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A Most Irregular Army

The Rise of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces

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ABSTRACT

In post-Qadhafi Libya's fragmented security landscape, Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) stand out as the only faction that successfully consolidated power at the sub-national level. Haftar started out with a loose alliance of armed groups in 2014, but warded off successive challenges from within his coalition and gradually centralized authority. Consolidation required gaining autonomy from the local loyalties and interests that defined many of the armed groups in Haftar's alliance. Key to Haftar's success in disembedding his forces from local society was the foreign support he enjoyed, which dwarfed that available to any other faction. To concentrate power, Haftar combined coercion and cooperation, adapting his strategy to local conditions. He enticed political and military actors into allying with him or supporting him, then used coercion to punish disloyal behaviour and eventually spread fear through widespread repression. This way, he gradually transformed opportunistic support into a centralized power structure held together by a web of economic interests. At their very core, the LAAF are a family enterprise.

Introduction

In June 2020, Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) made a chaotic retreat from Tripoli and western Libya. Major support from Turkey had allowed forces affiliated with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) to eventually defeat Haftar's thirteen-month effort to seize the capital, and power. The rout shattered the image of the ever victorious commander Haftar had cultivated during his seemingly inexorable expansion. Haftar's popularity in eastern Libya, which had already suffered as the Tripoli war dragged on, plummeted further after his defeat. Politicians or militia leaders who had opportunistically supported Haftar, hoping to sweep to power with him, now had reason to take their distance from him.

But Haftar's power structure in eastern Libya weathered the shock surprisingly well. Political tensions in the east have been on the rise since Haftar's defeat, and foreign states have tried to weaken Haftar by promoting the head of the eastern-based rump parliament, Agilah Saleh, as an interlocutor in negotiations. But across eastern Libya, Haftar remains very much in charge, exercising authority through the LAAF and his security apparatus.

That the core of the LAAF retained its cohesion despite Haftar's misadventure in Tripoli demonstrates his success in building loyal forces. This is all the more remarkable since in 2014, Haftar had started out with a loose alliance of armed groups. Over the following years, he warded off successive challenges from within his coalition and gradually centralized authority. His steady expansion has been the only notable effort to overcome post-Qadhafi Libya's endemic political fragmentation. Only two other armed groups succeeded in centralizing control over entire cities: the Islamic State in Sirte (2015-16) and the Kaniyat militia in Tarhuna (2015-2020). Along with these two groups, Haftar's LAAF have been unique among Libyan factions in their ability to wield despotic violence against communities under their control. But Haftar's forces have to date been the only Libyan faction to consolidate authority over an entire region, eastern Libya, and become powerful enough to obtain a chance at seizing overall power.

This paper analyses Haftar's rise and the concomitant transformation of his forces. The prevailing view sees the LAAF as a "core of regulars, many from the Qadhafi era, surrounded by an informal coalition of militias".¹ Others go as far as dismissing the LAAF as a mere franchise for local militias.² But a closer look shows that neither description adequately reflects the nature of Haftar's forces, which underwent significant changes over the years.

The paper shows that Qadhafi-era officers initially played a much more limited role in Haftar's forces than is often assumed. In its early years, the LAAF did indeed resemble a franchise for local armed groups, and this continues to apply to most southern and western Libyan LAAF units. But from 2016 onwards, Haftar built units that form the core of the LAAF today. Most of these units' members came of age after 2011, and the Qadhafi-era officers who joined them were often marked by revanchist sentiment that originated in the deep divisions of the 2011 war, rather than by an ethic of disciplined service to the country as a

¹ Jalel Harchaoui and Mohamed-Essaïd Lazib, *Proxy War Dynamics in Libya*, Blacksburg: Virginia Tech Publishing, 2019, p. 4. Other observers come to similar assessments: "an amalgam of formal units of mixed tribal composition...and some local auxiliary forces" (Tim Eaton et al., *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014: Community Dynamics and Economic Interests*, London: Chatham House, 2020); "a group of militias rotating around a regular army nucleus" (Arnaud Delalande, *Forces on the Libyan ground: Who is Who*, ISPI, 28 May 2018); "a core of former Gaddafi soldiers [and ranks filled] with less trained tribesmen" (Ulf Laessing, "How Libya's Haftar blindsided world powers with advance on Tripoli", Reuters, 10 April 2019).

² Tarek Megerisi, *The march of Haftar: Why Europeans should stand in the way of the Libyan National Army*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 5 April 2019; Emad Badi, *Exploring Armed Groups in Libya: Perspectives on SSR in a Hybrid Environment*, Geneva: Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF), November 2020.

whole. These units cannot be understood as formal or regular. What distinguishes them from other groups in the LAAF is their direct loyalty to Haftar's sons, relatives and close confidants, at times compounded by a strong Salafist tinge or an association with particular tribal constituencies. Moreover, the core LAAF units are closely linked to the predatory economic activities of Haftar's inner circle.

How did Haftar form a core of loyal units out of an initially fractious coalition? Consolidating control over the east and centralizing authority over the LAAF required overcoming the capacity of armed local communities to resist, and gaining autonomy from the local loyalties and interests that defined many of the armed groups in Haftar's alliance. Key to Haftar's success in disembedding his forces from local society was the foreign support he enjoyed, which dwarfed that available to any other faction. To concentrate power, Haftar combined coercion and cooperation, adapting his strategy to local conditions. He enticed political and military actors into allying with him or supporting him, then used coercion to punish disloyal behaviour and eventually spread fear through widespread repression. This way, he gradually transformed opportunistic support into a centralized and authoritarian power structure. While his Tripoli offensive ran into stubborn resistance from local armed groups, ultimately, only foreign intervention on a scale that matched the external support Haftar enjoyed blocked his continued progress.

Armed Group Proliferation in Post-Qadhafi Libya

Fragmentation has marked Libya's political and military landscape since the 2011 civil war and subsequent collapse of central authority with the demise of the Qadhafi regime. By the end of the 2011 war, 236 revolutionary armed groups had formed in the coastal city of Misrata alone.³ After the war, the revolutionary factions grew further and countless new armed groups formed across the country, as factional leaders nurtured them with state funding, and furnished official cover through newly created security institutions such as the Supreme Security Committee and the Libya Shield Force.⁴

Because competing factions vied for influence in state security institutions, state funding and state legitimacy for such units did not lead to the re-establishment of central authority. Quite the opposite: rivalries over the control of security institutions were a key driver behind the escalation into the second civil war (2014-15), during which state institutions split in two. Governments in Tripoli have since continued to juggle multiple competing factions, while in the east, the faction of Khalifa Haftar progressively centralized authority over the coalition of armed groups he mobilized from 2014 onwards.

Even with Haftar's gradual expansion, military fragmentation in Libya has been such that it is difficult to narrow down the number of armed groups even approximately. In Misrata, at least several dozen – likely over a hundred – armed groups continued to operate in post-2011 conflicts. In Tripoli, a process of consolidation reduced the plethora of post-revolutionary factions to around fifteen main militias by 2018, of which four dominated central Tripoli and its institutions.⁵ In the coastal city of Zawiyah, at least a dozen armed groups continued to exist but remained mostly dormant between 2015 and 2019. One study from 2018 identified 122 armed groups across Libya, but that list was far from comprehensive.⁶ The UN Panel of Experts on Libya in 2019 counted 49 groups fighting for the GNA and 61 groups fighting for the LAAF.⁷ But the list was incomplete even when taking into account only those groups that participated in the conflict, and it did not include the many militias that were not fighting.

We should assume that several hundred armed groups were active or dormant across Libya at any given moment since 2014. This number may appear high in comparison with many other conflicts. But most Libyan groups are hardly comparable to the factions in a civil war between a state and insurgents. Very few Libyan armed groups explicitly raise their weapons against the government. The vast majority claim the mantle of official legitimacy of the interior or defence ministries, and many receive salaries from one of the two rival governments, despite not being under effective government oversight.

The fact that we are not dealing with a state-insurgent conflict has implications for the analysis of militant fragmentation and consolidation. Analyses of fragmentation emphasize the role of state action or battlefield developments in causing splits or alliances.⁸ But most

³ Brian McQuinn, *After the Fall: Libya's Evolving Armed Groups*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2012.

⁴ Wolfram Lacher and Peter Cole, *Politics by Other Means: Conflicting Interests in Libya's Security Sector*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2014.

⁵ Wolfram Lacher and Alaa al-Idrissi, *Capital of Militias: Tripoli's Armed Groups Capture the State*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2018.

⁶ Andrea Carboni and James Moody, "Between the Cracks: Actor Fragmentation and Local Conflict Systems in the Libyan Civil War", *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 29 (3) 2018, 456-490.

⁷ UN Security Council 2019, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011)*, S/2019/914, 9 December 2019.

⁸ Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012; Jesse Driscoll, "Commitment Problems or Bidding Wars? Rebel Fragmentation as Peace Building", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (1) 2012, pp. 118-49; Paul Staniland, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries", *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56 (1) 2012, pp. 16-40; Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, "Actor Fragmentation and Civil War Bargaining: How Internal Divisions

of the time, Libyan armed groups have not been exposed to threats or incentives from a government or a rebel group that were serious enough to cause them to fragment, ally or merge. Under most circumstances, they did not have much of an incentive to distinguish themselves with a corporate identity, a pronounced ideological stance to facilitate recruitment or cohesion in battle. Local-level concerns often drove recruitment, such as community protection or financial incentives, whether in the form of state salaries or predation.

In fact, Libya's armed groups often are not easily identifiable organizations with clearly defined boundaries. Many have repeatedly changed their names and institutional affiliation in search of the seal of state legitimacy and funding. The composition of their foot soldiers might fluctuate as they move from one iteration to the next, while the networks of leading figures remain more constant. Others are not standing armed groups and not on the state payroll; their leaders and members are demobilized most of the time. This latter type of armed group generally relies on tight-knit networks of friends, neighbours and relatives, and new recruits generally come from such social networks.

In cohesive communities, such as the city of Misrata or the Amazigh towns in the Nafusa mountains, multiple – and mostly dormant – forces co-exist, but often do not act as discrete armed groups that would only follow their leaders' narrow whims. Clashes between them are extremely rare. Most only mobilize in response to serious external threats.

For example, after the 2011 war, a large proportion of Misratan forces only mobilized during the 2014-15 and 2019-20 civil wars as well as the 2016 campaign against the Islamic State in Sirte. A small fraction of Misratan forces also mobilized for other operations whose aims did not enjoy widespread backing in the city. Typically, commanders do not take unilateral decisions to mobilize, but are part of complex, informal negotiations and consultations with influential businessmen, politicians as well as their immediate social surroundings. Misratan forces cannot be treated as one armed group, but neither does it make sense to analyse each of the city's dozens of factions as if they were distinct militias. It is impossible to clearly pinpoint the membership and leadership of these forces, since their boundaries with society are highly permeable.⁹ Overcoming such forces to consolidate control would require subduing local society as a whole.

But far from all of Libyan armed groups correspond to this type of a socially embedded force. Many are more clearly identifiable militias defending more parochial interests. Where social cohesion is weaker, groups from the same community can occasionally clash with each other. Zawiya, for example, has seen several internal skirmishes, but in April 2019, the city's armed groups united against Haftar's Tripoli offensive.

Analysing the organizational fragmentation of armed groups is therefore insufficient to capture the nature of fragmentation in Libya. Fragmentation has an important social dimension. The violent conflicts since 2011 have inflicted deep rifts on Libyan society, pitting entire communities against each other. They have promoted social cohesion in places where communities united to fight against external threats. In other places, they provoked internal cleavages, distrust and violent local power struggles. Social cohesion in communities makes political and military fragmentation more durable, since factions are linked to their local rivals by a dense network of social ties and cannot move against them ruthlessly. Social cohesion therefore impedes efforts at consolidation.¹⁰ Tellingly, the Haftar faction emerged from a context marked by a deeply divided local social fabric: the conflict in Benghazi.

Generate Civil Conflict", *American Journal of Political Science* 57 (3) 2013, pp. 659–72; Lee Seymour, "Why Factions Switch Sides in Civil Wars. Rivalry, Patronage, and Realignment in Sudan", *International Security* 39 (2) 2014, pp. 92–131; Michael Woldemariam, *Insurgent Fragmentation in the Horn of Africa: Rebellion and Its Discontents*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

⁹ Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2020.

¹⁰ Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation*, op. cit.

The Origins of Haftar's Alliance

At the core of Haftar's forces, there are few constants other than his sons and close relatives. Many of those who started out with Haftar in 2014 proved expendable thereafter. Haftar's personality and the cult surrounding it have been central to the rise of his faction, requiring a brief biographical sketch before turning to the alliance he built.

After participating in Mu'ammār al-Qadhafī's coup in 1969 at the age of 26, Khalifa Haftar climbed the ranks of the army. In 1986, he became commander of the eastern flank in Libya's forces in northern Chad. When Chadian forces overran the Libyan base of Wadi Doum, in March 1987, they captured Haftar along with several hundred other Libyan soldiers. Qadhafī denied that Libyan forces were in Chad, and therefore also that there could be Libyan prisoners of war; in a public appearance after the Wadi Doum disaster, he even pretended not knowing anyone by the name of Haftar. How exactly Haftar then established contact with Chad's president Hissène Habré is unclear, but Habré arranged a meeting between Haftar and Mohamed al-Magariaf – head of Libya's main exiled opposition movement, the NFSL, which had moved its small military wing to Chad several months earlier.¹¹

Haftar then joined the NFSL as the General Commander (*al-Qa'id al-'Aam*) of its military wing, which he renamed the Libyan National Army. In April 1988, the Chadian government released around 700 Libyan POWs who followed Haftar in joining the NFSL.¹² In Chad, the group received training by the CIA for operations inside Libya.¹³ But before they could enter into action, Habré was toppled by his French-backed former ally Idris Déby, who forced the NFSL to leave Chad. The US hurriedly airlifted around 700 NFSL members to Zaire, and ultimately to the US, where they became refugees.¹⁴ Contrary to NFSL propaganda, its military force ceased to exist in the US.¹⁵ Instead, Magariaf and Haftar cultivated contacts inside Libya, and eventually reached out to a group of military officers who were preparing a coup against Qadhafī. According to Magariaf, Haftar also met with senior regime officials during the same period and plotted to break away from the NFSL together with several other members, to whom he also divulged details of the planned coup.¹⁶ The Qadhafī regime foiled the plot in October 1993; a few months later, Haftar and other members left the NFSL in acrimony. Haftar continued to live in Virginia until 2011, but accepted a house in Egypt for his family as a gift from the Qadhafī regime.¹⁷

In March 2011, two weeks after the uprising against Qadhafī had erupted, Haftar returned to Benghazi, then the seat of the newly formed rebel leadership, the National Transitional Council (NTC). He refused to submit to the command of the NTC's Chief of Staff Abdelfattah Younes, instead obtaining the title "commander of land forces" and formally reporting to the NTC's Defence Minister, Jalal al-Dgheili.¹⁸ In reality, none of these formal

¹¹ Khalifa Haftar, [interview with Libya Awalan TV](#), 6 June 2013; Mohamed al-Magariaf, interview on [al-Shahed, episode 39](#), Libya al-Ahrar TV, 29 March 2020; Mohamed al-Magariaf, interview on [al-Shahed, episode 43](#), Libya al-Ahrar TV, 9 April 2020; Barak Barfi, *Khalifa Haftar: Rebuilding Libya from the Top Down*, Research Note, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 2014.

¹² Barfi, *Khalifa Haftar*, op. cit.; Mohamed al-Magariaf, interview on [al-Shahed, episode 43](#), Libya al-Ahrar TV, 9 April 2020.

¹³ Human Rights Watch, *Enabling a Dictator: The United States and Chad's Hissène Habré, 1982-1990*, New York, 2016; Barfi, *Khalifa Haftar*, op. cit.

¹⁴ Barfi, *Khalifa Haftar*, op. cit.; Mohamed al-Magariaf, interview on [al-Shahed, episode 45](#), Libya al-Ahrar TV, 14 April 2020.

¹⁵ Mohamed al-Magariaf, interview on [al-Shahed, episode 48](#), Libya al-Ahrar TV, 20 April 2020.

¹⁶ Mohamed al-Magariaf, interview on [al-Shahed, episode 51](#), Libya al-Ahrar TV, 23 April 2020; Al-Magariaf, interview on [Shahed ala al-Asr, episode 13](#), Al-Jazeera TV, 23 February 2020.

¹⁷ Khalifa Haftar, [interview with al-Naba' TV](#), October 2013; Jared Malsin and Benoit Faucon, "Alleged Torture Victims Target U.S. Property Assets of Libyan Commander", *Wall Street Journal*, 8 November 2020.

¹⁸ Haftar, interview with al-Naba' TV, op. cit.; Haftar, [interview with Libya International Channel](#), June 2013.

positions meant meaningful control over the armed groups that made up the bulk of rebel forces. Haftar's role in the 2011 war was unremarkable. Contrary to other leaders in the revolutionary forces, he did not accumulate weapons and fighters under his command.

In the power struggles that followed the demise of the Qadhafi regime, Haftar unsuccessfully promoted himself as candidate for a leading military position. In November 2011, around two hundred officers met in the eastern city of al-Bayda to nominate Haftar as their candidate for Chief of Staff.¹⁹ But Haftar's obvious personal ambitions and his controversial past provoked distrust, and he went empty-handed. Over the following two years, Haftar sought unsuccessfully to mobilize supporters among army officers who were disgruntled over their marginalization by the revolutionary armed groups. In TV interviews, he presented himself as a champion of a strong military institution, while interviewers questioned him on charges that he was seeking a top position and was not committed to the democratic process.²⁰ In April 2013, he was among the most prominent attendees of a "conference for the salvation of the Libyan army" that demanded the dismissal of Chief of Staff Youssef al-Mangoush.²¹ In autumn 2013, there were persistent allegations that Haftar was plotting the overthrow of the parliament that succeeded the NTC, the General National Congress (GNC), and he was retired along with hundreds other officers.²²

In late 2013 and early 2014, Haftar was one among an increasing range of actors who were using or threatening force increasingly brazenly, thereby pushing Libya's transitional process to the edge. Two camps gradually emerged: one camp saw itself as defending the 2011 revolution against counter-revolutionary plots, and used its dominance over the GNC to empower itself further; the opposing coalition sought to bring about the GNC's downfall. The latter camp included proponents of eastern autonomy; the biggest political party in the GNC, Mahmoud Jibril's National Forces Alliance (NFA); as well as armed groups from Zintan that were allied with the NFA.²³ Haftar's attempts at building alliances contributed to the formation of this camp, but contrary to others, he still lacked a military force of his own.

On 14 February 2014, Haftar appeared on TV declaring Libya's transitional institutions dissolved in the name of a "general command of the Libyan army".²⁴ Haftar apparently counted on two Zintani-led armed groups in Tripoli, the Qa'qa' and Sawaeq Battalions, to act. But no forces moved in support of his declared coup; even close associates were caught by surprise, and Haftar had to flee Tripoli to Benghazi via desert tracks as the government issued an arrest warrant for him.²⁵ Four days later, the Qa'qa' and Sawaeq Battalions issued a separate demand that the GNC dissolve itself, as if to make clear that they and not Haftar were in a position to topple the government.²⁶

Until February 2014, therefore, Haftar had no organization or even alliance he could rely on. But after the debacle of his coup declaration, he focused on mobilizing support in Benghazi and eastern Libya, where three constituencies offered fertile ground for his efforts. First, military officers and their relatives were not only angry at their marginalization by armed groups, but even more so over a spate of assassinations that targeted former and

¹⁹ DW, شلغم يتهم قطر بتسليح إسلاميين ليبيا، ومليشيات تلوح بالجوء للقوة، 18 November 2011.

²⁰ Khalifa Haftar, [interview with al-Asema TV](#), 22 March 2012; Haftar, interview with al-Naba TV, October 2013.

²¹ Khaled al-Moheir, أزمة بين أركان الجيش وفصائل ليبيا، Aljazeera.net, 22 April 2013.

²² Haftar, interview with al-Naba TV, October 2013, op. cit.; Ashour al-Shamis, [interview with al-Tanasuh TV](#), 18 May 2019.

²³ Lacher and Cole, *Politics by Other Means*, op. cit.

²⁴ Khalifa Haftar, [televised statement](#), 14 February 2014.

²⁵ David Kirkpatrick, "In Libya, a Coup. Or Perhaps Not", *New York Times*, 14 February 2014; Mohamed al-Hejazi, interview on [al-Shahed, episode 4](#), Libya al-Ahrar TV, 10 July 2019.

²⁶ Ghaith Shennib and Ulf Laessing, "Libyan Militias Threaten Parliament, Deploy Forces in Tripoli", Reuters, 18 February 2014.

active officers in Benghazi and Darna. The Tripoli government proved unable to track down the perpetrators, who remained unknown – though jihadist groups such as Ansar al-Sharia were widely suspected of being responsible for many of the killings.²⁷ Second, the eastern autonomy movement and its armed proponents were challenging the legitimacy of the transitional institutions increasingly openly. One militia leader who had appointed himself head of a “Cyrenaica Political Bureau”, Ibrahim al-Jadhran, was even trying to export oil from ports he controlled. Third, an escalating conflict opposed revolutionary and Islamist-leaning armed groups from Benghazi to armed groups recruited from the Awagir and other eastern tribes in the Benghazi periphery, as well as to the Saeqa Special Forces in Benghazi, many of whose members by that point were civilians.²⁸

From March to early May 2014, Haftar received leaders of armed groups in the house of Ali al-Qatrani, a local politician from the Awagir tribe, on Benghazi’s outskirts. He also toured eastern Libya to meet with army officers.²⁹ Following his prodding, officers at eastern Libya’s air force bases issued statements demanding that the government take action against the assassinations.³⁰ Some politicians declared their backing for him in the name of their tribes, although such statements hardly reflected a collective position of these constituencies.³¹ A number of army officers from the wider Benghazi area joined Haftar to plan an offensive against revolutionary and jihadist groups in Benghazi, among them Abderrazeq al-Nadhuri, who headed a battalion in al-Marj, and the head of Benina air base, Saad al-Warfalli.³² Air force officers at Benina and Tobruk put themselves and their ageing aircraft at Haftar’s disposal. Several officers who joined Haftar had very personal reasons to do so: his air force chief Saqr al-Jarushi, for example, had been dismissed as air force Chief of Staff in January 2013. Like Jarushi and Haftar himself, hundreds of other officers were angry about having been retired or dismissed from military service in 2013 due to allegations of corruption, their role under Qadhafi, or simply the government’s intention to rejuvenate the army’s ranks.³³

Most importantly, however, Haftar obtained support for such an offensive from local militia leaders.³⁴ Among them was Col. Hamid al-Hassi, a leader in the self-declared “Cyrenaica Military Council” that championed eastern autonomy.³⁵ Another, Ezzedine al-Wakwak, was a close associate of Hassi’s in that council and led an armed group that controlled Benina airport.³⁶ In addition to al-Wakwak, other Awagir militia leaders who joined Haftar included Salah and Khaled Bulghib, who headed an “intelligence support force” on Benghazi’s northern outskirts;³⁷ Faraj Ga’im, whose group controlled the Barsis area north of Benghazi and had suffered a suicide attack in December 2013;³⁸ Ali al-Amruni, a businessman and militia

²⁷ Hanan Salah, “Counting the Dead in Benghazi”, *Foreign Policy*, 6 June 2014; Human Rights Watch, “Libya: Assassinations May Be Crimes Against Humanity”, 23 September 2014.

²⁸ Frederic Wehrey, “The Battle for Benghazi”, *The Atlantic*, 28 February 2014.

²⁹ Salem al-Obeidi, “حفتر يزور المرج ويلتقي بأهالي المدينة وضباط الجيش”, *al-Wasat*, 6 March 2014; Khalifa Haftar, *speech in Qasr Libya*, 8 March 2014.

³⁰ Abdelaziz al-Ru’af, “منتسبو قاعدة طبرق الجوية يحذرون من انتشار التطرف”, *al-Wasat*, 3 March 2014; Lacher, *Libya’s Fragmentation*, op. cit., p. 181.

³¹ “كلمة قبيلة العبيدات تأييدا لمبادرة اللواء خليفه حفتر”, *speech at meeting in Qasr Libya*, 8 March 2014.

³² Mohamed al-Hejazi, interview on *al-Shahed, episode 5*, Libya al-Ahrar TV, 10 July 2019; Al-Hejazi, interview on *al-Shahed, episode 6*, Libya al-Ahrar TV, 11 July 2019.

³³ Lacher and Cole, *Politics by Other Means*, op. cit., p. 26-27, p.60.

³⁴ Lacher, *Libya’s Fragmentation*, op. cit., p. 182; Mohamed al-Hejazi, interview on *al-Shahed, episode 5*, Libya al-Ahrar TV, 10 July 2019.

³⁵ Mobtada, “العقيد حامد الحاسي هدفنا ضرب أوكار الإرهابيين التكفيريين”, 19 May 2014.

³⁶ *al-Wasat*, “الوكوك يؤكد سيطرته على مطار بنينا”, 20 May 2014.

³⁷ Alrseefa, “إستهداف مقر كتيبة إسناد الاستخبارات التابع الى صلاح بولغيب صباح اليوم”, 8 November 2013.

³⁸ Ayman al-Warfalli, “Suicide bomber kills seven outside Libya’s Benghazi”, Reuters, 22 December 2013; Af-rigateneews, “بنغازي من مهد للثورة الي مهد للاغتيالات”, 28 December 2013.

leader from al-Abyar; and Ayad al-Fsay, an associate of Jadhran in the militant wing of the eastern autonomy movement.³⁹ Al-Fsay had lost a son in the June 2013 clashes at the base of a revolutionary armed group, the first division of the Libya Shield, and he led an armed group that would later call itself *Awliya' al-Damm*, the closest of kin – a reference to the right to take revenge.⁴⁰ Finally, Haftar's initial coalition included an armed group led by Salem al-Naili that was part of the Saeqa Special Forces, but consisted primarily of civilians. These groups all had in common that they were locked into a pre-existing conflict with revolutionary and Islamist-leaning armed groups in Benghazi, as well as with Ansar al-Sharia.⁴¹

As he launched his "Operation Dignity" in Benghazi on 16 May 2014, Haftar was at the head of a loose alliance of armed groups, each of which had their own leadership, weapons and interests. Some saw in him a saviour from jihadist groups, whom they suspected behind the assassinations of military officers. But the bulk of the groups involved had a more opportunistic relationship with Haftar. The Benghazi militias sought to use his operation to prevail over their local rivals. The eastern autonomy movement wanted to advance its own agenda, in which Haftar could feature only in an interim capacity. Haftar had grown up in the eastern town of Ajdabiya and had a house in Benghazi. But as a member of the Firjan tribe, he was not considered an easterner. Moreover, his political outlook remained firmly wedded to the Arab nationalist conceptions of a centralist, militarist state that had marked his socialization in the 1960s and 1970s. Haftar had an even more tenuous relationship with prospective allies in western Libya. He had proven that he harboured boundless personal ambitions and a propensity for betrayal, which should have deterred many from trusting him. When asked about his past and future aspirations in TV interviews, his dishonesty was palpable. How Haftar managed to hold this loose coalition together, let alone consolidate authority over it, is a puzzle worth analysing.

How to Start a Civil War

From the very beginning, Haftar's operation was far more than an attack on Islamist-leaning and jihadist groups in Benghazi. It was a transparent attempt at toppling the government in Tripoli and, failing that, at sparking a civil war. For an aging, retired military officer without a force of his own, this revealed a stunning boldness. If it had been Haftar's plan to provoke a nationwide conflict in the hope that this would allow him to win a leading role within a broad alliance, then his strategy turned out to be highly successful.

The conditions were ripe for Haftar to start a civil war. The fact that numerous politicians and armed groups across the country quickly declared their support for Haftar's operation proved his skill in seizing the moment. Libya's power struggles had been escalating throughout 2013 and the first months of 2014. These struggles had increasingly polarized the public sphere, but on the ground, they remained fragmented into disparate conflicts in different locations. Haftar's operation linked these conflicts together and exacerbated polarization by announcing a merciless fight against all "Islamists" – a category that could be

³⁹ Alrseefa, "فيديو مسرب للقاء علي زيدان وانصار ابراهيم الجضران في مطار بنينا", 11 February 2014.

⁴⁰ OHCHR, *Investigation by the Office*, op. cit., p. 33; Human Rights Watch, *Libya: No Impunity for 'Black Saturday' Benghazi Deaths*, 13 June 2013.

⁴¹ Wehrey, "The Battle for Benghazi", op. cit.; Badi, *Exploring armed groups in Libya*, op. cit.; Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation*, op. cit., p. 182; Mohamed al-Hejazi, *al-Shahed*, interview on episode 5, Libya al-Ahrar TV, 10 July 2019.

applied at will to political opponents. His declared intent to eradicate the Muslim Brotherhood also resonated strongly in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, whose support was decisive in lifting Haftar out of the mass of Libyan militia leaders.⁴²

Had Haftar wanted to launch an operation to fight jihadist groups and hit squads suspected of being behind the assassinations in Benghazi, he could have focused his attacks on those groups and conduct arrests of specific individuals. But Operation Dignity opened hostilities against a wide range of groups. The first, botched attack of his operation targeted the base of the Rafallah al-Sahati Battalion – an Islamist-leaning revolutionary armed group that had helped provide security for the 2012 elections in Benghazi. Hit-and-miss airstrikes on bases of the Rafallah al-Sahati and 17 February Battalions, as well as those of Ansar al-Sharia, accompanied the attack. Subsequent clashes also pitted Haftar's forces against other revolutionary armed groups, such as Battalion 319 and the first division of the Libya Shield.⁴³

This approach triggered two reactions that would play out in Haftar's favour. First, because the threat from Haftar united them, several of Benghazi's Islamist-leaning and revolutionary armed groups banded together with Ansar al-Sharia to form the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC). Although many BRSC fighters were not Islamists and several revolutionary armed groups continued to fight outside the BRSC umbrella, this allowed Haftar and his allies to depict their adversaries as al-Qaeda terrorists. It would also create an opening for returnees from Syria and former members of Ansar al-Sharia to establish an Islamic State affiliate in Benghazi, which emerged in late 2014 to fight against Haftar's forces separately from the BRSC. From that point onwards, it became common for Haftar's supporters to refer to his enemies in Benghazi wholesale as *Dawa'esh* – members of the Islamic State. Instead of isolating the extremists, Haftar's purported counterterrorist operation significantly boosted them, and encouraged radicalization.⁴⁴ But as a means of demonizing a wide range of political opponents and mobilizing foreign support, it was highly effective.

Second, in response to Haftar's haphazard offensive, his various adversaries began to attack armed groups, military officers and activists they suspected of supporting Haftar. During July and August 2014, the BRSC took control of much of Benghazi, and assassinations targeting known opponents of Ansar al-Sharia accelerated in September.⁴⁵ The component groups of Operation Dignity now had little choice but to stick to their alliance with Haftar to defend themselves, and the threat posed by the jihadists drove vast parts of eastern society into Haftar's arms. Haftar also gained the support of a Salafist armed group led by Ashraf al-Mayyar who designated Haftar's adversaries as "apostates".⁴⁶ This was the beginning of Haftar's alliance with followers of an ultraconservative strand of Salafism led by the Saudi preacher Rabi' al-Madkhali. The Madkhalis were radically opposed to everything from democracy to the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda, and would become a key component of Haftar's forces.

⁴² Al-Sharq al-Awsat, "حقت: هدفنا تنظيف ليبيا من الإخوان المسلمين", 20 May 2014.

⁴³ BBC News, "Libya clashes between rival militias in Benghazi", 16 May 2014; David Thomson, "معركة بنغازي", 16 May 2014; France 24, 20 May 2014; Mary Fitzgerald, "Libyan Renegade General Khalifa Haftar Claims He is Winning his War", *Guardian*, 24 June 2014; Mohamed al-Hejazi, interview on al-Shahed, episode 6, Libya al-Ahrar TV, 11 July 2019.

⁴⁴ David Kirkpatrick, "Strife in Libya Could Presage Long Civil War", *New York Times*, 24 August 2014; Frederic Wehrey, *Ending Libya's Civil War: Reconciling Politics, Rebuilding Security*, Carnegie Paper, September 2014, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

⁴⁵ Amnesty International, *Benghazi's Descent into Chaos. Abductions, Summary Killings and Other Abuses*, London, 2015.

⁴⁶ Ashraf al-Mayyar, *televised statement*, 10 June 2014; Afrigatenews, "الشيخ السلفي أشرف الميار ينضم إلى كتبية", 25 July 2014.

Operation Dignity polarized not only because it vowed a pitiless war against an open-ended range of opponents, but also because it was a thinly disguised power grab. Here was a retired military officer who was subject to an arrest warrant – and yet, he not only launched a military operation, but the following day issued a statement in the name of the “leadership of the Libyan National Army”, whose legitimacy stemmed from “the people”, and called on all soldiers to report to service.⁴⁷

Haftar’s branding of his forces as the “Libyan National Army” – which would gradually give way to the “Libyan Arab Armed Forces” – was a masterstroke. Since 2011, Libyan armed groups had adopted ever more pretentious names to pose as official security forces – the “Preventative Security Apparatus”, the “Libya Shield Force”, the “Supreme Security Committee”. By its simplicity, Haftar’s choice trumped them all, and offered any armed group that joined his coalition the incentive to become part of “the” army. In addition, the name was also that of the NFSL’s military wing, which Haftar headed in the late 1980s, underlining that this army was very much Haftar’s own.

In reality, the vast majority of Haftar’s forces were made up of civilians, as his officers themselves admitted.⁴⁸ This applied both to the armed groups led by civilians and to ostensibly regular units. Even army units that had survived the revolution, such as the Saeqa Special Forces, were by this point closer to militias than to regular forces. The Saeqa had already integrated civilian fighters during the 2011 war, forming new subunits marked by strong personal loyalties, such as the Zawiya Martyrs Battalion.⁴⁹ Thereafter, the post-revolutionary commanders of the Saeqa extensively recruited civilians to prevail in the struggles over the Benghazi security landscape.⁵⁰ Moreover, several prominent eastern army officers openly rejected Haftar’s operation due to its renegade character and Haftar’s transparent personal ambitions. And one of Benghazi’s largest army units, the 204th Battalion of al-Mahdi al-Barghathi, only began openly siding with Haftar in October 2014.

Still, to some Libyan officers as well as to foreign patrons, Haftar’s branding conveyed an aspiration to rebuilding an army, and it fooled many foreign observers. Assessments that emphasized the role of army units as the backbone of Haftar’s operation, and downplayed or ignored the dominant role of armed groups in it, proved influential.⁵¹

Haftar’s own military power in the early days of his operation was insignificant, which paradoxically helped to mobilize support for his ploy. His chances of emerging as the leading figure from the demise of the transitional institutions appeared slim. Political and military actors across the country therefore looked at his rebellion against the Tripoli institutions as an opportunity rather than a threat. Many declared their support for the operation of the “Libyan army” without explicitly backing Haftar. Two days after the launch of Haftar’s operation, the Zintani-led Qa’qa’ and Sawaeq Battalions attacked the seat of the GNC in Tripoli, killing two staffers and abducting several members.⁵² The same day, the Zintani army officer Mokhtar Fernana spoke in the name of the “leaders of the Libyan army” to declare

⁴⁷ Khalifa Haftar, [press conference](#), 17 May 2014; Al-Wasat, “[حفتار يعلن استمرار عملية كرامة ليبيا في بنغازي](#)”, 17 May 2014.

⁴⁸ Faraj al-Barassi, [public comments recorded on video in March or April 2015](#); Mohamed al-Hejazi, interview on [al-Shahed, episode 9](#), Libya al-Ahrar TV, 23 July 2019; Frederic Wehrey, “[Whoever Controls Benghazi Controls Libya](#)”, *The Atlantic*, 1 July 2017.

⁴⁹ Lacher and Cole, *Politics by Other Means*, op. cit., p. 55-57.

⁵⁰ Badi, *Exploring Armed Groups in Libya*, op. cit.

⁵¹ See, for example, UN Security Council, *Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011)*, S/2015/128, 23 February 2015, p. 14; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Investigation by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on Libya: detailed findings*, A/HRC/31/CRP.3, 15 February 2016, p. 18.

⁵² Ahmed Elumami and Ulf Laessing, “[Gunmen Loyal to Ex-General Storm Libyan Parliament, Demand Suspension](#)”, Reuters, 18 May 2014.

the GNC dissolved and start a new transitional process.⁵³ Three days later, Haftar appeared again, this time speaking in the name of a “Supreme Council of the Libyan Armed Forces” that would “protect” a new transitional process of Haftar’s contrivance.⁵⁴ That same day, on 21 May, Mahmoud Jibril’s National Forces Alliance declared its support for “the Libyan army in its war against terrorism”, while presenting its own plan for a transition.⁵⁵ These different actors clearly competed for the helm of the rebellion. But as a result of their moves, the notion of a parallel army leadership opposed to the transitional institutions, and intent on seizing power in Tripoli, took root. This would lead to all-out civil war as well as the emergence of two separate parliaments and governments three months later.

From Renegade to General Commander

Haftar’s gamble for civil war was a success. After a brief respite for the elections to the GNC’s successor parliament, the House of Representatives (HoR), war erupted in Tripoli. On 13 July 2014, a coalition of revolutionary and Islamist-leaning armed groups calling itself “Dawn of Libya” attacked the positions of the Zintani-led armed groups that had loosely allied with Haftar. Dawn of Libya claimed to be a reaction to counter-revolutionary movements, by which the operation’s architects meant both Haftar’s power grab and the Zintani-led armed groups, which had not only tried to topple the GNC, but also included a number of former members of Qadhafi’s security brigades.⁵⁶

In early August, the HoR was due to meet for the first time in Benghazi, but fighting raged both in Benghazi and in Tripoli. The question where the parliament should convene became entangled with the escalating civil war. A prominent Benghazi businessman whose TV channel strongly backed Haftar’s operation, Hassan Tatanaki, helped HoR members supportive of Haftar to engineer the parliament’s move to Tobruk, where army units had aligned with Haftar. Thirty HoR members opposed to Haftar boycotted the Tobruk sessions.⁵⁷ Although Western states and the UN recognized the Tobruk-based HoR as Libya’s legitimate parliament, they also emphasized the need for it to reunite. A rump GNC reconvened in Tripoli in late August, exploiting the controversy over the legality of the HoR’s Tobruk sessions, and formed its own government.⁵⁸ The war had led to a situation of split sovereignty.

Although Haftar still had no official position, his operation now enjoyed the backing of the internationally recognized parliament and its government. In late August 2014, after the Dawn of Libya coalition pushed Haftar’s Zintani allies out of Tripoli, the HoR designated both Dawn of Libya and Ansar al-Sharia as terrorist organisations, and declared the fight led by the “Libyan National Army” to be a war between the Libyan state and terrorists.⁵⁹ Haftar supporters in the HoR also succeeded in appointing a close associate of Haftar as Chief of Staff. Abderrazeq al-Nadhuri was a founding member of Operation Dignity, and an unremarkable figure on whom Haftar could rely not to challenge him. Nadhuri and HoR speaker Agilah Saleh immediately visited Egypt and successfully mobilized support for the “army”.⁶⁰ Only days earlier, Emirati warplanes, flying from bases in Egypt, had struck Dawn

⁵³ Mokhtar Fernana, [statement broadcast on Libya International Channel](#), 18 May 2014.

⁵⁴ Khalifa Haftar, [press conference](#), 21 May 2014.

⁵⁵ Al-Wasat, “تحالف القوى الوطنية يعلن تأييده كرامة ليبيا”, 21 May 2014.

⁵⁶ Lacher and Cole, *Politics by Other Means*, op. cit.; Lacher, *Libya’s Fragmentation*, op. cit., Anadolu News Agency, “اشتباكات متقطعة بجنوب طرابلس الليبية”, 13 July 2014.

⁵⁷ Kirkpatrick, “Strife in Libya Could Presage Long Civil War”, op. cit.

⁵⁸ Reuters, “Libya’s Ex-Parliament Reconvenes, Appoints Omar al-Hasi as PM”, 25 August 2014.

⁵⁹ Salem al-Obeidi, “مجلس النواب: «فجر ليبيا» و«أنصار الشريعة» جماعات إرهابية”, *al-Wasat*, 24 August 2014.

⁶⁰ Jum’a Hamdallah, “رئيس الأركان الليبي: السيسي وعدنا بدعم الجيش”, *al-Masry al-Youm*, 26 August 2014.

of Libya positions in Tripoli.⁶¹ In September, Egypt and the UAE began supplying Haftar with weapons and ammunition, including helicopters and fighter jets.⁶² Over time, that support would prove crucial in establishing Haftar as the uncontested leader of his coalition.

In the first year of the Benghazi operation, however, Haftar primarily harnessed the self-motivation of armed groups; he mobilized, rather than consolidated. Key to mobilization in his coalition was agitation against “Misratans” – families of Misratan origin who had moved to Benghazi dozens or hundreds of years ago, and formed a sizeable part of the city’s commercial and educated elite. Members of such families were indeed among the leaders and rank-and-file of the BRSC, but so were many members of eastern tribes, and families of Misratan origin were far from broadly supportive of the BRSC. Incitement against “Misratans”, “Westerners” or “Turks” – since some of these families were of mixed Ottoman-Libyan descent – exploited socioeconomic rancour among recruits for Haftar’s operation.⁶³ The bulk of Dignity forces were armed groups recruited from the Awagir tribe, from Benghazi’s outskirts. The leaders of these groups coveted the wealth, market shares, and administrative positions members of “Misratan” families held in the city.

To gain a foothold in Benghazi, Haftar covertly armed cells of civilian fighters in the city that surfaced as the “neighbourhood youth” when Dignity forces moved into Benghazi’s eastern suburbs in October 2014.⁶⁴ As they took control, “neighbourhood youth” groups kidnapped and killed perceived opponents, and burned the homes of families who had members fighting with the BRSC – or in some cases simply because they were of Misratan origin.⁶⁵ Key leaders of armed groups in Haftar’s coalition, such as Khaled Bulghib or Ayad al-Fsay, openly vowed to kill or expel “Misratans” and “Turks”.⁶⁶ Another leading commander, Faraj al-Barassi, publicly explained that to satisfy the victims of terrorism, it was justified that “anyone who was a suspect” had their houses razed.⁶⁷ Anyone whom Haftar’s armed groups accused of links to their enemies risked being disappeared, and bodies bearing torture marks became a common sight on Benghazi’s outskirts.⁶⁸ Thousands of families fled Benghazi to Misrata, Tripoli and other cities in the west; groups fighting in Haftar’s operation seized many of their properties.⁶⁹

Some of the extrajudicial killings were suspected of being the work of cells formed specifically for that purpose by two close associates of Haftar: Aoun al-Firjani and Ezzedine al-Wakwak. Later, former allies of Haftar would accuse such cells of having perpetrated car bombings and assassinations before and after the launch of Operation Dignity.⁷⁰

Other groups Haftar mobilized in Benghazi appeared to be outside his direct control. But they did not challenge his authority, and their acts served his interests, while the absence of formal ties accorded Haftar deniability. They spread terror that intimidated Haftar’s po-

⁶¹ David Kirkpatrick and Eric Schmitt, “Arab Nations Strike in Libya, Surprising U.S.”, *New York Times*, 25 August 2014.

⁶² UN Security Council, *Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011)*, S/2015/128, 23 February 2015.

⁶³ Wehrey, “Whoever Controls Benghazi”, op. cit.

⁶⁴ Mohamed al-Hejazi, interview on [al-Shahed, episode 7](#), Libya al-Ahrar TV, 16 July 2019; Amnesty International, *Benghazi’s Descent into Chaos*, op. cit.

⁶⁵ Amnesty International, *Benghazi’s Descent into Chaos*, op. cit.; Al-Hejazi, interview on [al-Shahed, episode 7](#), op. cit.; Isabel Debre, “US Court Hears Torture Case against Top Libyan Commander”, AP, 12 June 2020.

⁶⁶ Khaled Bulghib, [statement on video](#) posted online on 26 October 2014; Ayad al-Fsay, [statement on video](#) posted online in February 2015; also see OHCHR, *Investigation by the Office*, op. cit., p. 33.

⁶⁷ Faraj al-Barassi, [statement on video](#) posted online on 2 November 2014.

⁶⁸ Amnesty International, *Benghazi’s Descent into Chaos*, op. cit.

⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch, “[Libya: Displaced Benghazi Families Prevented From Return](#)”, 1 February 2018.

⁷⁰ Libya al-Mostakbal, “[مطالب بالتحقيق في اتهامات لأجهزة حفر بالضلوع في الإغتيالات](#)”, 14 June 2016; Al-Wasat, “[إبريك اللواتي: وزير الداخلية الفاخري قال لي إنه مغلوب على أمره](#)”, 17 June 2016;

litical opponents. They also socialized a new generation of young men from greater Benghazi to wield ruthless violence, without regard for commonly accepted moral codes or social cohesion. And they implicated the groups that fought for Haftar in crimes for which they wanted to avoid accountability – making them interested in Haftar’s continued leadership and averse to any outreach towards his opponents, who had suffered at their hands.

Public discourse in eastern Libya and in media outlets sympathetic to Haftar remained silent on such crimes. The true nature of Haftar’s forces notwithstanding, Haftar’s narrative that he was restoring the army to its rightful place became dominant across eastern Libya. Haftar and allied political entrepreneurs made substantial investments in TV channels, news websites and social media to promote this narrative. Undeniably, Haftar gained genuine popularity in much of eastern Libya, which he used to pressure those in his coalition who sought to keep his power in check. Haftar himself, as well as his air force chief Jarushi and more than a hundred other officers, regained their capacity as active military officers through a decision by HoR President Agilah Saleh in January 2015.⁷¹ When a particularly deadly bombing struck the eastern town of al-Qubba in February 2015, he exploited the groundswell in support for his counter-terrorist agenda to finally obtain the top position he had long coveted.⁷² On 2 March 2015, the HoR established the post of “General Commander of the Armed Forces”, which was superior to the Chief of Staff and also included the competencies of the defence minister – and incidentally carried the same title Haftar had held as head of the NFSL’s military wing. The same day, Agilah Saleh, to whom Haftar nominally answered under that law, appointed Haftar to the post.⁷³

Making Or Breaking Haftar’s Hold over the East

As General Commander, Haftar now formally towered above the armed groups who were fighting for him in the grinding Benghazi war. But his own forces were still insignificant compared to these largely independent groups. To strengthen his authority over the forces in his alliance, he used the military supplies he received from his foreign backers, privileging loyalists and penalizing commanders he considered unreliable. This generated serious tensions. Key commanders became increasingly vocal in their criticism of Haftar. The first of such disputes opposed Haftar to Col. Faraj al-Barassi, who coordinated with other commanders to agree on a mechanism for the distribution of ammunition, and the acting Defence Minister Massoud Arhuma, who sought to exert influence over the supplies coming from abroad.⁷⁴ Arhuma was from the western town of Rujban and without protection in eastern Libya; to intimidate him, Haftar had Arhuma briefly kidnapped in January 2015.⁷⁵ Haftar then tried to remove Barassi, but failed because the latter had the backing of forces under his own command, fellow commanders, as well as politicians from the eastern Barassa tribe.⁷⁶ When commanders met with Prime Minister Abdallah Thinni to voice their anger, Haftar declared such meetings banned.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Afrigatenews, “رئيس مجلس النواب الليبي يعيد 129 ضابطاً للخدمة العسكرية”, 3 January 2015.

⁷² Voice of America, “IS Militants Claim Deadly Bombings in Libya”, 20 February 2015; Al-Hejazi, interview on al-Shahed, episode 10, op. cit.

⁷³ House of Representatives, [Law No. 1 \(2015\)](#), Tobruk, 2 March 2015; House of Representatives, [Decree of the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces No. 20 \(2015\)](#), Tobruk, 2 March 2015.

⁷⁴ Faraj al-Barassi, [interview with Libya Awalan TV](#), 23 February 2015.

⁷⁵ Al-Sharq, [اختطاف وكيل وزارة الدفاع الليبي](#), 4 January 2015; Mohamed al-Hejazi, interview on al-Shahed, episode 10, Libya al-Ahrar TV, 24 July 2019.

⁷⁶ Albayda Media Center, “إقالة البرعصي” أظهرت على السطح الصراع القبلي القديم”, 22 January 2015.

⁷⁷ Arabi21, “الحجازي: اجتماع الثني بعسكريين من الكرامة” غير مسموح”, 2 February 2015.

The tensions in Haftar's coalition continued to mount. In May 2015, a video circulated on Libyan social media showing the Awagir militia leader Khaled Bulghib fulminating against Haftar in a meeting with commanders and tribal politicians:

“Col. Mahdi al-Barghathi and Col. Jamal al-Zahawi are suffering from a lack of ammunition. The ammunition and the fighter jets are going to the west, and we in Benghazi are suffering from shortages. As if there is a foreign agenda, as if the man wants to rule! But we're fighting for our homeland, we're not fighting so someone can rule us with steel and fire! Haftar and his sons are sitting there in al-Marj, and we're dying here!”⁷⁸

Haftar eventually succeeded in removing one of these unruly commanders, Faraj al-Barassi, in June 2015. But others posed a growing challenge to him. In western Libya, his allies entered into local ceasefire agreements with their enemies, with remaining Haftar loyalists in the region too weak to continue the war.⁷⁹ As UN-led negotiations over the re-establishment of a unified government progressed during autumn 2015, Haftar faced increasing difficulties in holding his alliance together. Politicians who had been loosely aligned with him were now negotiating independently of him. While the UN tried to include Haftar in the negotiations, Haftar's opponents insisted that the agreement should lead to his removal.

Several of the unruly eastern commanders in Haftar's coalition threw their support behind the UN-led negotiations, raising the prospect that the agreement would allow Haftar's former eastern allies to sideline him. They could count on the support of Ibrahim al-Jadhran, a commander who controlled most of the oil export terminals in eastern Libya. Jadhran, a proponent of eastern autonomy, had aligned himself with the HoR in Tobruk against Haftar's opponents, though he had never accepted Haftar's authority. In September 2015, Haftar's acrimonious relationship with Jadhran turned into open enmity when Haftar unsuccessfully tried to have him arrested, and then bombed his forces.⁸⁰ With Jadhran, an eastern militia leader with the power to unlock much of Libya's oil exports was due to side with the new government against Haftar.

When the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) was signed in December 2015, Haftar appointed a close ally since 2014, Ali al-Qatrani, as his representative in the top executive body of the newly created Government of National Accord (GNA), the nine-member Presidency Council. On Haftar's behalf, Qatrani immediately began sabotaging the GNA from the inside, while HoR President Agilah Saleh colluded with Haftar to ensure that the HoR neither ratified the LPA nor endorsed a GNA cabinet.⁸¹

Throughout the first half of 2016, Haftar's hold over eastern Libya appeared increasingly fragile. Defectors from his coalition tried to leverage the weight of the new, internationally recognized government against him. In January 2016, the Presidency Council designated one of the disgruntled Benghazi commanders, al-Mahdi al-Barghathi, as GNA Defense Minister. Two days after Barghathi's designation, Haftar's spokesman and close companion since 2014 Mohamed al-Hejazi announced his defection, citing corruption by Haftar's sons and relatives and Haftar's marginalization of his erstwhile allies in pursuit of his personal power.⁸² Throughout spring and summer 2016, Barghathi and Jadhran competed with Haftar in staging displays of support by notables in their tribes, the Awagir and Magharba.⁸³

⁷⁸ Khaled Bulghib, [statements on video](#) posted online in [May 2015](#).

⁷⁹ Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation*, op. cit., pp. 129-132.

⁸⁰ Ean Libya, “الجضران” يتهم “حقتز” بمحاولة قصف رتل تابع له”, 10 September 2015.

⁸¹ International Crisis Group, *The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset*, Brussels: ICG, 2016.

⁸² Ean Libya, “المتحدث باسم عملية الكرامة يعلن انشقاقه عن خليفة حقتز”, 21 January 2016.

⁸³ Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation*, op. cit., p. 187-188.

Barghathi's ally, the Awagir militia leader Faraj Ga'im, accused Haftar of responsibility for assassinations and bombings in Benghazi.⁸⁴ The challenge to Haftar's authority was unprecedented.

Haftar, however, succeeded in transforming this precarious situation into an opportunity to sideline his challengers and consolidate control. Central to his success was the growing foreign backing he enjoyed. In January 2016, French special forces began covertly supporting Haftar's operation in Benghazi.⁸⁵ French assistance not only helped Haftar's coalition break a long stalemate and make significant advances in Benghazi in February 2016. Since information about the French role spread rapidly, it also signalled that Haftar's backers had not abandoned him, contrary to what their declarations of support to the unity government suggested. In spring 2016, Emirati backing made a qualitative leap with the installation of a covert UAE airbase in eastern Libya from which combat drones and so-called air tractors would later support Haftar's campaign in Benghazi.⁸⁶ At the same time, the rival east-based Central Bank secured Russian support to print its own dinar banknotes, which it used over the following years to underwrite dozens of billions of dinars in debt to commercial banks in the east.⁸⁷ Around a third of eastern expenditure financed in this manner went straight to Haftar's forces, beyond the oversight of the eastern government or its audit bureau.⁸⁸

Such foreign support helped Haftar to expand his coalition in ways that reduced his dependence on unruly eastern commanders and increased his ability to clamp down on challengers. He promoted three groups in particular: first, he encouraged former regime loyalists to return from exile or reinstated them in military and intelligence positions. These regime loyalists often sat uneasily with Haftar allies who were at least rhetorically committed to the 2011 revolution, such as Zintani armed groups and several of the Benghazi commanders. But they were more dependent on Haftar's support, since they had been politically marginalized and unable to establish their own armed groups after 2011. Many saw Haftar's forces as an opportunity to regain political and military influence, and take their revenge on the constituencies that had supported the revolution – particularly Misrata.

A former senior military and intelligence officer under Qadhafi and fellow tribesman of Haftar's, Aoun al-Firjani, became Haftar's right hand early on, and established his security apparatus in eastern Libya following the Qadhafi regime's model.⁸⁹ In southern Libya, a former intelligence officer from the Magarha tribe, Mohamed ben Nayel, was released from detention in Misrata in April 2016 and immediately resumed his efforts to enrol former regime loyalists for Haftar.⁹⁰ Around the same time, Haftar mobilized former members from Qadhafi's security brigades from the Qadhadhfa and Firjan tribes for an effort to capture Sirte that ultimately failed to materialize. Later, two senior officers who played leading roles in Qadhafi's counterinsurgency effort in 2011 would fulfil important functions in Haftar's forces, and attract others from ex-regime constituencies into their ranks: al-Mabruk Sahban, whom Haftar first appointed to a top position in March 2017, and Belgasem al-

⁸⁴ Libya al-Mostakbal, "القعيم يتهم: لدينا ملفات كبيرة عن تصفيات بنغازي", 5 June 2016.

⁸⁵ Nathalie Guibert, "La France Mène des Opérations Secrètes en Libye", Le Monde, 23 February 2016.

⁸⁶ UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts in Accordance with Paragraph 13 of Resolution 2278 (2016)*, S/2017/466, 1 June 2017; Frederic Wehrey, *This War Is Out of Our Hands: The Internationalization of Libya's Post-2011 Conflicts From Proxies to Boots on the Ground*, Washington, DC: New America, September 2020, p. 20.

⁸⁷ Rami Musa, "Defying Critics, Libya's Eastern Bank Prints its Own Money", AP, 27 May 2016; International Crisis Group, *Of Tanks and Banks: Stopping a Dangerous Escalation in Libya*, Brussels: ICG, May 2019.

⁸⁸ Al-Wasat, "الحبري: ثلث ميزانية الإنفاق خلال السنوات الثلاث الماضية جرى تسيلها لفائدة الجيش", 19 February 2019.

⁸⁹ Author interviews, military officers, Tobruk, April 2015.

⁹⁰ Jihan al-Jawzi, "مبادلة 16 من المقارحة على رأسهم محمد بن نايل مقابل 6 من مصراتة", 4 April 2016.

Ab'aj, who had been imprisoned for years after 2011 and received a leading function in March 2018.⁹¹

Second, Haftar strengthened the hardline Salafists who had begun joining his alliance as early as June 2014. Armed groups with a pronounced Salafist tendency and a doctrine that emphasized political obedience were more willing to carry out arrests that were bound to provoke negative reactions from members of extended families. In early 2016, Haftar transferred members of the Salafist al-Tawhid battalion to Battalions 210 and 302. He thereby camouflaged these groups as formal units – Battalion 302 later became part of the Saeqa Special Forces – but allowed them to retain their ideological esprit de corps, and boosted their firepower with foreign support.⁹²

Third, in late 2015 Haftar began recruiting mercenary fighters from Darfur for the Benghazi war.⁹³ Over the next years, he would come to deploy thousands of such mercenaries to remote areas of central and southern Libya, thereby projecting force in ways he could not if he had to depend on his original allies in Benghazi.

The process of strengthening more docile elements over the unruly components of Haftar's coalition was slow, but it progressively granted Haftar a measure of autonomy from the constituencies that had supported him since 2014. Haftar used that autonomy to progressively ratchet up repression against disobedient erstwhile allies, and signs of dissent in the east more broadly. In September 2015, he attacked an army unit in al-Bayda that had declared its opposition to Haftar and had joined local Islamists in Darna in their fight against the Islamic State.⁹⁴ In December 2015, he had former Deputy Defence Minister al-Siddiq al-Mabrouk al-Ghaithi abducted in Susa; an ally of Ibrahim al-Jadhran, al-Ghaithi had been mediating between the Darna Islamists and neighbouring towns. In spring 2016, kidnappings targeted proponents of regional autonomy and supporters of the unity government in Tobruk and al-Marj.⁹⁵ The victims were held incommunicado – a practice that Haftar's forces were using extensively against suspected enemy sympathizers in Benghazi, but that they now expanded to critics across the east. In Benghazi itself, the bodies of victims of extrajudicial executions by Haftar's forces now began turning up by the dozens on rubbish dumps.⁹⁶ He also signalled that he expected unconditional obedience by televising meetings at which tribal politicians declared their loyalty to him, in spectacles that closely resembled those staged by Qadhafi.⁹⁷

If Haftar increasingly revealed his authoritarian tendencies, he could do so not least because his popularity in much of the east was unbroken. It rose to new heights after he overcame Jadhran and seized control of the oil crescent. In June 2016, Jadhran allowed the Benghazi Defence Battalions (BDB), a newly formed group of Haftar opponents, to move through his territory towards the outskirts of Benghazi, where airstrikes eventually stopped their advance. Haftar responded by mobilizing Jadhran's local opponents to attack Jadhran's forces, who were already embroiled in a confrontation with the Islamic State in the oil crescent.⁹⁸

⁹¹ Abdelbaset ben Hamel, "المبروك سحبان لقيادة العمليات العسكرية في ليبيا", Afrigatenews, 26 March 2017; 218 TV, "الأبعج", "أمرًا لمنطقة الكفرة العسكرية", 21 March 2018.

⁹² Afrigatenews, "الإعلان عن تشكيل الكتيبة 210 مشاة", 28 February 2016; Ramzi Zairi, "مدرعات جديدة تصل الكتيبة 210 مشاة", "في الجيش الليبي", Afrigatenews, 1 March 2016; Salem al-Obeidi, "بكمال عتادها إلى القوات الخاصة", al-Wasat, 12 September 2017; Frederic Wehrey, "Quiet No More?", Diwan, 13 October 2016.

⁹³ UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan Established Pursuant to Resolution 1591 (2005)*, S/2017/22, 9 January 2017.

⁹⁴ Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation*, op. cit., p. 186.

⁹⁵ Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation*, op. cit., p. 188-189.

⁹⁶ UN Security Council, *Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Support Mission in Libya*, S/2016/1011, 1 December 2016.

⁹⁷ Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation*, p. 188.

⁹⁸ Ayman al-Warfalli, "Rival Libyan Forces Clash in Strategic Eastern Town", Reuters, 21 June 2016.

In September 2016, Haftar eventually succeeded in pushing Jadhran's forces out of the oil crescent without major fighting. He savoured his success by having himself promoted to the rank of field marshal.⁹⁹ With the takeover of the oil crescent, Haftar had expanded his control across eastern Libya, with the exception of Darna and remaining pockets of resistance in Benghazi. With Jadhran, he had ejected a key eastern ally of the unity government. The prospect that eastern GNA supporters could sideline Haftar vanished. GNA Defence Minister al-Mahdi al-Barghathi fled Benghazi, and in November, Haftar's forces captured Barghathi's base.¹⁰⁰

Consolidation in the East

Once Haftar had warded off the challenge from within his former coalition, the path was clear for him to consolidate control over the east. During autumn 2016, he replaced elected mayors with his appointees in eight eastern cities, including Benghazi.¹⁰¹ Beginning in January 2017, a Haftar protégé in the Saeqa Special Forces, Mahmoud al-Warfalli, spread terror across the east with a series of videos that showed him executing captives in Benghazi.¹⁰² Warfalli and his civilian associates in the Saeqa also worked closely with neighbourhood vigilante groups that abducted suspects and seized the property of displaced families, enriching himself in the process.¹⁰³

In February 2017, Salafist fighters loyal to Haftar twice shot their way into the home of Faraj al-Barassi, one of the officers who had dared to defy Haftar's authority.¹⁰⁴ This showed that Haftar now had unprecedented autonomy from his erstwhile allies, as well as from local society more broadly. It was a blatant violation of moral codes in eastern Libya, and targeted an officer who had not only played a key role in Haftar's Benghazi operation, but also belonged to one of eastern Libya's biggest tribes. In May 2017, a car bomb that killed a tribal politician who had supported al-Mahdi al-Barghathi against Haftar reinforced that message.¹⁰⁵ Haftar's forces again demonstrated that they enjoyed total impunity in October, when 36 bodies of executed prisoners were found near al-Abyar, on Benghazi's outskirts.¹⁰⁶

Haftar's takeover of the oil crescent also raised his stature internationally. It no longer appeared realistic to weaken him by promoting alternative figures in the east, as Western governments had sought to do by supporting the GNA in Tripoli. Instead, Western states began courting Haftar, ostensibly to integrate him into a unified government. Such courtship only increased after Haftar took control over the airbases of al-Jufra and Tamanhant in June 2017, thereby expanding towards central and southern Libya. In July 2017, France elevated Haftar by inviting him to a summit meeting with President Emmanuel Macron and GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj. An official visit to Italy followed soon after. International courtship of Haftar meant that Western governments would shy away from criticizing Haftar for crimes committed by his forces, and would not exert pressure on Haftar's

⁹⁹ Al-Wasat, "ترقية الفريق خليفة حفتر إلى رتبة مشير", 14 September 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Libya al-Mostakbal, "بنغازي.. قتل ضابطين وإيقاف آخرين من الكتيبة 204 دبابات", 6 November 2016.

¹⁰¹ Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation*, op. cit., p. 189.

¹⁰² Human Rights Watch, "Libya: Videos Capture Summary Executions", 16 August 2017.

¹⁰³ UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011)*, S 2018/812, 5 September 2018, p. 11; Bawabat al-Sutur, "المجرم شريف المرغني القيادي في مليشيا محمود الورفلي", "يستولي على منازل مهجري بنغازي بالقوة ويهدد اقاربهم بالقتل", 7 June 2020; author telephone interviews, Benghazi residents, March-August 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Wasat, "مقتل «سلفي» وإصابة آخرين في ثاني عملية اقتحام لمنزل العقيد فرج البرعصي", 15 February 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Wasat, "مقتل أحد شيوخ قبيلة العواقر ابريك اللواتي في تجير سيارة مفخخة بسلو", 19 May 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Human Rights Watch, "Libya: Mass Extra-Judicial Execution", 29 November 2017.

foreign supporters to respect the UN arms embargo. The weapons flows to Haftar continued unabated, while the GNA in Tripoli was unable to procure arms from abroad.¹⁰⁷

Haftar now used foreign support not only to promote loyalists among the existing armed groups in his coalition, but he established new units over which he exerted complete control through his sons, relatives, or close confidants. Haftar's sons and in-laws suddenly appeared as officers and rapidly climbed rankings without undergoing any meaningful officer training. The first of these units to emerge, in late 2016, was Battalion 106, which was led by Haftar's son Saddam, whose brother Khaled later succeeded him as the informal head of the battalion.¹⁰⁸ (Saddam, who in 2011 had suffered an injury after he started a shootout at a bank in Tripoli, acquired further notoriety in December 2017, when his Battalion 106 removed cash worth hundreds of millions of dollars from the Central Bank building in Benghazi that the LAAF had captured. Much of the cash vanished subsequently.)¹⁰⁹

Over 2017 and 2018, other units led by Haftar's nephews, in-laws, and close associates of his sons followed. They included Battalion 166, headed by Haftar's son-in-law, nephew and assistant Ayub Busaif al-Firjani; Battalion 155 and the Ajdabiya Deterrence Force, headed by his cousins Basem and Mohamed al-Bu'aishi, respectively; as well as the Tareq ben Ziyad Battalion, initially led by Saddam and later handed to Saddam's close associate Omar Mraje'. Also part of this circle of young commanders considered as unquestionably loyal to Haftar was a close friend of Omar Mraje', Hassan Ma'tuq al-Zadma, for whom Haftar created Battalion 128.¹¹⁰ These units received the most advanced equipment Haftar obtained from his foreign backers.¹¹¹ Hassan al-Zadma's wealthy and well-connected UAE-based brother Salem even mobilized Emirati support in addition to what Haftar received.¹¹² The 106th, 128th and Tareq ben Ziyad Battalions were later upgraded to Brigades and absorbed a number of smaller units.¹¹³

In addition to the close personal ties that assured these units' direct loyalty to Haftar, the 106th, 128th and Tareq ben Ziyad Battalions included subgroups impregnated with Salafist ideology.¹¹⁴ More broadly, the 106th and Tareq ben Ziyad Battalions recruited strongly from the milieu of the armed groups in Haftar's Benghazi coalition – among them factions associated with Saeqa commanders such as Mahmoud al-Warfalli, hardline Salafists, and criminal gangs that specialized in extortion and property confiscation in Benghazi neighbourhoods.¹¹⁵ Moreover, the 128th and Tareq ben Ziyad Battalion were closely

¹⁰⁷ Wehrey, *This War Is Out of Our Hands*, op. cit.

¹⁰⁸ LAAF media office, "تخريج دفعة جديدة من الكتيبة 106 محفلة , نوفمبر 2016", 16 December 2016. On Saddam and Khaled as commanders of Battalion 106, see UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011)*, S 2018/812, 5 September 2018, p. 10; Jalel Harchaoui and Mohamed-Essaïd Lazib, *Proxy War Dynamics in Libya*, op. cit.; Libyan Stand, "العبدلي يؤكد استمرار خالد حفتر أمرا للكتيبة", 14 October 2017; Laurent De Saint Perier, "Libye: comment Haftar prépare ses fils à la succession", *Jeune Afrique*, 27 October 2020.

¹⁰⁹ UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011)*, S 2018/812, 5 September 2018, p. 10.

¹¹⁰ Author interview, person with close links to senior LAAF officers, location withheld, March 2019; author telephone interviews, politicians and observers from Awlad Suleiman and Magarha tribes, July-August 2020; see also Mohamed al-Hejazi, interview on *al-Shahed, episode 9*, Libya al-Ahrar TV, 23 July 2019.

¹¹¹ Wehrey, *This War Is Out of Our Hands*, op. cit., p. 21.

¹¹² Author telephone interviews, observers from Awlad Suleiman and Magarha tribes, November 2020.

¹¹³ Libyan Stand, "حفتر يضم الكتيبة 21 مشاة اجدابيا إلى اللواء 106 محفلة", 28 August 2018; Al-Marsad, "المشير حفتر يضم القائد العام يصدر قرارين لاستبدال مسمى كتيبة طارق بن زياد", 1 October 2018; Alsaad24, "والكتيبة 128 مشاة وتعيين أمرين جديدين لهما", 13 September 2020.

¹¹⁴ Frederic Wehrey and Anouar Boukhars, *Salafism in the Maghreb: Politics, Piety, and Militancy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 125; *Video statement by Battalion 128 in Ubari*, 9 June 2020; *Khalifa Haftar speech to the 10th Battalion of the Tareq ben Ziyad Brigade*, 2 August 2020.

¹¹⁵ Author telephone interviews, Benghazi residents, July-September 2020.

associated with local constituencies that harboured resentments against the former revolutionary strongholds. Omar Mraje' and Hassan al-Zadma had both fought for Qadhafi in 2011 and came from communities that had experienced the 2011 war as a defeat: the Magarha tribe and the town of Harawa, home to the Lahiwat branch of the Awlad Suleiman. Zadma's family included several former regime officials, among them his uncle Abdesselam al-Zadma, who had held top intelligence functions under Qadhafi. The 128th Battalion recruited heavily among the Awlad Suleiman of Harawa, as well as among other southern constituencies, such as the Zwayya and Mahamid, and among former members of Qadhafi's security brigades. Omar Mraje' had spent four years in detention in Zawiya after the 2011 war.¹¹⁶ In addition to its contingents from Benghazi, his Tareq ben Ziyad Battalion also recruited strongly among the Magarha and the Firjan – Haftar's tribe.

These units were hardly "regular". In their combination of personal, tribal and ideological loyalties, as well as in the leading role of Haftar's sons and close relatives, they were clearly modelled on Qadhafi's security brigades – regime protection units recruited from particular tribal constituencies, rather than regular forces.¹¹⁷ In addition, the new core LAAF units were also inextricably intertwined with economic interests. A network of economic and financial ties emerged around Haftar's sons and relatives, as well as a handful of close associates. These included Chief of Staff al-Nadhuri, who since 2015 came to own vast plots of land and real estate in the al-Marj area; Haftar's right hand Aoun al-Firjani, who worked closely with Saddam, Khaled and Omar Mraje' in both predation and the targeting of political adversaries; Mohamed al-Madani al-Fakhri, until December 2019 head of the LAAF's military investment authority, who was not only Saddam's business associate, but in November 2020 also became his father-in-law; Hassan al-Zadma's UAE-based brother Salem, who did business with Saddam as well as with the military investment authority; as well as a number of Benghazi militia leaders from the Saeqa and the hardline Salafist factions.¹¹⁸ In alternating partnerships, this narrow circle made large profits through predation, seizing public and private land and other property, or monopolizing markets such as subsidized fuel or the export of scrap metal.¹¹⁹ The control of close relatives and their associates over the LAAF's core units was closely linked to their control over predatory and illicit economic activities. In short, the core of the LAAF emerged as a family enterprise.

Along with these developments came an even stronger promotion of a personality cult surrounding Haftar. Supportive media had stylized Haftar as a saviour from the very beginning of his operation. But once he had warded off challenges from within his coalition, his portrait became ubiquitous on streets and in public buildings in eastern Libya, his name and title were religiously recited in public speeches, tribal politicians made regular displays of adulation, and even pop songs were produced to sing Haftar's praises.¹²⁰ While Haftar's ostensible effort to rebuild an army was widely popular in eastern Libya, his political ambitions were less so. His propaganda machine left no doubt over the type of regime Haftar had

¹¹⁶ Author telephone interviews, politicians and observers from Awlad Suleiman and Magarha tribes, July-August 2020, as well as telephone interview with observer from Zawiya, November 2020.

¹¹⁷ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Full Report of the International Commission of Inquiry to investigate all alleged violations of international law in Libya*, A/HRC/19/68, 2.3.2012, p. 41-42; Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Fractious South and Regional Instability*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, February 2014.

¹¹⁸ Author telephone interviews, person with close links to senior LAAF officers, Benghazi residents as well as politicians and observers from Awlad Suleiman and Magarha tribes, July-November 2020; see also Abdeljalil ben Salma, "حصار مشاكل إنتاج الحبوب بـ 4 مناطق في ليبيا", Sada, 25 March 2020.

¹¹⁹ Eaton et al., *The Development of Armed Groups*, op. cit., pp. 29-34; Noria Research, *Predatory Economies in Eastern Libya: The Dominant Role of the Libyan National Army*, Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, June 2019.

¹²⁰ Mirko Keilberth and Fritz Schaap, "Der Warlord", *Der Spiegel*, 30 August 2019; David Kirkpatrick, "A Police State with an Islamist Twist: Inside Hifter's Libya", *New York Times*, 20 February 2020.

in mind for Libya. It also made clear that the structure Haftar had built was entirely dependent on him. No other figure had a credible chance to keep the alliance structured around Haftar and his unpopular sons together.

The promotion of Haftar's cronies and the increasing centralization of power within a narrow circle of relatives disappointed those LAAF officers who had harboured hopes that they were helping rebuild a national army.¹²¹ It also fuelled resentment among Haftar's eastern allies, who often saw themselves as the real owners of a project that Haftar had usurped. But it made mobilization against Haftar increasingly difficult. In August 2017, the Awagir militia leader Faraj Ga'im made one last attempt. He had himself appointed Deputy Interior Minister in the GNA, then returned to Benghazi in that capacity, thereby openly challenging Haftar's authority. After several months during which both sides avoided confrontation, two attempts targeted Ga'im in November 2017. Ga'im publicly accused Haftar, and called on Saeqa commander Wanis Bukhamada to "save the Libyan army" and sideline Haftar.¹²² In response, Haftar's sons Saddam and Khaled attacked Ga'im's force and family home and captured him.¹²³ If anyone in eastern Libya still needed proof that Haftar could dispose of his original allies at will, this incident provided it. Haftar only released Ga'im in August 2018, in a gesture of generosity towards continued petitioning from Ga'im's tribesmen. A year later, he eventually allowed a much-reduced Ga'im to regain a role at the head of a small force in Benghazi.¹²⁴

Haftar's suppression of the last remaining challenge to his authority in the east, combined with his increasingly obvious cronyism, left a number of his former allies out in the cold. Several of the politicians and commanders who had supported his Benghazi war found refuge in Tripoli or abroad, where they allied with their former enemies. Even formerly close Haftar associates, if deemed unreliable, now risked being abducted and held incommunicado – among them the deputy head of military intelligence Ahmad al-Areibi and a founding member of Operation Dignity, Col. Fathi al-Drissi.¹²⁵ Most striking was the slow transformation of vocal Haftar supporters in the Libyan media into his outspoken opponents. One example was the businessman Mohamed Buisir, a proponent of eastern autonomy who was close to Haftar in his first year, and his prominent advocate in the media. Later, Buisir tried to mediate between Haftar and his Awagir opponents, then eventually turned against him and became his virulent critic. Another example for those who had joined Haftar from the beginning, only to find themselves sidelined as Haftar's power grew, was his former spokesman Mohamed al-Hejazi. After defecting in early 2016, Hejazi clearly held a grudge against Haftar. Nevertheless, it is worth considering Hejazi's explanation for why, in 2019, almost none of Haftar's original companions remained in his inner circle:

"Those who were partners in the operation from the beginning could have opposed Haftar's project to seize power, they had the right to voice their opposition. They had to be sidelined and replaced by others who would not object, because they had not been partners – if one of them spoke out, you could tell them 'I was the one who brought you here'. It was systematic – the famous figures were sidelined, and some were assassinated."¹²⁶

¹²¹ Wehrey, *This War Is Out of Our Hands*, op. cit., p. 21.

¹²² Televised interview with Faraj Ga'im, 218 TV, 10 November 2017.

¹²³ Seraj al-Din Abdelhamid, "فرج قعيم.. ما الذي يخشاه حفتر من النقيب الشاب في ليبيا؟", Arabi21, 14 November 2017.

¹²⁴ 218TV, "إطلاق سراح فرج قعيم", 19 August 2018; Salem al-Obeidi, "جهاز مكافحة الظواهر السلبية يبدأ حملته الأمنية في بنغازي", 18 August 2019.

¹²⁵ Jihan al-Jazwi, "عائلة العربي لا تعرف إن كان اللواء أحمد العربي مخطوفاً أم معتقلاً", al-Wasat, 2 October 2018; Elmanassa, "حفتر يصدر قراراً بالعفو عن", 5 October 2018; Afrigatenews, "جديد الاعتقالات وحقيقة الانقلاب", 5 March 2019; Libya Observer, "اختطاف العميد حسونة الدرسي من منزله في البيضاء", 25 September 2019.

¹²⁶ Mohamed al-Hejazi, interview on al-Shahed, Episode 5, Libya al-Ahrar TV, 10 July 2019.

Haftar's consolidation machine had turned an alliance of convenience into a centralized structure that could wield repression even against its former support base. The input for the machine was foreign support; its by-product disgruntled but powerless former allies.

Expansion amid Ambiguity

To expand beyond the east, Haftar had to change strategies. In the east, Haftar had designated a clear enemy – the “terrorists” – and anyone who challenged him risked the accusation that he was colluding with that enemy. The spectre of terrorism retained its power in the east long after the battle of Benghazi had been decided in Haftar's favour: his opponents remained holed up in small pockets of central Benghazi, the last of which were only taken in December 2017.¹²⁷ Thereafter, commanders in the Saeqa, Tareq ben Ziyad and other LAAF battalions continued to wield accusations of “terrorism” against victims of their ongoing confiscations of homes and land in Benghazi.¹²⁸

But such all-out war against mortal enemies was unsuitable to gain footholds in the south and west of the country. In western Libya, fighting had ended in summer 2015, in the south several months later. Most municipalities reported to the GNA in Tripoli, hoping to mobilize resources from it. As an assemblage of rival factions, the GNA exerted no central authority, and local armed groups continued to operate largely independently, with rivalries over turf common in Tripoli. But escalations of violence were localized and transitory; public opinion was relieved about the end of the war, and adverse to renewed conflict. Moreover, with the campaigns against the Islamic State in Sirte and Sabratha, western Libyan armed groups in 2016 drew clearer lines between themselves and extremists.

In this context, starting a war would have been highly unpopular. Haftar had to appear as bringing stability, and liberation from abusive militias. His expansion into the oil crescent in September 2016 set the tone: following a largely bloodless takeover, Haftar surprised local and foreign observers alike by handing control over the oil facilities back to the Tripoli-based National Oil Corporation (NOC), allowing revenues to accrue to the Central Bank in Tripoli. Prime Minister Serraj, who already saw himself as head of a unity government and was reluctant to antagonize Haftar, now had even more reason to avoid confrontations with him.

By contrast, Haftar's opponents increasingly acquired a reputation as spoilers. With covert backing from GNA Defence Minister al-Mahdi al-Barghathi, the Benghazi Defence Battalions (BDB) allied with the widely reviled Jadhraan and some individuals with extremist ties, attempting to capture the oil crescent from Haftar in December 2016, and again in March 2017.¹²⁹ In June 2018, some BDB members joined a third attempt led by Jadhraan. Each time, the GNA and NOC condemned their actions, and production resumed once Haftar's forces had taken back control (though in 2018, Haftar blocked exports for several weeks).¹³⁰

In May 2017, fighters affiliated with the BDB and a Misratan armed group, supported by Chadian mercenaries, executed dozens of prisoners they had taken after overrunning one of Haftar's bases in southern Libya.¹³¹ An outcry in the south followed that, along with a

¹²⁷ Reuters, “Eastern Libyan Forces Say They Fully Control Benghazi”, 28 December 2017.

¹²⁸ Eaton et al., *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014*, op. cit., p. 33; Human Rights Watch, *Libya: Displaced Benghazi Families Prevented From Return*, 1 February 2018.

¹²⁹ International Crisis Group, “New Libyan Militia's Oil Strike Risks Wider Conflagration”, 10 March 2017.

¹³⁰ International Crisis Group, *After the Showdown in Libya's Oil Crescent*, Brussels: ICG, August 2018.

¹³¹ Human Rights Watch, “Libya: Mass Executions Alleged at Military Base”, 21 May 2017; Jérôme Tubiana and Claudio Gramizzi, *Lost in Trans-Nation: Tubu and Other Armed Groups and Smugglers along Libya's Southern Border*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2018, p. 53.

brief campaign of Egyptian airstrikes, led the Misratans and the BDB to vacate southern and central Libya. Haftar's forces took over key airbases in those regions without encountering resistance.¹³² In the oil crescent and central Libya, Haftar deployed his newly created core of loyalists: the 106th, 210th and 302nd Battalions, later also the Tareq ben Ziyad and 128th Battalions.¹³³ He thereby displayed his new ability to project power, and newfound independence from the Benghazi groups he had started out with.

Beyond central Libya, Haftar had to tread carefully. Western and southern Libya were fragmented along communal lines, with many communities also suffering internal divides. Allying too closely with armed groups from one community risked provoking conflict with those groups' local rivals, or alienating other communities. Towns that had suffered exactions and marginalization at the hands of neighbouring revolutionary strongholds offered fertile terrain for Haftar, but his forces had to avoid threatening their neighbours or risk being taken out. The collective struggle in 2011 had lastingly welded together revolutionary strongholds; in places like Misrata or the Amazigh towns, social cohesion and commitment to the revolutionary ideals prevented Haftar from gaining a foothold.¹³⁴

The necessity to maintain social peace amid a political rift in Zintan did much to slow down Haftar's expansion in western Libya. Zintan was a community that had emerged united from its revolutionary struggle. In 2014, the town's forces allied with Haftar to defend themselves. But the following year, former revolutionaries under Osama Juwaili negotiated ceasefires with their adversaries. Haftar's man in Zintan – Idris Madi, who in 2011 had been a rare Zintani loyalist officer – was unable to continue the war without Juwaili's forces. In July 2017, Juwaili accepted the position of commander for the western region in the GNA, further weakening Haftar's supporters in Zintan. Juwaili then proceeded to dislodge armed groups loyal to Haftar from the Warshafana area south of Tripoli. But he never confronted Madi or other Zintani Haftar supporters. A Zintani Salafist group aligned with Haftar used the al-Wutiya airbase to supply Haftar loyalists in western Libya, causing internal tensions in Zintan. But the dense social networks that linked both factions kept them from attacking each other, right up until Haftar's April 2019 Tripoli offensive.¹³⁵

Ambiguity also marked the takeover of the western coastal city of Sabratha by local Haftar supporters, in autumn 2017. Supplied by Haftar via al-Wutiya, they drove out rival armed groups in a battle that lasted several weeks. But they remained nominally loyal to the GNA, which welcomed their takeover.¹³⁶ Preserving uncertainty over their affiliation served to prevent mobilization from hostile groups in neighbouring towns. Even weeks before Haftar's eventually launched his offensive on Tripoli, they still remained evasive when asked about their links to Haftar.¹³⁷

Elsewhere, Haftar merely enticed local officers to nominally join the LAAF while keeping a low profile. This applied to Bani Walid, a community in which regime loyalism remained strong and many saw Haftar as a traitor, due to his support for the revolution in 2011.¹³⁸ It

¹³² Reuters, "East Libyan forces Take Desert Air Base As They Push West", 3 June 2017.

¹³³ Afrigatenews, "تسريبات عن تحركات الجيش داخل خليج سرت", 5 March 2017; Mohamed Mansour, "ليبيا... الهلال النفطي", *Almayadeen*, 21 June 2018.

¹³⁴ Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation*, op. cit.

¹³⁵ Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation*, op. cit.

¹³⁶ Ahmed Elumami and Aidan Lewis, "Armed Force Claims Victory in Libyan Migrant Smuggling Hub", Reuters, 6 October 2017; Mark Micallef and Tuesday Reitano, *The Anti-Human Smuggling Business and Libya's Political End Game*, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, December 2017.

¹³⁷ Frederic Wehrey, "A Minister, a General, & the Militias: Libya's Shifting Balance of Power", *NYRDaily*, 19 March 2019.

¹³⁸ Author interviews, local observers from Bani Walid, Bani Walid and Tripoli, April 2018 and February 2019.

also applied to Tarhuna, where the militia of the Kani brothers had exclusive control, including over the LAAF unit whose establishment they allowed to attract some salary payments from Haftar.¹³⁹ Similarly, in the southern town of Ubari, some Tuareg soldiers joined the LAAF to receive a second salary, in addition to what Tripoli paid them. But their primary loyalties continued to lie with their local friends and relatives whose allegiance to the GNA was equally nominal.¹⁴⁰

This approach also helped maintain the ambivalence that now marked Haftar's relations with the Tripoli institutions. In the east, Haftar promoted open hostility towards the GNA and tried to prevent eastern municipalities from cooperating with it. But an increasing range of informal ties bridged that political divide. The Central Bank governor in Tripoli, al-Siddiq al-Kabir, integrated politicians from the east – among them figures close to Haftar – in the clientelist networks he built to ensure his survival.¹⁴¹ The Tripoli government continued paying salaries to public sector employees across the country, including many who were working in institutions reporting to the parallel government in the east. From 2018 onwards, the GNA budget also included an additional 4bn Dinars worth of salaries for new employees of the eastern government.¹⁴² Tripoli continued to pay members of Haftar's forces who had been on the payrolls before the mid-2014 split; across the country, Haftar incentivized even nominal adherence to his forces by paying an additional salary on top of what soldiers received from Tripoli.

An attempt to take a more forceful approach in southern Libya proved unsuccessful. In February 2018, Haftar tried to expand in the southern city of Sabha by extending the LAAF franchise to armed groups from the Awlad Suleiman – such as Massoud Jiddi's militia, which became the LAAF's 116th Battalion.¹⁴³ But the largest Awlad Suleiman militia, the 6th Brigade, split over its alignment with Haftar. Moreover, given that these groups had fought against the Tubu in preceding intercommunal conflicts, Haftar's strategy alienated large parts of the Tubu community in Sabha.¹⁴⁴ In May 2018, Tubu armed groups wrested the fortress that overlooked the city from the LAAF-aligned 6th Brigade.

The Sabha failure of 2018 seemed to show that Haftar advanced so cautiously not only because he sought to appear as a stabilizing force, rather than an aggressor. It suggested that he also lacked the necessary manpower to pursue a more forceful strategy. Many of his original allies in Benghazi were reluctant to venture beyond the east. But over 2017 and 2018, the growth of units led by his sons and relatives or their close associates gradually strengthened Haftar's room for manoeuvre.

The battle of Darna, which began in May 2018 and dragged on until February 2019, offered a showcase for these new units: The 106th and Tareq ben Ziyad Battalions; the 155th and 166th Battalions headed by Haftar's cousin Basem al-Buaishi and his nephew Ayub Busaif; the Salafist-leaning 210th and 302nd Battalions; Al-Zadma's 128th Battalion, as well as a small group led by longtime Haftar loyalist Ali al-Qataani, who would go on to head another large unit, the 73rd Brigade.¹⁴⁵ As Benghazi, the Darna conflict was far from the

¹³⁹ Author interviews, local observer from Tarhuna, Tripoli, February 2019; Afrigatenews, "إكتشف 4 معلومات عن "اللواء 22 مشاة بترهونة", 6 September 2018.

¹⁴⁰ Author interviews, local observer from Ubari and army officer active in the area, Tripoli, March/April 2018.

¹⁴¹ Author interviews, active and former technocrats, Tripoli, April/November 2018 and February 2019.

¹⁴² Author interviews and telephone interviews, senior Central Bank officials in Tripoli; senior official in eastern government's finance ministry; and senior official in international financial institutions, March and June 2019.

¹⁴³ Eaton et al, *The Development of Libyan Armed Groups Since 2014*, op. cit., p. 41.; Badi, *Exploring Armed Groups in Libya*, op. cit., pp. 35-36.

¹⁴⁴ Reuters, "Civilians Killed as Armed Groups Clash in Libyan South", 28 February 2018.

¹⁴⁵ Jihad Nasr, "حرب "درنة" الليبية.. معظياتها ومجرياتها (تقرير)", Anadolu, 24 May 2018; Elmanassa, "تعرف على كتائب الجيش", 11 المشير حفتر يصدر قرار بتشكيل اللواء 73 مشاة بامرة العميد علي القطعاني", 19 May 2018; Al-Marsad, "المشاركة في معركة درنة", 11

clear-cut counter-terrorist operation as which Haftar portrayed it, and for which he gained French intelligence support.¹⁴⁶ Haftar had long punished Darna as a whole by imposing a crippling siege on the city, at times preventing all food and medicine from reaching the city for several months.¹⁴⁷ As in Benghazi, Haftar's adversaries were a mixture of revolutionaries, hardened jihadists, and men who sought to protect their families and possessions against Haftar's groups; as in Benghazi, Haftar also mobilized local armed groups from Darna's surroundings who looted and confiscated properties.¹⁴⁸ And as in Benghazi, the new, loyal units moved against some of the local armed groups Haftar had mobilized for the war.¹⁴⁹ When the battle of Darna drew to a close in early 2019, Haftar was able to send these new units first southwards, then westwards.

The Ponzi Scheme¹⁵⁰

In January 2019, Haftar tasked a force of some 350 vehicles with the declared aim of "liberating the south from terrorists and Chadian gangs".¹⁵¹ The core units involved were the Tareq ben Ziyad and 128th Battalions, whose commanders both had close ties to Haftar's sons, were themselves from southern Libyan tribes, and employed a substantial number of Sudanese mercenaries as auxiliaries. They encountered little resistance. Across the south, anger had been on the rise for months due to rampant insecurity, the collapse of public services, and the disinterest of the government in Tripoli for the region's predicament. Many hoped Haftar's takeover would bring improvement.

The force was too small to take southern Libya through a military offensive. Instead, using promises of cash and the expectation that he would soon rule in Tripoli, Haftar enticed southern armed groups into declaring their loyalty to him. In Sabha, most armed groups from the Awlad Suleiman did exactly that, helped by the fact that a fellow tribesman, Hassan al-Zadma, led the 128th Battalion. Those that failed to align with Haftar kept their weapons, but lay low. Tubu armed groups in Sabha negotiated the handover of their bases, then withdrew towards Murzuq. Tuareg armed groups in Ubari also adhered to Haftar's forces, allowing Haftar to take control of the key oilfield of al-Sharara. GNA-aligned armed groups tried to turn matters around by appointing the senior Tuareg officer Ali Kanna as the GNA commander for the southern region, but this backfired. In a situation where Haftar promised to bring some long-yearned-for stability, the GNA appeared as a spoiler. Local opinion

September 2018; Hamsa Younis, "الواء 73 يتسلم الكتيبة 298 دبابات", Afrigatenews, 14 October 2018; 218TV, "انضمام القطعاني يتسلم كتيبتي 157مشاة والسرية الثانية سوسة", 19 October 2018; Salem al-Obeidi, "كتيبتي 165,303 الى اللواء 73 مشاة", al-Wasat, 25 March 2019.

¹⁴⁶ Africa Intelligence, "France's DGSE Gets Front Row View of Haftar's Attack on Derna", 7 June 2018.

¹⁴⁷ Ayman al-Warfalli and Aidan Lewis, "East Libyan city suffers as military forces tighten siege", Reuters, 7 August 2017; Human Rights Watch, *Libya: Battle for City Endangers Civilians*, 14 May 2018; Amnesty International, *Libya Protect Civilians under siege in Derna*, 11 June 2018.

¹⁴⁸ Al-Zubayr Salem, "The Crisis in Derna: Reconciliation Opportunities in the Midst of War?", European University Institute Policy Brief, December 2017; Al-Zubayr Salem, "The War in Derna: What's Happening Now, and What's Next?", European University Institute Policy Brief, June 2018.

¹⁴⁹ Mohamed Sadeq Amin, "الخلافات تنهش بمعسكر حفتر وقدرات قواته تتراجع في محاور طرابلس", *al-Mugtama*, 16 May 2020.

¹⁵⁰ Tarek Megerisi (*The March of Haftar*, op. cit.) was the first to use the Ponzi scheme metaphor with regard to Haftar's forces.

¹⁵¹ The Libyan Address, "القوات المسلحة تلي نداء الجنوب لتخليصه من القوى الإرهابية والإجرامية", 15 January 2019; author interviews, observers from southern Libya, Tripoli, February 2019.

was overwhelmingly in favour of allowing Haftar to take over, to prevent a rift through the local community.¹⁵²

Resistance to Haftar's southern expansion was limited to parts of the Tubu community. The prominent role of Zadma made it obvious that Haftar aligned with the Awlad Suleiman against the Tubu in Sabha. Moreover, the accompanying rhetoric about "Chadian gangs" had already served as code language for Tubu armed groups in previous Sabha conflicts. When Haftar's forces moved southwards towards Murzuq, local Tubu forces violently opposed them.¹⁵³ But that opposition soon faltered, and even violent reprisals by Haftar's forces against the Tubu community in Murzuq did not provoke wider resistance.¹⁵⁴ The Tubu had no allies to support them against Haftar, whether in the south or in the GNA. Public opinion in western Libya had become used to seeing Tubu forces as foreign invaders, and was supportive of the operation. Even GNA Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha declared his approval.¹⁵⁵ Moreover, Haftar retained some staunch Tubu loyalists – including a recently established armed group with a pronounced Salafist tendency, the Khaled ben al-Walid Battalion in Umm al-Araneb.¹⁵⁶ In other towns with a sizeable Tubu population, such as al-Qatrun, local armed groups therefore recognized Haftar's authority while otherwise staying put – much like what had happened before in Sabha and Ubari.

Haftar's southern campaign did not translate into meaningful territorial control. After an initial groundswell of support as the eastern government supplied goods and cash to southern cities, it became clear that the region's predicament remained the same. Armed groups, including foreign mercenaries, largely remained in the same positions. But in the meantime, Haftar's successful and largely bloodless southern expansion had fundamentally altered the calculations of both local and international actors. The expectation that Haftar's takeover of power in Tripoli was inevitable became increasingly widespread.

Western diplomats and UN Special Representative Ghassan Salamé now made another attempt at striking a deal between Haftar and the GNA, to give Haftar the dominant role he now appeared to deserve. It remains unclear whether they genuinely believed that Haftar was ready for a compromise, as they claimed. They did, however, warn politicians in western Libya that Haftar was ready to use force if negotiations proved unsuccessful. In late February 2019, Haftar and Serraj met in Abu Dhabi and appeared to agree on the outlines of such a deal. But in the following weeks, both backtracked.¹⁵⁷

Because Haftar's further progress appeared increasingly inevitable, politicians and militia leaders from western Libya covertly intensified their contacts with Haftar. Haftar gained promises from a number of actors in Tripoli, Zawiya, Gharyan, Tarhuna and Misrata that they would side with his forces, or at least not oppose them. In exchange, these actors were hoping to safeguard their local fiefdoms, or feature in a new political dispensation dominated by Haftar. But whether these actors would honour any commitments they had made to Haftar remained unclear as long as he made no progress towards Tripoli.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² Author interviews, observers from southern Libya, Tripoli, February 2019; Wolfram Lacher, "Libya's Conflicts Enter a Dangerous New Phase", SWP Comment, February 2019; Emadeddin Badi, "General Hifter's Southern Strategy and the Repercussions of the Fezzan Campaign", Middle East Institute, March 2019.

¹⁵³ Reuters, "Eastern Libyan Forces Fight Tribesmen for Southern City", 21 February 2019.

¹⁵⁴ UN Security Council, *United Nations Support Mission in Libya: Report of the Secretary General, S/2019/682*, 26 August 2019, p. 4.

¹⁵⁵ Jihan al-Jazwi, "باشاغا يتهم «جهة بعينها» بعرقلة عمله ويصنف التشكيلات المسلحة في العاصمة ويتحدث عن الوضع بالجنوب وزيارته", *الأميركا*, al-Wasat, 19 February 2019.

¹⁵⁶ Jérôme Tubiana and Claudio Gramizzi, *Lost in Trans-Nation*, op. cit., p. 34.

¹⁵⁷ Author interviews, foreign diplomats and senior officials, February-April 2019.

¹⁵⁸ Wolfram Lacher, *Who Is Fighting Whom in Tripoli? How the 2019 Civil War is Transforming Libya's Military Landscape*, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2019

In February and March 2019, then, Haftar's alliance increasingly began to resemble a Ponzi scheme built on the expectation that Haftar would seize power. This expectation led actors in southern Libya to refrain from contesting Haftar's fragile hold over the region, and actors in western Libya to prepare for his advance towards Tripoli. But in order to prevent the scheme from unravelling, Haftar had to make continued progress on the ground.

It is likely that Haftar could have expanded further by establishing more footholds in western Libya while maintaining ambivalence towards forces that eyed his impending arrival with suspicion or hostility. Instead, on 3 April 2019, he launched a large-scale offensive on Tripoli, forcing actors in western Libya to immediately and unambiguously take sides.

The Machine Gets Stuck in Tripoli

Both Haftar himself and many foreign observers overestimated the willingness of western Libyan forces to accept his takeover by force. Two western Libyan armed groups did indeed switch sides and allowed Haftar to establish two crucial forward bases for his Tripoli operation: a militia led by Adel Da'ab in Gharyan, and the militia of the Kani brothers in Tarhuna – the *Kaniyat*. In both cases, the calculations were clearly opportunistic. Da'ab had fought against Haftar's Zintani allies in 2014-15, and by 2019, he was at loggerheads with the Zintani commander of the western military region, Osama Juwaili. In February 2019, Da'ab's militia became the 111th Battalion of LAAF Brigade 106.¹⁵⁹ The *Kaniyat* had allied with Misratan armed groups in their attempt to gain a foothold in Tripoli, in August 2018. In a second round of clashes in January 2019, their Misratan allies had abandoned the Kani brothers, causing them to look to Haftar for support. Western Libyan armed groups that had long been overtly or covertly affiliated with Haftar predictably joined his operation, among them militias from Zintan, Rujban, Sabratha and Surman – most of them dominated by Madkhali Salafists.¹⁶⁰

But the reactions of other armed groups confounded Haftar's expectations. Zawiyani forces on 5 April captured over a hundred of Haftar's troops who had apparently counted on cooperation from Zawiya to reach Tripoli. In the neighbouring Tripoli suburb of Janzur, the militia leader Naji Gneidi appeared to be in on the plan, but his fighters turned against him, causing him to flee that same night. Misratan forces immediately began to mobilize to stop Haftar's offensive, proving that Haftar had relied on promises from local actors with limited influence. The Tripoli militias that were widely suspected of being opportunistic enough to collude with Haftar were among the first to mobilize against him.

It was not simply that most of western Libya's standing militias united against the common threat that Haftar's forces posed to them. Haftar's offensive also caused forces to mobilize that had remained dormant for years: people in revolutionary strongholds like Misrata and the Amazigh towns who had either fought themselves in 2011 or had relatives who did, but who had mostly remained on the sidelines of the post-revolutionary power struggles. These forces were deeply embedded in local communities and highly cohesive, which helped explain the fierce resistance they offered to Haftar's forces despite receiving little or nothing in the way of supplies and salaries from the Tripoli government.¹⁶¹

Foreign observers often underestimated the motivation of these forces. After the first three days of the conflict, virtually no defections occurred for the remainder of the war in

¹⁵⁹ Afrigatenews, "منتسبو اللواء 106 مجفل بغريان يباركون عمليات الجيش في الجنوب," 21 February 2019.

¹⁶⁰ Lacher, *Who Is Fighting Whom in Tripoli*, op. cit.; Wehrey and Boukhars, *Salafism in the Maghreb*, op. cit., pp. 129-30.

¹⁶¹ Lacher, *Who Is Fighting Whom in Tripoli*, op. cit.

western Libya. Even months into the war, foreign diplomats kept waiting for them to switch sides and allow Haftar to make crucial advances.¹⁶² It never happened. The one notable exception proved the rule: In Sirte, the Salafist-leaning 604th Battalion flipped in January 2020, allowing Haftar to capture the city without a fight. But Sirte, held by Misratan forces who had been widely unpopular in the city, was a former regime stronghold at the margins of western Libya, and the 604th Battalion was heavily recruited from the Firjan – Haftar’s tribe.¹⁶³

Elsewhere, side-switching made little sense even for more opportunistically-minded groups. After all, Haftar could give his enemies no credible assurances that he would not move against them once he had won the war. The threat of atrocities in the event of surrender also played a role. In Benghazi and Darna, the LAAF had been responsible for war crimes that were unparalleled in Libya’s post-2011 conflicts. Haftar’s propaganda machine openly cultivated a desire for revenge against the former revolutionary strongholds in general, and Misrata in particular.¹⁶⁴ Such revanchist sentiment was rampant across the LAAF. Moreover, members of core LAAF units on the Tripoli front disseminated videos of themselves desecrating corpses, or shooting artillery while on drugs.¹⁶⁵ Even many members of supposed elite units such as the 106th Brigade, when taken prisoner, turned out to have barely reached adulthood.¹⁶⁶ The disciplined army Haftar’s propaganda apparatus never tired to portray was nowhere to be seen.

Initial expectations of Haftar’s rapid victory having been disappointed, the war settled into a near-stalemate. This still appeared to play to Haftar’s advantage, since he enjoyed major military backing from the UAE and political support from the Trump administration and France; in addition, from September 2019 onwards, he deployed Russian mercenaries who granted him a significant tactical advantage.¹⁶⁷ The GNA, by contrast, received only limited support from Turkey in the first months of the war, and during the autumn this support stopped, making the situation of Haftar’s opponents increasingly desperate.¹⁶⁸ Turkey only resumed its support in December 2019, after forcing the GNA into signing an agreement on maritime boundaries.¹⁶⁹

The fact that Haftar had multiple foreign backers granted him substantial room for manoeuvre. French and Egyptian officials claimed that they had warned Haftar against an offensive on Tripoli – but even if this was true, they saw little alternative to supporting his war once it had started.¹⁷⁰ In January 2020, Russia and Turkey tried to coax their respective clients into a ceasefire. Serraj, entirely dependent on immediate Turkish support to ensure

¹⁶² Author interviews, foreign diplomats, Tunis, June 2019.

¹⁶³ Wehrey and Boukhars, *Salafism in the Maghreb*, op. cit., pp. 127-128.

¹⁶⁴ See, for example, [coverage from al-Libiya TV](#), 8 December 2019; and [coverage from al-Libiya TV](#), 8 June 2020.

¹⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch, “[Libya: Apparent War Crimes in Tripoli](#)”, 16 June 2020; Libyan Crimes Watch, “[بيان: التنكيل بجثة في ضواحي طرابلس](#)”, 29 September 2019; Libyan Crimes Watch, “[بيان: فيديو تمثيل بالجثث في طرابلس](#)”, 12 December 2019; Wolfram Lacher, “[Who are the forces fighting each other in Tripoli?](#)”, thread on Twitter, 12 December 2019.

¹⁶⁶ Alex Crawford, “[Libya warlord accused of using child soldiers to fight forces of UN-backed government](#)”, Sky News, 20 April 2019.

¹⁶⁷ David Kirkpatrick, “[The White House Blessed a War in Libya, but Russia Won It](#)”, *New York Times*, 14 April 2020.

¹⁶⁸ Author interviews, GNA commanders and officials, Tripoli, October 2019.

¹⁶⁹ International Crisis Group, *Turkey Wades into Libya’s Troubled Waters*, Brussels 2020.

¹⁷⁰ Samer al-Atrush, “[What Lies Behind the Nine Years of Turmoil in Libya](#)”, *Bloomberg*, 26 August 2020; Patrick Haimzadeh, “[En Libye, le maréchal Haftar accumule les revers, la France aussi](#)”, *Orient XXI*, 4 June 2020.

the GNA's survival, had no choice but to sign, and travelled to Moscow without even knowing the terms he would have to commit to.¹⁷¹ But Haftar, encouraged by his Emirati backers, refused.¹⁷² Still, Russian military support to Haftar increased over the following months.¹⁷³ At the Berlin conference in January 2020, Haftar clearly savoured having Western leaders beg him – yet again in vain – for a commitment to a ceasefire. In Libya, pictures of Chancellor Merkel meeting with Haftar along with his cousin Basem al-Buaishi and son-in-law Ayub Busaif al-Firjani spawned jokes about the German government receiving the Firjan tribe.

With foreign intervention in the war heavily tilted in his favour, Haftar could have been expected to replicate the successful consolidation of power over his alliance that he had previously achieved in Benghazi. In addition to his core loyalists, Haftar's forces in Tripoli relied heavily on more opportunistic allies. By far the most important were the Kaniyat of Tarhuna, but others included criminal gangs from Zawiya, Bani Walid and Ajeilat, as well as various groups of former regime loyalists.¹⁷⁴

As in Benghazi, many of these allies hoped to use Haftar to win the war, then defend their independence from his authority or even turn on him. But as in Benghazi, his allies had little choice but to stick with him once the war had started, and they grew dependent on the foreign support Haftar alone was able to mobilize. And as in Benghazi, Haftar gradually strengthened his authority over opportunistic allies as the war ground on. For Haftar, the more unruly elements, motivated by loot or rapid victory, were expendable, and many were killed in the war. So were several commanders of local armed groups, which allowed Haftar to integrate their foot soldiers into tighter command structures. The most prominent were two of the Kani brothers, who were killed in Tripoli alongside a third commander from Tarhuna in September 2019.¹⁷⁵ (After the defeat in Tripoli and the Kaniyat's flight to the east, Haftar had the Kani brothers sidelined entirely and their fighters distributed across several LAAF units).¹⁷⁶ Other independently-minded commanders in Haftar's forces were killed under dubious circumstances, leading to suspicions that Haftar had them eliminated – suspicions that also existed with regard to several assassinations that had targeted officers in Haftar's Benghazi operation.¹⁷⁷

Had Haftar kept advancing and eventually captured the capital, he would likely have been able to consolidate his power over this coalition, contrary to what some of his allies expected. But his consolidation machine could only work in the event of continued progress towards victory. In the end, direct Turkish intervention suddenly upturned the balance of forces during spring 2020, and Haftar's forces were routed from western Libya.

Defeat posed a grave threat to Haftar, given that his coalition was built on the assumption that he would prevail. Predictably, some of the more opportunistic supporters of his war on Tripoli – and particularly those outside eastern Libya – were quick to distance themselves from Haftar. Foreign support that prevented Haftar's enemies from advancing towards eastern Libya was crucial in stabilizing Haftar's authority after his defeat in Tripoli.

¹⁷¹ Author telephone interviews, senior GNA officials, January 2020; see also Wehrey, *This War Is Out of Our Hands*, op. cit., p. 32.

¹⁷² Bloomberg, "How Putin Was Thrown Off Course by a Furious Libyan General", 15 January 2020.

¹⁷³ Thomas Grove and Jared Malsin, "Russian Warplanes in Libya Signal New Risky Phase of Conflict", *Wall Street Journal*, 29 May 2020; Declan Walsh, "Waves of Russian and Emirati Flights Fuel Libyan War, U.N. Finds", *New York Times*, 3 September 2020.

¹⁷⁴ Lacher, *Who Is Fighting Whom in Tripoli?*, op. cit.

¹⁷⁵ Jalel Harchaoui, "[Tarhuna, Mass Graves, and Libya's Internationalized Civil War](#)", *War on the Rocks*, 30 July 2020.

¹⁷⁶ Author telephone interviews, Tarhuna and Benghazi residents, September–November 2020.

¹⁷⁷ Lacher, *Who Is Fighting Whom in Tripoli?*, op. cit.

Russian mercenaries and fighter jets in Sirte and Jufra, as well as the threat of Egyptian intervention against any advances of GNA-aligned forces, held the line.¹⁷⁸

However, foreign backing alone could not explain the fact that Haftar's rule over the east survived intact. The core of the LAAF proved cohesive, held together by a web of personal loyalties, economic interests, and partnerships in crime. Economic predation by Haftar's inner circle and their LAAF units increased further during and after the Tripoli war. A stunning illustration came in May 2020 with the grand opening of a big shopping mall in Benghazi on land LAAF commanders had seized from a forcibly displaced family.¹⁷⁹ Extortion and seizures of land in Benghazi became ever more blatant, backed by abductions, arbitrary arrests and killings.¹⁸⁰ Haftar's sons provoked growing popular resentment with conspicuous displays of wealth and propaganda aimed at their glorification.¹⁸¹ But Haftar's power structure made up for his declining popularity with intensified repression. Haftar's ability to survive what could have been a fatal blow underlined how successfully he had transformed an initially loose alliance in eastern Libya into a centralized, authoritarian power structure.

Conclusion

Most armed groups in post-revolutionary Libya were profoundly local in their recruiting base and scope of operation. For Haftar, consolidation meant using such local groups as raw material while building forces that enjoyed autonomy from local loyalties and interests. Haftar achieved this by building a broad alliance in which individual local armed groups of doubtful loyalty became increasingly dispensable. He used patronage – in the form of foreign support – and repression to gradually turn this alliance into a centralized power structure. As a by-product, his consolidation machine spewed out disgruntled individuals who had hoped to use Haftar's alliance to advance their own aims, only to find themselves outmanoeuvred by an increasingly powerful Haftar.

Consolidation required a combination of strategies. In wartime, Haftar gradually imposed his authority over his allies by granting or withholding the support he obtained from his foreign backers. But once he had established forces of his own, he also punished disloyal member of his coalition by arresting, killing or expelling them, *pour encourager les autres*. Ultimately, he wielded crude force to cow his erstwhile allies and their social support base into submission. In the ambivalent circumstances that prevailed in western and southern Libya between 2016 and 2018, however, he quietly sought to build loyalist groups, while avoiding confrontations that could have provoked a backlash from local society.

¹⁷⁸ Wehrey, *This War Is Out of Our Hands*, op. cit.

¹⁷⁹ Author telephone interviews, Benghazi residents, May/November 2020; Sada, "افتتاح المركز التجاري مول أوف", "بنغازي", 14 May 2020.

¹⁸⁰ Author telephone interviews, Benghazi residents, March-November 2020; Albayda Media Centre, "العواقير", "المجرم شريف", 25 February 2020; Bawabat al-Suttur, "المرغني القيادي في مليشيا محمود الورفلي يستولي على منازل مهجري بنغازي بالقوة ويهدد اقاربهم بالقتل", 7 June 2020; Albayda Media Centre, "كتيبة طارق بن زياد وظيفتها سرقة الأراضي في مدينة بنغازي", coverage from 218 TV, 1 September 2020; Jamahiriya News Agency, "واقعة تتكرر.. أحد أبناء قبيلة العواقير يشكو من استيلاء كتيبة طارق بن زياد على أرضه واختطاف أخيه لتوقيع", "التنازل", 3 November 2020; Human Rights Watch, "Libya: Outspoken Benghazi Lawyer Murdered", 11 November 2020.

¹⁸¹ Author telephone interviews, Benghazi residents, September-November 2020; Coverage from 218 TV, 22 July 2020; Albayda Media Centre, "صدام حفتر يشتري 100 ناقة بأكثر من مليون دينار", 24 September 2020; Libya Observer, "الليبيون يعانون.. وحفتر وابنه صدام يُغرقان مادحيهما بالهدايا الباهظة", 22 November 2020; Jared Malsin and Benoit Faucon, "Alleged Torture Victims Target U.S. Property Assets of Libyan Commander", *Wall Street Journal*, 8 November 2020.

Consolidation also required taking considerable risks. In early 2016, Haftar faced a serious challenge to his authority in the east. Had he displayed lenience towards his challengers and the government in Tripoli, his nascent power structure may well have foundered. The reward for his boldness was the elimination of his rivals, and the consolidation of power in the east. In 2019, Haftar gambled that he could form another broad coalition with elements whose loyalty was at best dubious, then consolidate authority either during the war or after victory. This time, his gamble failed. Haftar had undoubtedly overestimated the opportunism of armed groups in western Libya, just as he underestimated the social base and cohesion of the forces that mobilized to resist his advance. And he could not foresee the Turkish intervention that would eventually cause his consolidation machine to grind to a halt.

By gradually disembedding his core forces from pre-existing local militias, Haftar turned the LAAF into the only military faction that transcended the localism prevailing among Libya's armed groups, and could project force across the country. However, at no point could the LAAF's pretence of being a truly national force be taken at face value. At every stage of its expansion, the mobilization of LAAF units was driven by motivations that ranged from local or inter-communal rivalries, predatory economic activities or the thirst of revenge to Salafist ideology. Haftar's adversaries were acutely aware of such agendas within LAAF units, which were often the primary reason for their opposition to the LAAF.

As remarkable as the LAAF's cohesion in the face of defeat has been, it is doubtful that Haftar's power structure could survive him. At the core of the LAAF is not an impersonal institution but a web of family ties, personal loyalties, economic interests, and shared responsibility for crimes. The core LAAF units are not regular forces; they are inextricably tied to this web of interests. Even for the core stakeholders within that network, the question of who might succeed Haftar would be hard enough to resolve. It would be even more difficult for a succession process to safeguard alliances with the various entrepreneurs operating under the LAAF franchise: hardline Salafists, militias associated with particular tribal constituencies, ex-regime elements, and criminal gangs. Haftar, the personality cult that surrounds him, and the terror that is wielded in his name have kept this alliance together. A handover to a successor would probably cause this power structure to fracture. It could also provide an opportunity for all those who fought Haftar from the beginning, suffered because of his violent rise, or fell out with him along the way to seek their due.

For much the same reason, the LAAF cannot form a building block for a future, united Libyan army. Local armed groups that operate under the LAAF franchise do not differ much from their adversaries in the challenges they pose for efforts to build national security institutions. The core LAAF units, however, are so closely tied to Haftar's rapacious, family-based power structure that they cannot but act on behalf of that power structure, and cannot survive without it. Building a truly national Libyan army will in all likelihood have to wait until the post-Haftar era.

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This Working Paper reflects the author's views.

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