



# Libya's Proxy Battlefield

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Less than four years since NATO-led military intervention helped to unseat the 42-year Gaddafi dictatorship Libya is a failing state on the borders of Europe. Since last summer the country has been divided between two rival national governments and a series of sub-states controlled by loosely aligned tribal, militia and jihadist groups. Almost all European embassies have been evacuated and oil production has fallen by about 80% in response to the fighting. The rulers of Derna, a coastal city 300 km south of Crete, have declared their territory an exclave of the Islamic State. Jihadist groups based in Libya have raided into Tunisia, Algeria, Niger and Egypt and for almost a year controlled northern Mali. Hundreds of thousands of desperate African and Middle Eastern refugees and migrants are attempting to cross illegally into Italy, Malta and Greece from Libya's coast.

If the momentum seems to have been lost for consolidating the revolutionary transition, calls have inevitably risen for renewed foreign intervention to secure Libya and to protect its people and neighbours. The House of Representatives, elected in June 2014 by just 18% of eligible Libyans, retreated to Tobruk in far eastern Libya in August, issuing a call for UN intervention to protect civilians and institutions. This month it has refocused its appeals on the Cairo-based Arab League, which supports it against its Tripoli-based rivals. Speaking on behalf of Libya's southern neighbours in the Sahel, Mali also appealed to the UN Security Council to intervene in Libya on 6 January.

On the eve of UN-brokered talks between rival Libyan leaders and militia due to convene in Geneva this briefing sets out the various rationales for intervention from Libya's neighbours and other international actors and how these may

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impact on the case for peace through dialogue and reconciliation. It argues that now is a moment of opening that has the potential to save Libya from descent into full-blown civil war.

## Parameters of Libya's proxy struggle

Like the wars in Syria and Yemen, the conflict in Libya is particularly dangerous because it is a proxy war between more powerful regional actors. Moreover, like Syria, it threatens to become a double proxy war in which alignments and animosities are ever more complex and difficult to disentangle.

The active proxy war that has underlain the Libyan civil war since at least mid-2014 is part of the wider counter-revolutionary response to the Arab Spring uprisings that has been mounted against the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots by conservative Arab monarchies. The latent proxy war that threatens to exacerbate and radicalise the existing war – and for this reason is being talked up by hawkish elements from both sides – is between the conservative monarchies' Western allies and more radical jihadist groups aligned with Islamic State and al-Qaida as a late adjunct of the War on Terror. There is not, it must be stated, any Sunni-Shi'a dimension to the conflict; Libyans are almost entirely Sunni, albeit with important domestic distinctions between Sufi orders such as the Senussi (bedrock of the 1951-69 monarchy) and other Sunni groups.

The danger is that what is essentially a struggle for power and resources between locally based and supported armed factions is presented as a deeper ideological struggle that polarises and radicalises these factions, deepening and prolonging the destruction.

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## Internal Actors

While there are dozens of militia in post-revolutionary Libya, most affiliated to a particular tribe or region, there are at least six broad factions defined in the current struggle:

**Operation Dignity** represents an alliance between the internationally recognised parliament in Tobruk, led by Speaker Aguila Saleh Issa and Bayda-based Prime Minister Abdullah al-Thinni, and the majority of the Libyan National Army, mobilised by Gaddafi-era general Khalifa Haftar. Dignity and the House of Representatives control most of eastern Libya (Cyrenaica) and its oil export infrastructure. A mountainous pocket of northwest Libya is controlled by its ally, the Zintan militia, which is trying to wrest control of routes to Tunisia.

**Libyan Dawn** is a coalition of militia from eastern and central Libya (Tripolitania) spearheaded by forces from Misrata, the most powerful faction emerging from the 2011 war. Libyan Dawn took control of Tripoli, the official national capital, in August and reconvened the General National Congress (GNC) as its parliament. Elected in July 2012 by a clear majority of Libyans, the GNC was supposed to have dissolved itself in mid-2014. Dominated by Islamist parties and independents, some aligned with the Brotherhood, some GNC deputies refused to recognise the legitimacy of new elections in June 2014 in which far fewer Libyans voted.

**Ansar al-Shari'a** is a more radical Salafist group (listed by the US State Department as a Terrorist Group and accused of murdering the US Ambassador in September 2012) that has control of parts of Benghazi, the main city in Cyrenaica, and nearby Ajdabiya. Loosely aligned with Libyan Dawn, it is battling Operation Dignity.

**Shura Council of Islamic Youth** is a radical Islamist group that has largely controlled Derna since the early days of the revolution and pledged allegiance to Islamic State's caliphate in October. Many Libyans, especially from around Derna, had fought with al-Qaida in Iraq and there are reports of international recruits in the city. A first attack by Islamic State-affiliated militants was claimed in southern Libya, just outside Sebha, on 2 January. Operation Dignity has launched attacks on Derna, which is close to its core area; Libyan Dawn does not appear to have any alliance with Derna's militants.

**Tuareg** factions are locally dominant in southwest Libya, controlling trade or trafficking routes to Algeria. Their local rivals are another non-Arab ethnic group, the **Toubou**, who control trade with Niger and Chad, as well as some Arab tribes. In battles for control of the main oasis towns and the huge el-Sharara oil fields of southwest Libya (Fezzan), the Tuareg are reportedly aligned with Libyan Dawn and the Toubou with Operation Dignity. As both are pan-Saharan ethnic groups, there are reports of reinforcements coming from Mali and Niger (Tuareg) and Chad (Toubou). Given the alliance of some Malian Tuareg clans with al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, an Algerian-origin group), there are frequent allegations of onward links to jihadist groups that have sought refuge in southwest Libya since the 2013 French intervention in Mali.

What is most striking about the current coalitions at war in Libya is their lack of coherence with the 2011 alliances, when most militia now active in Libyan Dawn and Operation Dignity were allied against Gaddafi. In 2015, Libyan Dawn's Misratan militia cooperate with the pro-Gaddafi Bedouin tribes of central Libya as well as the Tuareg, a former pillar of Gaddafi's Islamic Legion. Dignity incorporates the vestiges of Gaddafi's old army and air force.

## External Actors

There are essentially three blocs of foreign support for international intervention in Libya, all of which are actively involved to varying degrees in the current conflict.

**Pro-Dignity** supporters include Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), probably with the financial support of Saudi Arabia. Fighters from the UAE flew covert strike missions against Libyan Dawn targets around Tripoli in August, operating with their in-flight refuelling support aircraft from an Egyptian air base. Egyptian aircraft are believed to have attacked Ansar around Benghazi on behalf of Dignity in October. Since then, the origin of air attacks has become more confused as Egypt appears to have supplied the Libyan Air Force (loyal to Dignity) with additional MiG-21 fighter aircraft and helped it to maintain, arm and possibly fly its few surviving MiGs, including reopening the Okba Ibn Nafa air base in Zintan territory close to Tunisia. Reports in early January suggest that the Libyan Air Force has taken delivery of at least four Russian Sukhoi Su-30 long-range multirole combat aircraft via Egypt. These would allow it to strike anywhere in Libya from Tobruk.

Egypt's interests are both ideological and security. It fears that the Muslim Brotherhood, overthrown and banned in Egypt in 2013, will gain control of Libya via the GNC and use it to destabilise Egypt. More acutely, it fears the consolidation of armed Salafist groups like Ansar and the Islamic State (which is also active in Egypt's northern Sinai) in Cyrenaica. Egypt also has hundreds of thousands of ex-patriate workers in Libya, some of whom have been attacked or kidnapped. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are the main sponsors of Egypt's military-based government, based on their own fear of the Brotherhood

as a vector of democratic Islamism that could threaten their own absolute monarchies.

Through Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Dignity's political allies have access to the main current in the Arab League, which they have begun enticing to consider a military intervention to protect Libyan institutions. Issa has said this is much preferable to intervention by Western states. However, the Arab League currently has no institutional capacity to manage a peace support operation.

**Pro-Dawn** supporters appear to include Qatar, Sudan and Turkey, all of which have been active in supporting the post-Arab Spring expansion of the Brotherhood and its allies for ideological and economic reasons. Each denies providing military assistance other than in the framework of general security sector reform programmes.

The coherence of this bloc has weakened considerably in recent months as Qatar has distanced itself from the Brotherhood. Since the November reconciliation between Qatar, UAE and Saudi Arabia, Qatar has also held talks with Egypt aimed at normalising relations. Sudan has also been enticed by Cairo since late 2014. Recent air strikes on Tripoli and Misrata airports have been successful in forcing the withdrawal of flight connections by Turkish airlines, isolating Libyan Dawn-controlled territory.

A broader **anti-jihadist** bloc can also be discerned among Libya's southern neighbours in the Sahel, including Niger, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Senegal, which have little capacity to intervene inside Libya but have been actively lobbying the UN for a mandate to tackle pan-Saharan jihadist groups (notably AQIM and its offshoot al-Mourabitoun) operating from southern Libya, which they believe are supplying arms and militants for operations on their territory.

Initially calling for all neighbouring states to avoid intervention in Libya, these states have notably changed their tune in the last month.

The military arm of this bloc is not African but French. Since 2014 France has maintained over 3,000 troops on a permanent basis in these countries for counter-terrorism operations. Reactivation of several French bases in northern Chad (Faya-Largeau air base and Zouar) and on the Niger-Libya border (Madama) is explicitly intended to monitor and contain the threat from southwest Libya but also give France strike capacity into Libya. Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, who spent his New Year at the Madama garrison deep in the Sahara, has repeatedly said that France may need to attack militants in Libya. However, President François Hollande has ruled out unilateral French intervention. Instead, France has begun to lobby for a clear UN mandate that could legitimise this.

No other European state has yet followed France's lead in advocating intervention, let alone offering to contribute troops or aircraft. The role of the US is more ambiguous. The Obama administration is highly unlikely to want to become involved in a new overt campaign in Libya but there is strong support among elements in Congress and the administration for actions against Islamic State wherever it operates, and for retribution against Ansar al-Shari'a. Like France, the US already has a heavy military presence just outside Libya. Apart from its Mediterranean fleet, it uses NATO air bases in Sicily and Crete, notably the Naval Air Station at Sigonella, eastern Sicily, which houses armed drones and Marine Corps commandos. US Africa Command also plans to move its MQ-9 Reaper drones from Niamey in southwest Niger to Agadez, 730 km closer to southwest Libya.



So far, the US appears not to have used its drones for targeted killings in Libya, although its special forces have twice abducted alleged al-Qaida and Ansar leaders from Tripoli and Benghazi since 2013. A broader question hangs over US support for Operation Dignity, whose commander Haftar is a US citizen, allegedly trained by the CIA. Like other Security Council members, the US has done little to question the breach of UN arms embargo that has allowed Egypt, Russia and others to arm Operation Dignity.

## **Chances for Dialogue**

Notably absent from this list are Libya's western neighbours, Algeria and Tunisia, both of which have major concerns about the activity of militant groups operating from western Libya. Although Algeria has enormous military capabilities, it is staunchly opposed to foreign interventions and would not welcome an expansion of Egyptian, Saudi or French influence across its border. This is important because there are few relatively unaligned regional brokers of the Libyan conflict and neither Algeria nor Tunisia has taken sides in the Conservative/Brotherhood conflict that has divided the Arab world since 2011. Tunisia, though preoccupied with its own transition, has a moral authority based on its experience of navigating Secular/Islamist tensions. Algeria, though autocratic, has experience of its own transition from civil war and power-sharing with Islamist parties. Neutral Malta, could also have a role in mediating reconciliation in its southern neighbour, perhaps as part of a UN-Arab League-EU process.

Despite recent escalations in armed clashes on the fringes of Libyan Dawn-controlled territory, the beginning of Egyptian and Saudi rapprochement with Qatar and Sudan in the last two months presents an opening for dialogue pursued by UN Special Representative Bernardino León. Notwithstanding the

dangers of inaction, European states and the US are far from attentive to the Libyan dossier, but at least seem more disposed to dialogue than military action. After months of effort, Léon has finally secured participation of the two rival Libyan authorities at peace talks due to begin in Geneva in mid-January.

This is a moment of opening that has the potential to save Libya from descent into full-blown civil war. It is reminiscent of conditions in Somalia in 2006 or Syria in 2011, when opportunities to make peace between authoritarian, liberal and Islamist armed factions were missed, resulting in much exacerbated fighting, the radicalisation of opposition forces and the internationalisation of these conflicts. The danger, then, is that hardline elements, particularly those directed by foreign powers, choose to depict the wider Libyan civil conflict as a battle between secular liberalism and Islamic State-style Salafist repression. Actively and passively supported by foreign partners, Operation Dignity seems ascendant in 2015, but isolating and demonising the western tribes, militias, GNC and Islamist political parties is likely to be self-fulfilling in bolstering recruitment for the few genuinely extremist groups in Libya. Similar results may be obtained by France or the US attacking particular Libyan factions.

A small population and the biggest oil reserves in Africa mean that Libya is a potentially rich country. This is one reason so many factions there see state power as worth fighting for. It is also an incentive and enabler for power-sharing. Post-Gaddafi, who proscribed political parties and personally dominated all political institutions, Libya cannot be expected to develop liberal institutions and cultures overnight, if at all. Regional tensions between Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan mean that it may not even survive as a unitary state. Yet the positions and aspirations of most of its peoples and parties are not widely divergent. Isolated from international rivalries and

supported constructively and over the long term by UN, Arab, Turkish and European partners to build representative and responsible political and security institutions, Libyans can still resurrect a viable, successful state at the heart of North Africa. This is one Geneva process that must work and work soon.

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**Photo:** *Wan Caza sand dunes in the Sahara Desert region of Fezzan, Libya.* **Source:** *Wikimedia*

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