

Dignity and Dawn: Libya's Escalating Civil War

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This report provides a detailed examination of the armed conflict in Libya between the Operation Dignity and Libya Dawn military coalitions. The conflict erupted in May 2014, when Dignity leader Khalifa Hifter announced the launch of his campaign, which was aimed at ridding eastern Libya of Islamist militias, beginning with Benghazi. This offensive shattered a fragile status quo. Revolutionary forces concentrated in the city of Misrata and Islamist politicians perceived Hifter's offensive as a direct affront and, following parliamentary elections that these factions lost, the Misrata-Islamist bloc announced the launch of the Libya Dawn offensive, aimed at driving pro-Dignity forces out of Tripoli. More broadly, the Dawn offensive was an effort to change facts on the ground in order to ensure that the Misrata-Islamist bloc retained political influence. The Dignity and Dawn offensives have contributed to the continuing political and geographic fragmentation of Libya. Libya now has two separate parliaments and governments, while much of the country has been carved into spheres of influence by warring factions. The Dignity-Dawn conflict has also caused a deterioration of security, which has played into the hands of a variety of violent non-state actors, including al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates that have capitalised on Libya's security vacuum to establish bases of operation. This report provides a blow-by-blow account of the military conflict between Dignity and Dawn forces, then assesses the implications of the Libyan civil war on regional security and potential policy options for Western states.

Executive Summary

The situation. Since the overthrow of dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, Libya's various political and military factions have been engaged in an ongoing struggle for control of political patronage networks and for influence over Libya's post-revolution future. Political debates have centered on various contentious issues, including the role of religion in the public sphere and the involvement of former Qaddafi officials in government. Despite the diffusion of military power in Libya, until recently the struggle between factions was relatively peaceful—though the peaceful periods were frequently disrupted by dramatic uses of coercive force, such as when armed militias undertook a two-week siege of the foreign and justice ministries in Tripoli in April-May 2013 to pressure the parliament to pass a “political isolation” law. This “armed politics” approach highlighted the risk that threats of violence could erupt into full-blown conflict.

The threat of civil conflict was exacerbated by a post-Qaddafi security environment characterised by an abundance of empowered militias. Lacking the will or ability to disband the militias, Libya's new central government instead attempted to incorporate them into the state security structure, a largely futile approach. The proliferation of unaccountable militias contributed to a climate of lawlessness in some parts of Libya.

Fears of a massive conflagration came to fruition on 16 May 2014, when Khalifa Hifter, a former officer in Qaddafi's military who defected during Libya's ill-fated war in Chad, launched Operation Dignity in the city of Benghazi. Hifter's campaign, which was designed to eliminate Islamist factions from eastern Libya, tapped into the population's fears and discontent. Violence had been rising in Benghazi and elsewhere, as members of the security forces and religious minorities were frequently targeted.

Hifter soon extended the Operation Dignity campaign beyond Benghazi. Only two days after he declared the campaign, Operation Dignity-aligned forces stormed the parliament building in Tripoli and called for the dissolution of the General National Congress (GNC), Libya's democratically-elected legislative body. The leading political bloc in the GNC — which was comprised of Islamist political parties, members of the Berber ethnic group, and former revolutionaries from the city of Misrata, among others — viewed Operation Dignity's raid as a direct assault on its power.

Indeed, the Islamist-Misrata bloc's greatest fears were realised in the 25 June parliamentary elections, which resulted in electoral gains for a nationalist-federalist coalition hostile to the Islamist-Misratan bloc's agenda. The loss of the parliament, coupled with the growing threat posed by Hifter's offensive, prompted the Islamist-Misrata bloc to launch a military campaign of their own, dubbed Operation Dawn, which was aimed at seizing control of the capital of Tripoli. Following Dawn's takeover of Tripoli in late August, Dawn forces reconvened the GNC, which had been legally dissolved following June elections. Since the GNC's reestablishment, most members of the international community have recognised the House of Representatives (HoR), which triumphed in the June elections, as Libya's legitimate legislative authority rather than the Dawn-allied GNC.

Since then, Dawn and Dignity forces have been engaged in a bloody and protracted battle for control of territory in the Nafusa Mountains and along Libya's western coast. On the other side of the country, Dignity forces remain in a heated fight with Dawn-aligned militias in Benghazi and other parts of eastern Libya. Dignity forces are now gaining ground in that city after experiencing serious territorial losses during an Islamist counteroffensive in the summer of 2014.

As the Dignity and Dawn campaigns have gained momentum, political divides in Libya have deepened. The factors underpinning the civil war are complex, involving regional, tribal, political, and religious fault lines that often both overlap and conflict with one another to create a dizzying array of

allegiances and rivalries. Indeed, the conflict can be seen through several different lenses: revolutionaries against members of the *ancien régime*, political Islamists against secular nationalists, and ethnic Arabs against Berbers and other non-Arabs.

While considerable uncertainty exists about the internal dynamics of the Dignity and Dawn coalitions, the implications of the conflict on regional stability are increasingly clear. The Dignity-Dawn clash has contributed to the deterioration of the Libyan state, creating ungoverned spaces that are being exploited by violent non-state actors — the Islamic State being prominent among them in 2015. Instability in Libya also imperils European countries, which are increasingly concerned about the threat that jihadist actors pose to domestic security.

The report. This study provides a granular review of the competition occurring between the Operation Dignity and Dawn campaigns. It begins by examining the historical and political context in which the Dignity coalition emerged. Then the study takes a detailed look at the kinetic activities of both the Dignity and Dawn campaigns, examining the following phases of their competition:

- The early months of the Operation Dignity offensive in Benghazi;
- The month-long Operation Dawn campaign in Tripoli, which culminated in the destruction of the city's airport and the withdrawal of Dignity-aligned Zintani militias from the capital in August 2014;
- The Islamist counteroffensive in Benghazi, which lasted from mid-July until mid-October;
- The Operation Dawn campaign in western Libya, which spanned from mid-August to the present;
- Operation Dignity's latest offensive in Benghazi, which began in mid-October and remains in progress.

This report relies heavily on reporting from the regional press, including Arabic-language sources that have often been underutilised by Western analysts. In addition, although social media has less penetration into the Libya conflict than Syria and Iraq, the report cross-references regional media reporting against social media sources to corroborate information.

Policy options. The United States and European Union face two major policy questions. First, what are the prospects of success for the current round of negotiations? Second, if they fail, should Western states provide military support to forces aligned with the internationally-recognised HoR government against its rivals?

Thus far, the international community has largely placed its faith in negotiations, though there are obvious exceptions: Egypt and United Arab Emirates have supported HoR and the Dignity coalition, while Qatar, Turkey, and Sudan have thrown their weight behind Dawn and the GNC. This prioritisation of negotiations as preferable to taking sides in the Libyan civil war is proper, as addressing the conflict by dialogue, even if there remain some "irreconcilables," would be ideal. But what are the chances that negotiations will succeed?

The United Nations' track record thus far in facilitating political negotiations in Libya provides some reason for pessimism, though the possibility of a breakthrough shouldn't be ruled out. In late September 2014, UN special envoy to Libya Bernardino Leon brokered what was expected to be the first stage of political talks between rival factions, but there was little enthusiasm for the negotiations from the outset. The UN hasn't given up on its efforts to foster a settlement, and is currently engaged in a new round of talks in Geneva. Even if negotiations don't yield a comprehensive political agreement, other benefits may result. Negotiations could lead more moderate Dawn factions to distance themselves from extremist groups. Similarly, political dialogue

could help the international community map the various actors within both Dawn and Dignity, as many outside observers view the two coalitions' internal dynamics as opaque.

If negotiations appear unlikely to attain their objectives, policymakers may begin to consider whether to provide security assistance to Operation Dignity forces, in the hope of shifting the conflict decisively in favor of the HoR. The majority of Libya analysts are lukewarm about this option, or opposed to it. The downsides of supporting Hifter and Dignity that they identify are real, but advocates of supporting these factions might counter that the alternatives are so unpalatable that supporting Dignity is nonetheless justified. While Hifter is quite polarising, concerns about the proliferation of violent non-state actors in Libya may cause many Western policymakers to believe that supporting Dignity is the "least bad option" if negotiations fail.

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