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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Stellungnahme / comment

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Lacher, W. (2019). *Libya's conflicts enter a dangerous new phase.* (SWP Comment, 8/2019). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. https://doi.org/10.18449/2019C08

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https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-61852-3

SWP Comment
NO. 8 FEBRUARY 2019

Libya's Conflicts Enter a Dangerous New Phase

Wolfram Lacher

Recent advances by Khalifa Haftar's "Libyan Arab Armed Forces" in southern Libya are changing power relations in Libya in ways that undermine the UN's ongoing attempts at brokering a political solution. Haftar's increasing influence implies he will be less open to concessions, while key forces in western Libya now perceive him as an existential threat. The Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), which has, to date, remained ambivalent towards Haftar despite his open opposition towards it, will come under increasing pressure from both adversaries and allies of Haftar to clarify its stance. The new configuration raises the risk of escalation on multiple fronts. Only the emergence of a stable balance of power can create the conditions for a political settlement.

In January and February 2019, Haftar's forces entered the southern cities of Sabha and Ubari and took over one of Libya's biggest oilfields, Sharara. They received widespread popular support and encountered no meaningful resistance. Local armed groups either defected to Haftar or lay low. Haftar's stunning success in the south was enabled first and foremost by the region's long neglect at the hands of the Tripoli-based GNA. Amid pervasive insecurity and a widespread shutdown of public services, residents eagerly welcomed Haftar's vow to re-establish order. Haftar's moves provoked a scramble by the GNA to appoint a commander for the southern military region and deploy forces from the north to protect Sharara. But these belated, rash steps ultimately backfired, since they threatened to provoke a political rift in the south just as Haftar's forces were promising to bring long-awaited stability.

Haftar's takeover of the heartland of the Fezzan region represents the first real change in the balance of power since his June 2017 expansion into the Jufra region, in central Libya. Thereafter, a fragile status quo had prevailed in which Haftar appeared unable to advance, while the GNA was hamstrung by rivalries between the — mostly western Libyan — factions associated with it. During this period, many ambivalent or informal relations bridged Libya's formal political division between two rival governments, each with its respective central bank and army leadership. Haftar allowed oil exports to be shipped from eastern ports under his control even though

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the revenues would be accrued to the Tripoli central bank. The GNA paid out salaries to many employees of the eastern government, including to soldiers of Haftar's forces. All the while, international efforts to negotiate a unified executive structure that would include Haftar remained stuck between Haftar's maximalist demands and the GNA's certainty that it alone enjoyed international recognition.

Haftar's expansion in the south has shattered that status quo. He can now claim control over the overwhelming bulk of Libyan oil production and most territory outside Tripolitania. Local and international actors are reassessing his chances of taking power in Tripoli. At the same time, the new configuration all but upends the long-faltering, UN-led political process. Previously, a key obstacle to any political deal had been Haftar's refusal to submit to civilian authority, and he is now even less likely to make concessions, given the prospect of further military advances on the back of the current momentum. Western Libyan forces that see the prospect of Haftar seizing power as an existential threat will now be even more wary of his integration into a unified government. After all, this would allow Haftar greater access to state resources with which to further expand his military might; in the current situation, no written agreement can credibly limit Haftar's power. In sum, the focus will now be on military developments rather than negotiations.

Ongoing Conflict in the South

Despite Haftar's successes, the south remains a highly contested region. Haftar's authority is still shaky in the southern areas he has taken over. He has sent only limited forces south and has primarily relied on the cooperation or venality of local armed groups. Southern communities are heavily armed. Haftar will therefore have to tread more carefully in persecuting political opponents in the south than he has done in the east.

The single biggest obstacle to Haftar's establishment of full control over southern Libya emanates from parts of the Tubu ethnic group. In a gesture of goodwill, Tubu armed groups had handed over their positions in Sabha to Haftar's forces before withdrawing south. But pro-Haftar media outlets then portrayed this as "the army" having "captured" these locations. Moreover, to take control of Sabha, Haftar's forces relied on armed groups recruited from the Awlad Suleiman tribe, which had been fighting several bloody wars with Tubu armed groups in the city since 2012. Tubu leaders were also wary of the narrative accompanying Haftar's operations in the south, which emphasised the aim of fighting "Chadian gangs". Although Chadian and Sudanese combatants have indeed become a major source of insecurity in the south over the past years, "Chadian gangs" had already been serving as code language for Tubu fighters — both Libyan and Chadian — in the Sabha conflicts since 2012. Clearly, this choice of language was not innocent, given that Haftar has himself been Libya's single largest employer of Chadian and Sudanese fighters.

Haftar's strategy for taking over Sabha therefore alienated even many Tubu who had previously been supportive or ambivalent towards him. Tubu forces have, to date, offered tenacious resistance to the attempts of Haftar's troops at moving south to Murzuq. It currently remains unclear whether Haftar can exploit divisions among the Tubu to overcome such opposition. If he gains the support of powerful Tubu commanders, his opponents and associated Chadian combatants may be forced to seek a way out, with possible repercussions for neighbouring Chad and Niger. If, on the contrary, the current rift cements along ethnic lines, this would increase the intensity of the conflict and block Haftar's moves towards the southern borders. Haftar's opponents in western Libya could support Tubu resistance; Misratan commanders, for example, are discussing a move into the Jufra region in central Libya to cut off Haftar's supply lines to the south. A move

on Jufra, in turn, would carry risks of a broader escalation.

Western Libya and the GNA's Fate

Continued progress by Haftar in the south would trigger major repercussions in western Libya. Haftar has yet to make major inroads into the large population centres of the northwest, and he has yet to face any of Libya's military heavyweights: the forces of Misrata and Zintan, those of the Amazigh towns, as well as the militias that control the capital. These forces, and most of the local constituencies from which they are drawn, remain overwhelmingly hostile to the prospect of a military strongman seizing power. Many have watched Haftar's advances in the south with growing alarm, and they now increasingly see the need to prepare their defences against the possibility of Haftar expanding into Tripolitania.

However, western Libyan cities are politically divided. Each one hosts several different armed groups. Such rival factions will define their positions towards Haftar not only according to how they assess his chances of seizing power, but also according to the potential advantage their alignment will accord them locally. Realignments at the local level could have major consequences: In Zintan, for example, the bulk of forces are currently aligned against Haftar, but public opinion in the town is much more ambivalent. In addition to such local divides, factions from different cities continue to vie for influence in Tripoli, where alliances change constantly and the risk of escalation is never far. Political and military actors are closely watching each other's moves, suspicious that some may be conspiring with Haftar against their opponents.

From here, two basic scenarios are conceivable. First, western Libyan forces could close ranks against the looming threat of Haftar's forces moving towards Tripoli. In interviews with political and military actors in Tripoli and Misrata, in February 2019, this tendency was already perceptible, driven by a palpable sense of alarm at Haftar's expansion in the south. But it is by no means a straightforward proposition, given that the Tripoli militias, in particular, have been engaged in intense rivalry with Misratan factions over the distribution of spoils in the capital. A catalyst for such a closing of ranks could be Haftar gaining control over a city — such as Tarhuna or Zawiya — from which he could directly threaten the capital. The political consequences could be far-reaching. If Tripolitanian forces were to reach an anti-Haftar consensus, this would force the GNA to adopt a more hardline position towards him, which, in turn, could cause Haftar to retaliate — for example, by blocking oil exports, and therefore the Tripoli-based central bank's revenues.

The second scenario would involve an increasing range of players in western Libyan cities bandwagoning behind Haftar because they expect him to seize power and seek to gain a privileged position in a new power structure. This could occur if forces newly loyal to Haftar simultaneously emerge into the open in several cities — possibly including Tripoli — without immediately seizing all-out control of them. This scenario would lead to increasing confrontations within and between local communities. It would also make it more difficult for the GNA to adopt a clear position against Haftar; the GNA would likely lose the support of key military forces in Tripolitania.

Haftar will seek to initiate dynamics along the lines of the second scenario. Judging from his moves over the past two years, he will advance gradually, exploiting divisions among his adversaries and buying local loyalties. Outside eastern Libya, Haftar has shown much care to avoid directly confronting other forces while expanding, placing the onus on his opponents to respond and appear as the aggressors.

However, a largely peaceful takeover of entire swathes of territory, as in the southern operation, is not a possibility in western Libya. In the south, alignments of armed groups with rival camps have been largely opportunistic since 2011, and Haftar's take-

over represented an existential threat for few local actors. In the west, a number of cities host major forces that are deeply embedded in the social fabric, strongly committed to the rejection of authoritarian rule due to their experience in 2011, and justifiably worried that they would face violent repression if Haftar seized power. Moreover, whereas Haftar's advances in the south could be construed as a welcome effort at stabilising a neglected region, any progress into Tripolitania immediately raises the question of power. The most likely outcome of any attempt by Haftar to seize Tripoli would therefore be protracted, large-scale conflict.

What Now?

Western governments have remained noticeably silent as the latest events have unfolded, anxious not to strain relations with Haftar at a moment when, for the first time, he appears to have a credible chance at seizing power. France has lent political — and most likely other forms of — support to Haftar's operation in the south and prevented its Western partners from issuing joint statements on the issue. The UN Support Mission in Libya has veered between subdued expressions of concern and outright support for Haftar's southern operation.

This permissive attitude towards major changes in the military balance of forces risks encouraging broader escalation in western Libya. It further reduces the chances for a deal by severely undermining trust in the ability of international actors to function as neutral arbiters and enforcers of an agreement. It is also driven by a misguided sense of realpolitik. A military victory for Haftar remains unlikely and would, if at all, only come about after violent conflict in western Libya of an intensity and duration that would likely surpass anything Libya has witnessed since 2011. And even if Haftar succeeds in seizing power at such massive cost, this would not offer a credible pathway towards stabilisation: Haftar is 75, and the structure he has established is likely to disintegrate with his demise, given its highly personalised nature and the conflicting interests Haftar balances within it — including those of his sons, who have gained key positions in Haftar's forces but are widely unpopular in them. With Haftar's departure, the deep rifts his campaign has inflicted on the social fabric, particularly in the east, are also certain to return to the fore.

At the same time, a negotiated settlement is currently almost as unlikely as a military victory. This is because all actors — but most importantly Haftar — now expect continued changes in the military balance of power. To improve the prospects for a negotiated way out, international actors would need to help stabilise the balance of power by exerting serious pressure on all sides to refrain from further attempts at expansion and provocation. This would require not only a fresh effort at curbing foreign military assistance to Haftar; Western states would also have to revisit their support to the GNA if the latter becomes engaged in an escalating struggle with Haftar. Given Haftar's increased weight, a settlement would need to include robust guarantees by foreign actors.

In other words, returning to a negotiating process would require a complete reversal of Western governments' current stance. A key challenge in negotiating such a reversal is the disunity between Western governments on Libya — particularly US disengagement; the diplomatic spats between Italy and France, for which Libya is one arena; and the unilateral French support for Haftar's southern operation. Given the potential consequences of conflict in western Libya, the stakes are sufficiently high to warrant much greater effort by European states to agree on a common policy with the aim to prevent escalation.

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ISSN 1861-1761
doi: 10.18449/2019C08