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Four Years After Gadhafi, Libya Is a Failed State

By Giorgio Cafiero

April 10, 2015

Nearly four years after NATO-backed rebels toppled the former Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi, the North Africa country has plunged into chaotic unrest.

The failure of last year's election to achieve political unity in Libya was most evident when Fajr Libya, or "Libya Dawn" – a diverse coalition of armed groups that includes an array of Islamist militias – rejected the election's outcome and seized control of Tripoli. The internationally recognized government relocated to Tobruk, situated in eastern Libya along the Mediterranean coast near the Egyptian border, while Libya Dawn set up a rival government, known as the new General National Congress, in the capital.

As forces aligned with the Tobruk government have fought Libya Dawn, the conflict has gradually become internationalized. Egypt and the United Arab Emirates have launched air strikes targeting Libya Dawn, while Turkey, Qatar, and Sudan are believed to have provided the Islamist-dominated coalition with varying degrees of support.

The emergence of Daesh (the so-called "Islamic State") in strategically vital areas of Libya has further complicated the conflict in Africa's most oil-rich country and raised security concerns in nearby states.

Libya's Most Polarizing General

The mercurial general Khalifa Belqasim Haftar has emerged as an influential, yet highly divisive, leader in this bloody conflict.

In early March, the anti-Islamist general was appointed commander of the armed forces loyal to the Tobruk government. Haftar's role in the former Gaddafi regime, his cozy relationship with Washington, and suspicions about his long-term ambitions have given him a controversial reputation among many Libyans. Nonetheless, he's also gaining respect from those who share his vitriol for Islamists.

Haftar was an early Gaddafi loyalist, and played an important role as one of the "Free Officers" in the 1969 revolution that toppled the monarchy led by King Idris al-Sanusi. Gaddafi later said that Haftar "was my son... and I was like his spiritual father." It was the start of a military career in which Haftar fought on many different sides.

During the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, Haftar led a Libyan battalion. Later, as a commander of Libyan forces in the country's 1980-1987 war with Chad, he was allegedly responsible for war crimes when his forces were accused of using napalm and poison gas.

In 1987, the Chadian military scored a major victory in the battle of Wadi al-Doum. In addition to killing more than 1,000 Libyan forces, Chad took over 400 Libyans, including Haftar, as prisoners.

Around that time, Haftar's loyalties shifted.

While held in Chad, Haftar worked with other Libyan officers to coordinate a coup against Gaddafi, before the United States secured his release – by airlifting him and 300 of his men to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), and from there to Virginia.

As a newly minted U.S. citizen, Haftar lived in northern Virginia from 1990 to 2011, spending part of this time working with the CIA before returning to Libya in March 2011 to fight once again against the Gaddafi regime. Several sources insist that Haftar was out of the CIA's hands by 2011, but others maintain that the US government orchestrated his return to Libya that year.

Libya's Civil War

Last year, Haftar called for the unilateral dissolution of Libya's parliament and the establishment of a "presidential committee" to rule the country until new elections were held. Haftar cited Libya's "upheaval" as justification for the armed forces to take over.

Many saw his act as an attempted military coup aimed at crushing the Muslim Brotherhood, which had won second place in Libya's 2012 elections. Prime Minister Ali Zeidan dismissed his announcement as "ridiculous".

Although many in Libya's government viewed him as a rogue general hungry for power, his ongoing campaign against Islamist forces has gradually won him supporters. Last May, Haftar waged a campaign called "Operation Dignity" to "eliminate extremist terrorist groups" in the country. Since then, the Tobruk-based government has by and large come to support the general, viewing him as the government's best bet in the struggle against its Islamist enemies.

Haftar's anti-Islamist crusade parallels that of Egyptian President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, who is presiding over a crackdown on Egypt's Islamists. In making no distinction between so-called moderate Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood and hardline factions such as Daesh and Ansar al-Sharia (an al-Qaeda affiliate), Haftar and Sisi are both selling a narrative to the West that their anti-Islamist positions are in sync with the "global war on terror."

So far, Haftar has been unwilling to negotiate with Libya Dawn – which contains the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood's political wing and the "Loyalty to Martyrs" bloc within its coalition. In turn, Libya Dawn refuses to negotiate with Haftar.

The United Nations has begun hosting talks in Morocco between Libya's various political factions in an effort to unite them against the growing threat of Daesh. Unfortunately, the UN's efforts to push Libya's two governments toward dialogue is undermined by the low levels of trust between them, and their mutual belief that only through continued armed struggle can they secure more territory and resources. Indeed, with strong backing from Cairo and Abu Dhabi, Haftar is likely convinced that he can make greater gains through warfare than diplomacy.

The toxic legacy of Gaddafi's divisive and authoritarian regime, which pitted Libya's diverse factions against one another, has plagued the prospects for any central authority gaining widespread legitimacy in the war-torn country. Indeed, since he was overthrown in 2011, Libya has turned into a cauldron of anarchy, with little meaningful security existing outside of Tripoli and Benghazi.

Gaddafi's regime harshly oppressed the Islamist groups that went on to form Libya Dawn, which views its rise to power in Tripoli as hard fought and a long time in coming. They view Haftar as a war criminal from the *ancien regime* committed to their elimination, which will certainly undermine the potential for Libya's two governments to reach a meaningful power-sharing agreement. With no peace in sight, a continuation of the bloody stalemate between the Tobruk and Tripoli-based governments seems most likely.

International Implications of Libya's Turmoil

The fall of Gaddafi launched a geopolitical tsunami across Africa and into the Middle East.

Libya is now home to the world's largest loose arms cache, and its porous borders are routinely transited by a host of heavily armed non-state actors – including the Tuareg separatists and jihadists who forced Mali's national military from Timbuktu and Gao in March 2012 with newly acquired weapons from Libya. The UN has also documented the flow of arms from Libya into Egypt, Gaza, Niger, Somalia, and Syria.

Last October, 800 fighters loyal to Daesh seized control of Derna near the Egyptian border, some 200 miles from the European Union. Since then, Daesh's Libyan branch has taken control of Sirte and gained a degree of influence in Benghazi, the nation's second largest city and heart of the 2011 uprising against Gaddafi.

The group's use of Libyan territory to terrorize and threaten other states has raised the international stakes. In February, Daesh beheaded 21 migrant workers from Egypt because they were Coptic Christians, then released a propaganda video containing footage of the heinous act. That lured Egypt into waging direct air strikes against the group's targets in Derna.

Last November, Ansar Bait al-Maqdis – the dominant jihadist group in the Egyptian Sinai – pledged allegiance to Daesh, as did Nigeria's Boko Haram more recently. Daesh has also made direct threats against Italy, prompting officials in Rome to warn that Italy's military may intervene in Libya to counter Daesh's fighters.

One quarter of Daesh's fighters in Derna come from other Arab countries and Afghanistan. A major influx of Jabhat al-Nusra fighters from Syria have also entered the fray in Libya, underscoring how Islamist extremists from lands far away have exploited Libya's status as a failed state. This development was most recently underscored when a Sudanese member of Daesh's Libya division carried out a suicide attack on April 5th, which targeted a security checkpoint near Misrata. The bloody incident resulted in four deaths and over 20 injuries.

The number of weak or failing states across Africa suggests that such international networks will continue to take advantage of frail central authorities and lawlessness throughout the extremely underdeveloped Sahel and other areas of the continent to spread their influence. In the absence of any political resolution to its civil war, Libya in particular – as a failed state with mountainous oil reserves – will remain vulnerable to extremist forces hoping to seize power amidst the ongoing morass.