But as he demonstrates his staying power outside of Tripoli, his outside backers—namely, the UAE and Egypt—will be tempted to escalate their military intervention. Already, the United Nations is investigating the use of armed, Chinese-made drones, which are known to be in the UAE inventory. For their part, Haftar's opponents in the GNA coalition are seeking military aid from Turkey and are reportedly employing foreign personnel to fly fighter aircraft, as evidenced by the LNA's recent capture of a pilot of apparent Portuguese nationality.

There are other signs that the conflict is becoming more intractable. The fighting could expand geographically, as Haftar's opponents try to disrupt his supply lines to eastern Libya or as Haftar tries to flank Misrata by attacking the city of Sirte. In virtually every scenario, oil production will be placed at risk. Facing a potential funding shortfall in eastern Libya, Haftar may try to leverage Libya's oil wealth. Already, according to the chairman of Libya's National Oil Corporation, Haftar has tried to "militarize" oil installations in the Gulf of Sidra by basing his forces near terminals. He may also try to unilaterally sell oil on the global market.

Meanwhile, the response of international powers has been marked by ambivalence and divisions. Most crucially, President Donald Trump publicly endorsed Haftar in a phone call on April 15th. At the United Nations Security Council, Russia and France, along with the United States, have blocked a resolution calling for a ceasefire. Some European states have called for a ceasefire without a withdrawal of Haftar's LNA to pre-April 4<sup>th</sup> lines—a truce that is unacceptable for the GNA side.

With both sides committed to fighting, the outlook remains grim. To move past the impasse and avert a wider escalation, Western powers, especially America, must use a mix of diplomacy and economic tools to stop regional states from worsening the conflict. They must also work to shape battlefield dynamics toward a stalemate that compels the warring Libyan factions to return to a political process.

## **Roles for the United States**

Mr. Chairman, in my recent conversations with numerous Libyans, as well as foreign diplomats, it is clear that the U.S. maintains unique leverage in Libya and is viewed as a relatively neutral broker. A more resolute U.S. policy response in this current crisis does not mean “owning” the Libya problem. But even modest U.S. diplomacy could prevent the country from spiraling into broader conflict. In particular, the U.S. should focus on three core areas.

First, the United States should exert diplomatic leverage to dissuade regional meddlers from sending arms and material to both sides. Such pressure should also include greater Congressional scrutiny of violations of the United Nations arms embargo and sanctions on logistical companies that facilitate these violations.

Second, American diplomacy should safeguard Libya’s oil infrastructure and prevent it from being “militarized.” The U.S. has already proven its value here: in the summer of 2018, after Haftar’s LNA had seized oil facilities in the central Gulf of Sidra, American diplomats, working with the United Nations, ensured their return to the rightful authority of the National Oil Corporation.

Additionally, the U.S. should use the threat of sanctions and war-crimes prosecution, against all sides, to deter attacks on civilians, medical workers, and critical infrastructure and marginalize spoilers. Congress should play an important oversight role in the implementation of these measures.

All of these U.S. actions can help limit the scope and duration of the conflict and steer it toward a political process. It is up to Libyans of course to decide the composition of these negotiations. But the mistakes of the past should be kept in mind, to include the repeated offers to Haftar to join in a peaceful settlement, which he has rebuffed and undercut with military force.

As the talks gets underway, the U.S. and its partners should redouble their outreach to Libyans who reject the binary choice between militia-run chaos or a return to authoritarianism. This includes the country’s vibrant civil society, women and youth, and elected municipal councils, who have long enjoyed a measure of popular legitimacy. A particular focus should be on communities in the east and south, some of whom backed Haftar out of sense of exclusion.



Much of the international effort thus far has been focused on national parliamentary and presidential elections. Here, however, a word of caution is in order. The previous rush to elections in 2012 and 2014 had disastrous consequences for the country, setting up a cycle of armed contestation that continues to the present. Current security conditions and militia violence in many areas would deter turnout—and in areas under LNA control, free and fair campaigning would be difficult. Aside from promoting a return to stability, the U.S. should help ensure that Libya has the appropriate voting laws and constitutional framework in place before elections.

On security matters, the U.S. should play an important supporting role in facilitating talks on the unification of Libya's military and police, between eastern and western factions. Tragically, figures from these two sides were already engaged in various degrees of rapprochement before Haftar launched his attack on the capital. A security track in a renewed political process should pick up where this dialogue broke off, emphasizing mutual security concerns as well as respect for the rule-of-law and elected civilian authority.

The U.S. should also support the dismantling of the militias that have preyed on the Tripoli government and plundered Libya's financial resources. This will be a difficult task that will involve a new political compact as well as technocratic, economic, and bureaucratic reforms. As noted above, Libyan officials, backed by the United Nations, were making modest progress on these reforms before Haftar's attacks. Those efforts need to be strengthened, albeit under a new, more legitimate political authority. Their success is far from assured—but they still stand a better chance than the current military assault that has thrown Libya into a civil war.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, in closing, I cannot stress enough the rapidly shutting window for action. Libya stands on the brink of a dissolution that threatens American interests and the interest of our allies. On top of this, it faces a worsening humanitarian crisis. The solution is not to pick one side in this complex, multi-faceted conflict—especially the side that offers the false promise of an authoritarian, military-led stability. Rather, it lies in supporting a return to dialogue and a more inclusive path.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you here today. I look forward to your questions.

