

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.

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Key Actors

Ansar al-Sharia in Libya: Salafi jihadist group with branches in Benghazi and Derna that has been at the forefront of fighting Operation Dignity forces.

Mokhtar Belmokhtar: Algeria-born al Qaeda member responsible for the 2013 In Amenas attack in Algeria. He leads the militant al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb offshoot al-Murabitun.

Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council: A coalition of Islamist militias in Benghazi, currently fighting Operation Dignity forces, that was established in June 2014.

Abdelhakim Bilhadj: Former emir of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group who is now a leader of Libya's salafist al-Watan political party.

Wanis Bukhamada: Commander of the Benghazi-based Saiqa Special Forces unit, which is a part of Operation Dignity.

General National Congress (GNC): Libya's democratically-elected parliament from 2012 through June 2014. The GNC refused to hand over power to the parliament that was subsequently elected in June 2014, instead reconvening in Tripoli in August 2014. The GNC is closely aligned with the Operation Dawn coalition.

Saqr al-Geroushi: Former Libyan air force chief of staff and current commander of Operation Dignity's air force.

Wissam bin Hamid: Commander of the Benghazi-based Libyan Shield One Battalion.

Omar al-Hasi: Former lecturer at the University of Benghazi who was chosen as prime minister by the General National Congress in August 2014. The international community does not recognize Hasi as Libya's prime minister.

Khalifa Hifter: Former officer in the Libyan military under Muammar Qaddafi who defected in the 1980s and led the dissident Libyan National Army. Hifter lived in the United States for much of the 1990s and early 2000s before returning to Libya to take part in the armed uprising against Qaddafi in 2011. He orchestrated the Operation Dignity offensive and remains the commander of Operation Dignity forces.

Muhammad al-Hijazi: Former Qaddafi-era military officer and current Operation Dignity spokesman.

House of Representatives (HoR): Libya's democratically-elected and internationally-recognized parliament. Libya's supreme court ruled in November 2014 that the HoR's June 2014 election was unconstitutional, and ordered it dissolved. The HoR has ignored that ruling, and continues to operate out of the eastern city of Tobruk.

Ibrahim Jathran: Federalist militia leader whose forces seized control of eastern oil terminals in September 2013.

Mahmoud Jibril: Prime minister under the National Transitional Council until October 2011, and current leader of Libya's National Forces Alliance political coalition.

Justice and Construction Party: The Libyan branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Abd-al-Raziq al-Nazuri: Former deputy to Khalifa Hifter in the Operation Dignity coalition who was appointed chief of staff of the Libyan army by Libya's House of Representatives in August 2014.

Operation Dawn: A military coalition comprised of Tripoli-based Islamist militias, Misrata-based militias, Berber armed factions, and others. Operation Dawn kicked off its own offensive against Zintani militias in Tripoli in July 2014.

Operation Dignity: Military coalition led by Khalifa Hifter that launched an offensive against Islamist militias in Benghazi in May 2014, then quickly broadened its campaign.

Muammar al-Qaddafi: Libya's leader from 1969 to 2011 who was violently overthrown by the 2011 revolution.

Sufian bin Qumu: Former al-Qaeda member and Guantánamo Bay detainee who now leads Ansar al-Sharia's branch in Derna.

Nuri Abu Sahyman: Former president of Libya's General National Congress who is now the speaker of the reconvened GNC.

Abdullah al-Thinni: Libya's internationally recognised prime minister, who was initially appointed as Libya's caretaker prime minister in March 2014. Thinni was formally reappointed by the Tobruk-based House of Representatives in September 2014 to form a crisis government.

Mohammed al-Zahawi: Former commander of Ansar al-Sharia forces in Benghazi (now deceased).

Guide to Acronyms

ABM: Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis

AQIM: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

ASL: Ansar al-Sharia in Libya

AST: Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia

BRSC: Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council

GNC: General National Congress

HoR: House of Representatives (also known as the Council of Representatives)

IS: Islamic State

JCP: Justice and Construction Party

LIFG: Libyan Islamic Fighting Group

LNA: Libyan National Army

MJN: Muhammad Jamal Network

NFA: National Forces Alliance

NTC: National Transitional Council

UAE: United Arab Emirates

UN: United Nations

VNSA: Violent Non-State Actor

Timeline of Key Events

February 15, 2011: Benghazi residents launch protests against Muammar Qaddafi's regime, setting in motion a months-long armed rebellion.

October 20, 2011: Qaddafi is killed by rebels in the town of Sirte, marking the effective end of the Libyan uprising.

April-May 2013: Militia fighters storm government buildings in Tripoli and pressure the General National Congress, Libya's parliament, to pass the political isolation law, an act that bans former Qaddafi officials from holding public office or serving in high-level positions in Libyan state institutions.

February 14, 2014: Khalifa Hifter launches an abortive coup attempt.

May 16, 2014: Hifter launches the Operation Dignity military campaign in Benghazi.

May 18, 2014: Pro-Dignity forces storm the General National Congress (GNC) building and demand dissolution of the GNC.

June 20, 2014: Islamist militias in Benghazi, including Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, announce the establishment of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council.

June 25, 2014: Libya holds parliamentary elections, which result in gains for the nationalist-federalist bloc at the expense of the Islamist-Misrata bloc.

July 13, 2014: Operation Dawn forces launch a military offensive against Zintani militias in Tripoli.

August 18, 2014: UAE jets, flown from military bases in Egypt, conduct air strikes against Dawn forces in Tripoli.

August 23, 2014: Operation Dawn forces seize control of the Tripoli International Airport.

August 25, 2014: The House of Representatives (HoR) appoints Major General Abd-al-Raziq al-Nazuri, a former Hifter deputy, as the new chief of staff of the Libyan Army. On the same day, the General National Congress elects Omar al-Hasi as the new prime minister of its competing parliament.

October 14, 2014: Operation Dignity launches a new offensive, termed the Snake's Sting operation, to retake control of Benghazi.

November 6, 2014: The Libyan supreme court rules that the June 25 elections were unconstitutional, and formally dissolves the House of Representatives. However, the House of Representatives ignores the ruling and continues to operate in Tobruk.

November 17, 2014: The House of Representatives officially confirms its support for Operation Dignity for the first time.

December 13, 2014: Operation Dawn launches a surprise attack against the Ras Lanuf and Sidra oil terminals, which are held by pro-Dignity fighters, the first time that the two oil facilities had come under attack. Dignity forces retaliate by bombing the seaport in Misrata.

January 22, 2015: Operation Dignity forces seize control of the Benghazi branch of the Libyan Central Bank.

January 27, 2015: Militants from the Libyan branch of the Islamic State launch an assault on the high-end Corinthia Hotel in Tripoli, killing ten, including an American security contractor and four other foreigners.

February 15, 2015: The Islamic State affiliate in Libya seizes control of the town of Nawfaliyah in central Libya. On the same day, Libya-based Islamic State militants release a video depicting the beheading of twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Christians who had been kidnapped in the town of Sirte weeks earlier.

February 16, 2015: In retaliation for the slaughter of the Egyptian Copts, Egyptian fighter jets conduct a series of strikes against alleged Islamic State positions in Derna.

February 20, 2015: The Islamic State's Libyan branch claims responsibility for a series of suicide bombings that kill at least 45.

Map of Libya



Figure 1: Map of Libya

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 Hifter 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 its 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.

1. Introduction

On the night of 15 February 2011, a group of Libyan lawyers took to the streets of Benghazi, eastern Libya's largest city, to protest the arrest of a colleague. That man, Fathi Terbil, had seemingly been detained as punishment for choosing to represent "the relatives of about 1,200 men killed by Libyan security forces at Abu Salim prison in 1996".¹ Though the protest's initial focus was limited, the rally gained momentum as the lawyers made their way through Benghazi. Others who joined the demonstration echoed the calls and slogans of anti-regime protesters who had managed to topple longstanding authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt.² Libyan security forces and hired thugs quickly squelched the protests. But rather than extinguishing a dying ember, the regime's heavy-handed tactics instead ignited the flames of an anti-regime movement that rapidly spread. 15 February 2011 was the beginning of the end for Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

Exactly four years later, Libya again found itself in the international spotlight, but for a less hopeful reason. On 15 February 2015, a Libyan affiliate of the Islamic State (IS) — a jihadist group that has attracted international attention for conquering significant territory in Syria and Iraq, and subsequently declaring that it had established a caliphate — released a sordid new video. The video, which employed such slick special effects features as slow motion and aerial footage, showed IS militants marching a group of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians clad in orange jumpsuits along a Libyan beach. The Coptic hostages were forced to sit in the sand, as an English-speaking militant in battle fatigues announced that IS had come to Libya, declaring, "Oh people, recently you have seen us on the hills of al-Sham and Dabiq's plain, chopping off the heads that have been carrying the cross for a long time. Today, we are on the south of Rome, on the land of Islam, Libya, sending another message".³ The video concluded with IS militants simultaneously beheading the hostages before the video panned to a scene of the blood-soaked Mediterranean Sea.

This mass beheading sparked an uproar from the international community, including from Pope Francis. The day after the video's release, Egyptian fighter jets conducted a series of strikes against alleged IS positions, including training camps and ammunition depots, in the eastern city of Derna. (In reality, Egypt seemingly struck at Islamist and jihadist targets indiscriminately, not constraining its response to targets affiliated with the Islamic State.) Though Egypt had long played a hand in Libya's civil conflict, these strikes marked the first time that the Egyptian government publicly admitted its involvement.⁴

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) campaign to overthrow Qaddafi had radically transformed the country's political and security environment. Libyans hoped, as Qaddafi fell, that their revolution would usher in a new era of democratic governance and prosperity. Yet though the country has experienced some positive developments, the post-Qaddafi era has largely been characterised by civil conflict and sub-state violence.

After Qaddafi's fall, the central government was never able to demobilise and disarm the country's powerful militias, or fold these militias into the state's security structure.⁵ This left the government with a writ that not only

¹ Robert F. Worth, "On Libya's Revolutionary Road", *New York Times*, 30 March 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/03/magazine/mag-03Libya-t.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

² Ibid.

³ David Kirkpatrick and Rukmini Callimachi, "Islamic State Video Shows Beheadings of Egyptian Christians in Libya", *New York Times*, 15 February 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/16/world/middleeast/islamic-state-video-beheadings-of-21-egyptian-christians.html>.

⁴ Erin Cunningham and Heba Habib, "Egypt bombs Islamic State targets in Libya after beheading video", *Washington Post*, 16 February 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/egypt-bombs-islamic-state-targets-in-libya-after-brutal-beheading-video/2015/02/16/3b32c50c-b5b6-11e4-9423-f3d0a1ec335c_story.html.

⁵ A note on terminology describing armed factions in Libya: While much of the secondary literature on post-Qaddafi Libya refers to the armed factions that emerged during or after the 2011 uprising as *brigades*, this study calls them *militias*. The reason for our choice of terminology is that many of these armed factions are only loosely aligned with the Libyan state, and bear little resemblance to what Western readers would

failed to encompass the whole country, but actually shrunk over time, until the government could no longer exercise basic sovereign functions in its own capital. In April to May of 2013, for example, armed militias undertook a two-week siege of the foreign and justice ministries in Tripoli to pressure the parliament to pass a “political isolation” law that would restrict the government positions Qaddafi-era officials could hold.⁶ The equivalent for the United States (US) would be gunmen forcibly shutting down both the Department of Justice and Department State for a two-week period. And after Libya's 2014 election results met with armed resistance, as this study discusses later, the newly-elected parliament was unable to convene in Libya's capital city, instead being forced to relocate to the eastern city of Tobruk. In addition to the central government's powerlessness, large parts of the country became unsafe for average citizens as jihadist groups grew in power.

The reshuffling of Libya's political landscape and rise in substate violence contributed to growing polarisation along ideological, religious, tribal, and ethnic lines. Debates in the General National Congress (GNC), Libya's first elected legislative body, frequently devolved into contentious infighting. Rather than the 2013 seizure of the foreign and justice ministries in Tripoli being an aberration, on numerous occasions throughout 2013-14 armed militias allied with various political factions stormed and occupied the GNC and other government buildings, demanding political concessions.

Former Qaddafi-era military official Khalifa Hifter rose to prominence against this backdrop. Hifter, born in 1943, had participated in the 1969 coup that brought Qaddafi to power, and served in Qaddafi's military thereafter. Hifter turned against Qaddafi after being deployed for Qaddafi's ill-fated military adventure in Chad in the 1980s, where Hifter was held as a prisoner of war for seven months. This experience, particularly Qaddafi's denial of not only the conflict in Chad but also the existence of prisoners of war, turned Hifter against Qaddafi's regime.⁷ He defected from Qaddafi's forces and joined the Libyan National Army, a dissident group comprised of military defectors. The US supported the Libyan National Army during this period.

When the uprising against Qaddafi hit its strides in 2011, Hifter returned to Libya, hopeful that he could lead the rebel army. Leaders of the National Transitional Council (NTC), which was established by anti-Qaddafi rebel forces in Benghazi in February 2011, were suspicious of Hifter for various reasons, including his Qaddafi-era ties, his arrogance, and his apparent authoritarian leanings. They feared he would try to personally dominate a post-Qaddafi government.⁸ Thus, after Qaddafi's overthrow Hifter was overlooked for the position he coveted as the military's chief of staff. Denied power in the new government, Hifter agitated from the outside. Regardless of whether his reasons for doing so were more personal or principled, Hifter's voice found a growing audience due to the country's slide into chaos and the growing influence of extremist groups like Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL).

Following an abortive coup attempt in February 2014, Hifter launched a military campaign in May that he called Operation *Karama* (Dignity), which in his words was designed to “eliminate the terrorist movement”, first in Benghazi and later in all of Libya.⁹ The Operation Dignity campaign spoke to the fears and concerns of many Libyans. As Barak Barfi, a research fellow at the New America Foundation who has spent time in the country has written,

think of as brigades. The term *militia*, which suggests that armed factions are largely autonomous and operate outside the state's control, better reflects the current situation.

⁶ “Deal with former rebels ends Libya siege,” *Al Jazeera*, 12 May 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/05/201351261230257352.html>.

⁷ Barak Barfi, “Khalifa Haftar: Rebuilding Libya from the Top Down”, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, no. 22 (2014), p. 3, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote_22_BarakBarfi.pdf.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹ Sharif Abdel Kouddous, “A Q&A with Khalifa Hifter, the Mastermind behind Libya's New Revolt”, *Washington Post*, 20 May 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/05/20/a-qa-with-khalifa-hifter-the-mastermind-behind-libyas-new-revolt/>.

Hifter “has exploited Libyans’ anger at a paralysed government, as well as their insecurity and alarm about growing Islamic extremism”.¹⁰

While Hifter found little support for his attempted coup in February 2014, deteriorating security conditions in Benghazi enabled his May offensive to gain momentum quickly. Within days of Hifter announcing Operation Dignity, a variety of units from the Libyan army announced their support for his initiative. Frederic Wehrey, a researcher at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace who frequently conducts research in Libya, notes that Hifter’s supporters included “the Benghazi-based Saiqa; air force units operating from Gamal Abdul El Nasser Air Base near Tobruk; air force units at Benina, Benghazi’s dual-use airport; the Army of Barqa (Jaysh Barqa or Cyrenaica Defense Force); the Baraghitha tribal armed formations under the command of Ibrahim Waqwaq; ethnic Tabu fighters from the southern city of Kufra; and Tuareg in the southwest region of Ubari”.¹¹

Hifter’s Operation Dignity provoked enormous resistance, particularly as his coalition grew. Foremost among Dignity’s opponents were Libya’s Islamists — which was predictable, as Hifter promised to take on the country’s Islamists without distinguishing between political Islamist and jihadist factions.¹² Other factions that felt threatened by Hifter’s advance included militias based in the western coastal city of Misrata, which saw the Dignity offensive as a thinly-veiled attempt to shift the balance of power in Libya in favor of former Qaddafi officials. These Misratan militias had played a central role in Qaddafi’s overthrow, and thereafter benefitted from the post-revolution distribution of power, which often explicitly excluded old Qaddafi hands. On 13 July 2014, militias aligned with the Islamist-Misrata bloc launched attacks in Tripoli against militia factions from the western city of Zintan that had aligned themselves with Operation Dignity. This new offensive, known as Operation *Fajr* (Dawn), was comprised of a patchwork of actors that were hostile to Operation Dignity and unwilling to accept the results of the 25 June parliamentary elections, which resulted in significant losses for the Islamist-Misratan political bloc. Operation Dawn included the Misrata-based Libya Central Shield Force, Islamist-aligned militias from Tripoli, the Knights of Janzour militia, various Berber militias, and a brigade from the town of Zawiya (west of Tripoli) that was commanded by hardline salafist Sheikh Shaaban Hadiya.¹³

The Dawn-Dignity conflict quickly took on regional dimensions as various Middle Eastern powers took sides. Egypt backed Hifter’s forces, as it feared empowered Islamist violent non-state actors (VNSAs) in its neighbour and recognised that Hifter’s military campaign to undermine Libya’s Islamists aligned with Egyptian president Abdel Fattah El-Sisi’s own policies. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), also wary of political Islamism, similarly endorsed Operation Dignity and soon became directly involved in the military campaign. Conversely, Qatar and Turkey discreetly supported the Dawn coalition. What began as a local affair rapidly evolved into something of a proxy war.

This study provides a granular review of the competition that occurred in 2014 between the Operation Dignity and Dawn campaigns. It begins by examining the historical and political context in which the Dignity campaign emerged. Thereafter the study takes a detailed look at the kinetic activities of the Dignity and Dawn campaigns, examining the following distinct phases of their competition:

- The early months of the Operation Dignity offensive in Benghazi;

¹⁰ B. Barfi, *Khalifa Haftar* (2014), p. 1.

¹¹ Frederic Wehrey, *Ending Libya’s Civil War: Reconciling Politics, Rebuilding Security* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), p. 20, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ending_libya_civ_war.pdf.

¹² Christopher Blanchard, *Libya: Transition and U.S. Policy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014), p. 3, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33142.pdf>.

¹³ Wolfram Lacher and Peter Cole, *Politics by Other Means: Conflicting Interests in Libya’s Security Sector* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2014), p. 51, <http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/F-Working-papers/SAS-SANA-WP20-Libya-Security-Sector.pdf>.

- The month-long Operation Dawn campaign in Tripoli, which culminated in the destruction of the city's airport and the withdrawal of Zintani militias from the capital in late 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 as of this writing.

After examining the Dignity and Dawn campaigns, the report then assesses the broader implications of the Operation Dawn-Dignity conflict for Libya and the surrounding region, and examines the policy implications for U.S. and European policymakers.

This report relies heavily on regional press reporting, including Arabic-language sources that have often been underutilised by Western analysts. Although social media usage is less prominent in the Libya conflict than it is Syria and Iraq, we have cross-referenced regional media reporting against social media sources to corroborate reported information, as well as to develop a more detailed look at developments on the ground. The report also utilises reliable secondary sources, such as think tank studies, to provide historical and social context. However, there are certain limitations to existing sources of information. For one, the Libyan press is still in a nascent stage, and its reporting often contains factual inaccuracies and unsubstantiated rumors. Moreover, some Libyan and regional news outlets have taken a biased stance in their reporting, having aligned themselves with one faction or another. We have attempted to specify areas where there are factual question marks, but these limitations on our sourcing should be understood.

The conflict in Libya is certain to have vast consequences. Although commentators maintain very different interpretations of the goals and ambitions of the various actors that comprise Dawn and Dignity, it is clear that jihadist groups have been able to capitalise on Libya's instability. Some of the consequences of Libya's chaos can be felt in the spillover into such neighbouring countries as Tunisia and Egypt. It is possible that within the next year Western officials will end up debating whether they should provide military assistance to Operation Dignity forces. There would be both benefits and also costs to doing so, and this study concludes by discussing this policy question.

2. NATO's Intervention to Overthrow Qaddafi

Rather than being a US-led intervention, NATO's campaign in Libya — first to protect anti-Qaddafi protesters, and later to overthrow Qaddafi — was largely prompted by European allies of the US. Indeed, one Obama administration official famously described the American role in the conflict as “leading from behind”.¹⁴

The Obama administration was initially skeptical about undertaking a military intervention in Libya when Qaddafi began to confront the uprising against his regime in early 2011. Qaddafi himself helped to make the case for Western intervention unintentionally by making proclamations worthy of a James Bond villain as his military moved to crack down. Some of Qaddafi's more outlandish statements included exhorting his followers to cleanse the streets of “the greasy rats” who opposed him, and referring glowingly to China's 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama's Foreign Policy,” *New Yorker*, May 2, 2011.

¹⁵ “Defiant Qaddafi Vows to Die as Martyr, Fight Revolt,” *Reuters*, 22 February 2011; Ian Black, “Qaddafi Urges Violent Showdown and Tells Libya ‘I’ll Die a Martyr’,” *The Guardian*, 22 February 2011.

Christopher S. Chivvis, a senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, explains that at the time two major arguments existed within the Obama administration for military intervention.¹⁶ The first was humanitarian: the concern that, if he wasn't stopped, Qaddafi would slaughter a large number of Libyan citizens. The second argument related to the "Arab Spring" uprisings that were transforming the region: some US policymakers believed that if they supported the Libyan population in its anti-Qaddafi uprising, they could deter other authoritarian regimes from slaughtering their own citizens. Additionally, a third often overlooked rationale for intervening in Libya concerned the Obama administration's view that the region's democratic uprisings would deliver a mortal blow to al Qaeda and global jihadism. Early in the Arab Spring, US analysts overwhelmingly believed that the revolutionary events were devastating to al Qaeda and other jihadists because they undermined its narrative and could remove the underlying grievances that drew people to jihadism.¹⁷

Though the arguments for intervention failed to persuade the majority of the Obama administration's decision-makers initially, a couple of developments in March 2011 prompted a reversal in the administration's thinking. One development was the rapid advances made by Qaddafi's forces, as they succeeded in "pushing rebels out of the oil port of Ras Lanuf on March 11 and crushing the uprising in Zawiyah".¹⁸ Having secured their hold over both Ras Lanuf and Zawiyah, Qaddafi's forces marched on Benghazi, which served as the base of operations for the NTC, Libya's rebel-appointed government. Qaddafi's battlefield victories resulted in a second major change: alarmed by developments, the Arab League issued a statement asking the United Nations (UN) Security Council to immediately impose a no-fly zone over Libya to protect civilians.¹⁹ The combination of Qaddafi's advances and the Arab League vote helped swing the administration's preferences toward military action.

The US pushed for a stronger Security Council resolution than previously considered, and the resolution's passage paved the way for NATO's intervention. Once NATO got involved, it didn't take long for Qaddafi to fall from power, and ultimately meet his gruesome end. Tripoli fell to rebels in August 2011, and Qaddafi was found by rebels, beaten, and shot to death on 20 October.

But if the military defeat of Qaddafi's regime was relatively efficient, building a democratic government — indeed, *any* kind of central government — out of the ashes of his authoritarian state proved far more difficult. The NTC continued to serve as Libya's provisional government for ten months after Qaddafi's fall, until it handed over control to the General National Congress (GNC) following a July 2012 election. Subsequent steps to strengthen the democratic process in Libya included the passage of a law in July 2013 that established elections for a Constituent Assembly, which would then draft Libya's first post-Qaddafi constitution. But such positive steps were overshadowed by the fact that both legislative bodies suffered from a lack of legitimacy and authority. Politicians and militia leaders across Libya established their own fiefdoms that were largely independent of the Tripoli-based national government.

¹⁶ Christopher S. Chivvis, Kindle ed., *Toppling Qaddafi: Libya and the Limits of Liberal Intervention* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), loc. 1143 of 6472.

¹⁷ For their own part, jihadist strategists expected that, rather than undermining the movement, the revolutionary events would yield significant advantages for it. See Ayman al-Zawahiri, "And be Neither Weakened nor Saddened", *Al-Sahab Media*, 15 August 2011; Hamzah bin Muhammad al-Bassam, "Heeding the Advantages and Lessons of the Two Uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia", *Ansar Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah*, 25 February 2011; Hani al-Siba'i, "The Release of Prisoners After Nearly Twenty Years of Injustice", *Ansar Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah*, 23 February 2011; Atiyatallah Abd al-Rahman, "The People's Revolt... The Fall of Corrupt Arab Regimes... The Demolition of the Idol of Stability... and the New Beginning", distributed by the Global Islamic Media Front, 16 February 2011; Hamid bin Abdallah al-Ali, "The Joy Lies in the Harvest of the Two Revolutions", posted on al-Ali's official website, 15 February 2011. For a comprehensive review of early salafi jihadist perceptions of the impact the Arab Uprisings would have on the movement, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Tara Vassefi, "Perceptions of the 'Arab Spring' Within the Salafi-Jihadi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35 (2012), pp. 831-48.

¹⁸ Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi*, loc. 1223 of 6472.

¹⁹ Richard Leiby and Muhammad Mansour, "Arab League Asks U.N. for No-Fly Zone Over Libya", *Washington Post*, 12 March 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/arab-league-asks-un-for-no-fly-zone-over-libya/2011/03/12/ABoieOR_story.html.

In Misrata, for example, officials operated the city's seaport without consultation from Tripoli. Municipal elections in cities and towns often carried more weight than national elections.

Qaddafi's fall also ushered in a wave of players who had been marginalised under Qaddafi's regime, including Libya's political Islamists. For decades, Qaddafi's security forces cracked down on Islamists, imprisoning thousands in Tripoli's infamous Abu Salim prison.²⁰ Suppression of Islamists intensified after the emergence of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), a jihadist group headed by Libyan veterans of the Afghan-Soviet war who launched a campaign aimed at overthrowing Qaddafi in 1990.²¹ But Qaddafi's fall cleared the way for Islamists to enter the political realm. In the years since his regime was overthrown, Islamist parties — including the Muslim Brotherhood-allied Justice and Construction Party (JCP) and the salafist Al-Watan party — have established themselves as important players. Among the Islamists who have tried their hand at politics are former members of the LIFG, such as Abdelhakim Bilhadj, who claim to have rejected violence in favour of integration into the political system. Many observers doubt that this rejection of violence is genuine, and as this report's subsequent discussion of Bilhadj makes clear, in his case the critics have a point.

Political instability and civil conflict have also eroded the Libyan economy. The anti-Qaddafi uprising and NATO's military campaign didn't significantly damage Libya's economic infrastructure, and oil production quickly returned to pre-uprising levels following Qaddafi's fall.²² But production plunged in September 2013 after federalist militias led by Ibrahim Jathran seized control of eastern oil terminals, demanding greater political autonomy and a larger share of oil revenue.²³ Though oil production increased again in April 2014 after Jathran agreed to lift his blockade, oil production and revenue has fluctuated ever since and remains vulnerable to political instability.²⁴

Setbacks in the oil industry exposed structural issues that plague the Libyan economy. Libya's oil production had long masked the country's deep-rooted economic deficiencies, and the country's inability to continue to depend on this source of income brought to the fore the full legacy of the Qaddafi regime's economic failures, including a corrupt public bureaucracy, a weak private sector, and excessive subsidisation of basic consumer goods.²⁵

3. The Operation Dignity Coalition Emerges

The Operation Dignity coalition's emergence resulted from Khalifa Hifter's months-long barnstorming campaign to garner support for his movement in eastern Libya. In the year leading up to his May 2014 offensive, Hifter cultivated relationships with such influential eastern Libyan tribes as the Ubaydat, Awaqir and Baraghitha.²⁶ Hifter was also able to tap into networks he had established in the nascent Libyan army, and received financial support from Libyan

²⁰ Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, "In Post-Gadhafi Libya, Islamists Start To Rise", *NPR*, 3 January 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/03/144586903/in-post-gadhafi-libya-islamists-start-to-rise>.

²¹ Ian Black, "The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group—From al-Qaida to the Arab Spring", *The Guardian*, 5 September 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/05/libyan-islamic-fighting-group-leaders>.

²² Christopher Chivvis and Jeffrey Martini, *Libya after Qaddafi: Lessons and Implications for the Future* (Santa Monica, US: The RAND Corporation, 2014), p. 55.

²³ Clifford Krauss, "In Libya, Unrest Brings Oil Industry to Standstill", *New York Times*, 13 September 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/13/world/africa/in-libya-unrest-brings-oil-industry-to-standstill.html>.

²⁴ Feras Bosalum and Ulf Laessing, "East Libyan Rebels to End Oil Port Blockage within Days: Senior Leader", *Reuters*, 1 April 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/east-libyan-rebels-agree-end-oil-port-blockage-201341924.html>.

²⁵ Peter Kenyon, "Libya's Economy Faces New Tests after Gadhafi Era", *NPR*, 14 November 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/11/14/142289603/libya-economy-faces-new-tests-after-gadhafi-era>.

²⁶ Wehrey, *Ending Libya's Civil War*, p. 20.

businessmen concerned about the influence of Islamist militias.²⁷ As a result, by the onset of the May offensive, sources in the Libyan military believed that Hifter had already established forces “worthy of a professional army”.²⁸ One reason many Libyan military and security personnel were eager to back Hifter is that they had become a primary target of jihadist violence. For example, a large number of incidents targeted security personnel in the first eight days of March 2014 alone:

- On 1 March, gunmen killed the head of Sirte’s military council in a drive-by shooting;
- On 2 March, an explosive device planted in special forces soldier Amran al-Ubaydi’s car in Benghazi killed him²⁹;
- On 2 March, former security officer al-Tuwati Ali al-Urfi was seriously injured when unknown gunmen tried to assassinate him in Benghazi;
- On 2 March, two members of the Libyan army in Tripoli were fired upon and injured;
- On 3 March, masked gunmen in Benghazi shot to death a member of Libya’s Rapid Intervention Force named Abd-al-Salam Nuri Hamad;
- On 5 March, the son of Special Forces commander Wanis Abu Khamadah was released following his kidnapping;
- On 7 March, military police NCO Abd-al-Rahim Adam Abu Bakr al-Ubaydi was assassinated in Benghazi;
- On 8 March, an army roadblock 25 km east of Derna was rocked by an explosion;
- On 8 March, a former security officer was assassinated by unknown gunmen in Benghazi.

Hifter’s unyielding promise to eliminate Benghazi’s jihadist factions offered an alternative to this lawlessness that victimised the security forces. Further, Hifter promised to rectify what military forces saw as a growing imbalance in the allocation of resources between official Libyan army forces and militia groups. Libyan military officials took a dim view of the militias’ capabilities and professionalism, and felt that state policies such as salary structure and the provision of military ranks to revolutionary commanders encouraged the militias’ growth.

Member	Description	Date the member announced it joined Dignity (all dates in 2014)
Benina Air Base unit	Benghazi-based air force unit	16 May
Gomaa al-Abbani	Commander-in-chief of Libyan air force	19 May
Gamal Abdul El Nasser Air Base unit	Tobruk-based Libyan air force unit	19 May
Saiqa Special Forces Unit	Benghazi-based special forces group, led by Wanis Bukhamada	19 May

²⁷ Abd-al Sattar Hatitah, “Quwat Hifter tatajaawaz 70 alf jundi bayn muhtarefeen wa-judud rafi’i al-tadreeb”, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 19 June 2014, <http://aawsat.com/home/article/120721>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Libyan Special Forces Soldier Killed in Eastern Benghazi City”, *WAL News Agency* (Tripoli), 2 March, 2014.

Brigade No. 25/Ahmed al-Shareef Brigade	Brigade in charge of security at the Sarir and Messla oil fields in southern Libya	8 June
Husayn al-Juwayfi Battalion	Bayda-based security battalion	Prior to 29 July
Isa al-Wakwak Battalion	Baraghitha tribe militia faction based in Marj and led by Ibrahim Waqwaq	Prior to 29 July
Al-Suqur Battalion	Marj-based battalion affiliated with Ibrahim Jathran's Barqah Army	Prior to 29 July
204 Tank Battalion	Benghazi-based Tank unit	15 November

Table 1: Members of the Operation Dignity Coalition

In addition to the support he derived from the Libyan military, Hifter found several other sources of support for his movement in the early days. One was ordinary citizens fed up with the collapse of Libya's rule of law and the domination of extremist militias. Illustrating these concerns, following a number of attacks against security forces, foreigners (including tourists), religious minorities (especially Egyptian Coptic Christians), and journalists, a 7 March 2014 rally in front of Benghazi's Tibesti Hotel demanded the deployment of "revolutionaries" into the streets to protect the people. Some of the demonstrators explicitly supported Hifter.³⁰

Hifter also sought to win the backing of outside states by portraying Operation Dignity as a bulwark against the encroachment of jihadist and Islamist groups. This appealed in particular to Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime in Egypt, which adopted a hardline approach to these issues. Indeed, Hifter has openly supported Sisi, and stressed his commonalities with the Egyptian strongman.³¹

Hifter launched his Operation Dignity offensive on 16 May 2014 in Benghazi. Two days later, the al-Qa'qa and Sawa'iq militias from Zintan raided the GNC and declared that the legislative body had been dissolved. Following the raid, an Operation Dignity spokesman declared that the constituent assembly that had been elected in 2014 to draft Libya's constitution would take the GNC's place. Militias based in Misrata were quick to react, moving toward the capital to defend their political allies in the GNC.

Though this brazen attack threatened to escalate the conflict in Libya, Hifter and his allies achieved one of their key political objectives by seizing control of the legislative body, as that move forced the GNC to announce a new round of parliamentary elections. Before that, the scheduling of new elections had been highly contentious. The GNC was narrowly divided between a coalition generally described as nationalist (Mahmoud Jibril's National Forces Alliance) and a rival coalition that included such Islamist factions as the hardline salafist al-Wafa bloc.³² The Islamist/Berber/Misratan bloc, which had gained control of the GNC, sought to delay elections after the expiration of the GNC's term in February 2014 — and a new round of elections was only set after the raid against the GNC.

³⁰ "Libyans in Benghazi Demonstrate, Call on Revolutionaries to Protect City", *Al-Tadamun* (Benghazi), 7 March 2014.

³¹ Safaa Saleh, "Hifter Supports Role for Egyptian Army in Libyan Conflict", *Al-Monitor*, 6 July 2014.

³² Andrew Engel and Ayman Grada, "Libya's Other Battle", *Policy Watch* (Washington Institute for Near East Policy), 28 July 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/libyas-other-battle>.

It is worthwhile at this point examining the fault lines of conflict in Libya. Though the country's divisions are often described as primarily Islamist versus nationalist, they in fact reflect several deeper divides. Other factors at play include ethnic, tribal, and regional tensions, as well as a clash between so-called revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces. All of these conflicting allegiances and identities were intensified by an intensifying competition for resources among factions vying for a stake in Libya's post-revolutionary future.

The primary geographic conflict is between Zintan and Misrata. During the Qaddafi era, the Zintanis maintained close ties with two tribes, the Warfalla and the Qadhadhfa, that were closely allied with the regime. As such, Zintan was long perceived as a "regime stronghold".³³ As with all generalisations, this perception wasn't universally accurate: despite the benefits Zintan received, many Zintanis "remained rather critical of Qaddafi and his Jamahiriya state", and some even took part in a 1993 coup attempt.³⁴ The Misratans and Zintanis put aside their differences during the anti-Qaddafi uprising, and both cities played important roles in bringing down the regime. But after the war the rivalry between the two cities re-emerged, fueled by Misratan accusations that Zintanis colluded with the Qaddafi regime during the war and failed to bear an equal burden during the conflict.³⁵ The power vacuum that emerged after Qaddafi's fall further exacerbated the rivalry. Misratan and Zintani forces tried to claim as much territory as possible in Tripoli, carving the capital into rival strongholds. Misratan forces gained Tripoli's seaport, while Zintanis seized the main airport.³⁶ Minor skirmishes frequently occurred between Zintani and Misratan factions in Tripoli.

The Zintani militias' practice of recruiting from the ranks of Qaddafi-era security brigades to bolster their capabilities also drew the ire of Misratan revolutionaries. After gaining control of key territories in Tripoli, Zintani militia leaders began recruiting from a variety of defunct forces previously affiliated with Qaddafi, including the 32nd Brigade, which had been considered one of the most capable and well-trained brigades in Qaddafi's forces, and the Maghawir Brigade, a predominantly Tuareg unit. Zintanis also recruited from the population of Bani Walid, which had long been considered a bastion of pro-Qaddafi support.³⁷

The conflict between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary factions long centered on whether Libya should pass a political isolation law to exclude former Qaddafi officials from positions in government. The Islamist bloc in the GNC has aligned itself with actors who consider themselves *thuwwar* (revolutionaries), and upon gaining the upper hand in parliament, that coalition proposed a political isolation law. The GNC also established an Integrity and Reform Commission for the armed forces in June 2013 to identify and exclude members of the military who had been involved in Qaddafi's efforts to crush the revolution.³⁸ Both of these policies were highly exclusionary, as the political isolation law that Libya passed prevented anyone who had held even a mid-level role in the Qaddafi regime between 1969 and 2011 from serving in a wide array of positions in politics, the media, and academia.³⁹ But debate over the political isolation law's merits took a back seat to facts on the ground: as described earlier, revolutionary militias stormed government buildings in April-May 2013, occupying Libya's foreign and justice ministries for weeks,

³³ Peter Cole and Brian McQuinn, *The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³⁴ Dario Cristiani, *The Zintan Militia and the Fragmented Libyan State* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2012), p. 3.

³⁵ Patrick Markey and Aziz el Yaakoubi, "Town vs. Town, Faction vs. Faction as Libya Descends into 'Hurricane'", *Reuters*, 1 August 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/08/01/uk-libya-security-insight-idUKKBN0G023820140801>.

³⁶ Chivvis and Martini, *Libya after Qaddafi*, p. 16.

³⁷ Lacher and Cole, *Politics by Other Means*, p. 85.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 26.

³⁹ Roman David and Houda Mzioudet, *Personnel Change or Personal Change?: Rethinking Libya's Political Isolation Law* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2014), p. 5, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2014/03/17-libya-lustration-david-mzioudet/lustration-in-libya-english.pdf>.

and thus pressuring the GNC into passing the law.⁴⁰ In Zintan this law was seen “as an attempt by Misrata to replace key state personnel with figures loyal to the city”.⁴¹

Although Hifter has characterised his offensive primarily as anti-Islamist, there are obvious echoes of both the Zintan-Misrata rivalry and also the revolutionary-counterrevolutionary divide. For some factions who found themselves excluded from post-revolution patronage networks, Hifter's campaign offered an opportunity to recover political power — including for a number of military units disillusioned by the GNC's lustration policies and fearful that they would be increasingly excluded by the revolutionary bloc. Some tribes aligned with Hifter had also been accused of sympathising with the Qaddafi regime, particularly the Warfalla. The involvement of former Qaddafi allies and officials in the Dignity campaign led the revolutionary bloc to portray Hifter's movement as a counter-revolutionary initiative aimed at reversing the gains of the 2011 uprising.

Similarly, rivalries between the Tebu and Tuareg ethnic groups in the southern town of Ubari in the Fezzan region overlapped with national-level tensions. The Ahmed al-Shareef Brigade (also known as Brigade No. 25), which was largely Tebu, announced its support for Operation Dignity on 8 June, while Tuareg forces allied with the Misratan/Islamist coalition later attempted to seize control of Tebu-held oil fields in Ubari.⁴²

Thus, the role of religion in society is an important division between the two sides in Libya's civil war, but not the only one. The “anti-Islamist” bloc in fact lacks a central unifying ideology regarding the role of religion within the state. Conversely, the Islamist bloc includes actors, such as many Misratan militias, who do not have the same agenda as its salafist groups. This report now turns to the armed struggle between these two competing factions.

4. Operation Dignity Clashes: 16 May through July

At the outset of Hifter's offensive, significant parts of Benghazi were in the hands of Islamist militias. The three major militias in the city, Rafallah al-Sahati, Ansar al-Sharia (ASL), and the 17 February Martyrs Brigade, controlled much of southwestern Benghazi, including the neighborhoods of Hawari, Qawarsha, Qunfoudah and Sidi Faraj. ASL and the other Islamist militias also maintained a stronghold in the al-Laithi district. The headquarters of the Libya Shield One Brigade (also known as the Libya al-Hurrah Battalion), led by Islamist commander Wissam bin Hamid, was located in the Tika district in southern Benghazi.⁴³

The headquarters of Hifter's campaign was located in Benina airport, on the eastern outskirts of the city. The Dignity-aligned Saiqa forces, led by Wanis Bukhamada, had a number of bases inside Benghazi, including a main base in Bu'atni district. But the majority of Operation Dignity forces were located on the outer reaches of the city, and were thus forced to push their way into Islamist strongholds inside the city. Thus Hifter's exclusive monopoly over airpower in Benghazi proved critical to the Dignity campaign. Saqr Geroushi, a Libyan air force commander who defected to Operation Dignity and became the commander of Hifter's air force, has said that Operation Dignity possessed twelve total aircraft: eight MiG fighter jets and four Mi25 attack helicopters.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Chivvis and Martini, *Libya after Qaddafi*, p. 46.

⁴¹ “Zintan's Tribal Alliance against Misrata Raises Civil Conflict Risks in Libya”, *IHS Global Insight*, 8 July 2013, <https://www.ihs.com/country-industry-forecasting.html?ID=1065980899>.

⁴² “Libya: Tebu Brigade Combining Petroleum Facilities Guards, Border Guards Joins ‘Operation Dignity’”, *Libya Herald*, 8 June 2014 (describing Brigade No. 25's support for Hifter); Jamal Adel, “Libya: Fighting Erupts Between Tribal Militias in Awbari”, *Libya Herald*, 17 September 2014 (reporting later Tuareg attack on the Tebu-held Sharara oil field).

⁴³ “Ra'ees al-arkaan ya'mer silaah al-jaw bi-mane' ayy taharrok li-quwwat Hifter”, *Quryna al-Jadida*, 16 May 2014.

⁴⁴ Mary Fitzgerald, “Libyan Renegade General Khalifa Haftar Claims He is Winning His War”, *The Guardian*, 24 June 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/24/libyan-renegade-general-khalifa-haftar-war>.

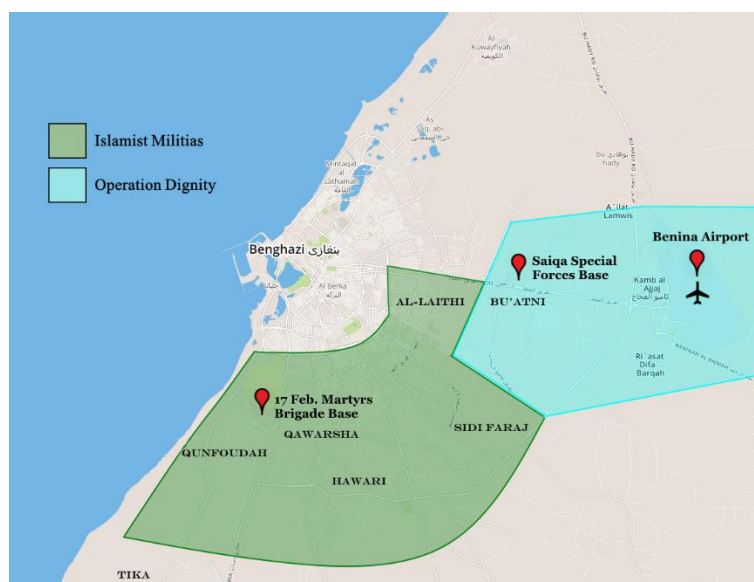


Figure 2: Geographic breakdown of Benghazi, 16 May 2014. (Source: Valens Global)

The Dignity campaign commenced in Benghazi on 16 May with two days of air strikes against Islamist strongholds in the southern and southwestern parts of the city. The majority of strikes were launched from the Benina airport. Airstrikes reportedly hit the 17 February Martyrs Brigade headquarters in Hawari district, along with bases controlled by the Rafallah al-Sahati militia and ASL. Strikes also occurred in the southern Benghazi districts of Qar Yunus and Tika.⁴⁵ As Dignity air force units continued to bombard parts of the city, Hifter spokesman Muhammad al-Hijazi, a former member of Qaddafi's army, called on residents of targeted neighbourhoods to evacuate in order to minimise civilian casualties.⁴⁶ Hifter's forces were subsequently

accused of carrying out indiscriminate air strikes, and causing significant damage to civilian residences and other non-military locations.⁴⁷

A ground assault by Hifter's forces complemented the air strikes, with 6,000 troops reportedly pushing toward Islamist-controlled checkpoints and clashing with Islamist forces in the Sidi Faraj district, which was adjacent to the Benina neighbourhood where the majority of Operation Dignity forces were based.⁴⁸ Clashes also broke out around the cement factory in Hawari district, which was controlled by ASL forces.⁴⁹ Saiqa Special Forces units also skirmished near the Saiqa main headquarters in Bu'atni with ASL forces who were attempting to advance towards Hifter's Benina stronghold.⁵⁰ On the night of 17 May unknown gunmen, likely affiliated with Operation Dignity, attacked a radio station run by ASL in the Al-Laithi district, igniting what would become an ongoing battle between Benghazi Islamists and Operation Dignity to control the flow of information.⁵¹ At least seventy individuals were believed killed in the first two days of clashes, which were among the most lethal days of fighting in the early months of Operation Dignity.

The launch of Operation Dignity prompted condemnations from many politicians and officials in Tripoli. Major General Abd-al-Salam al-Ubaydi, Libya's Chief of Staff, called the operation "illegitimate" and accused Hifter of trying "to take control of Benghazi and stage a coup". A Libyan Muslim Brotherhood official accused Prime Minister Abdallah al-Thinni's interim government and foreign actors of bearing responsibility for Hifter's offensive, alluding to

⁴⁵ "Ra'ees al-arkaan ya'mer silaah al-jaw bi-mane' ayy taharrok li-quwwat Hifter", *Quryna al-Jadida*, 16 May 2014.

⁴⁶ "Hiftar wa-ansaarahu yuwaaseloun al-harb 'ela al-musallaheen... wa-Tarabulus ta'alim hathr al-tayraan fawq Bengazi", *Al-Watan*, 17 May 2014.

⁴⁷ Fitzgerald, "Libyan Renegade General Khalifa Haftar Claims He is Winning", 2014.

⁴⁸ Chris Stephen, "Heavy Fighting Breaks out in Libya as Troops Storm Militias in Benghazi" *The Guardian*, 16 May 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/16/heavy-fighting-libya-troops-storm-militias-benghazi> (reporting that there were 6,000 troops); "Ishtibaakat 'aneefa fi Beghazi tu'adee bi-'asharaat al-qatlaa wal-jarhaa", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 16 May 2014.

⁴⁹ Aimen Majeed and Moutaz Ahmed, "Haftar Launches Benghazi Attack on Islamists", *Libya Herald*, 17 May 2014.

⁵⁰ Salem al-Ubaydi, "Al-saa'eqa 21 tassid ratlan tabe'aan li-ansaar al-sharee'a", *Al-Wasat*, 18 May 2014.

⁵¹ "Majhouloun yastahdefoon idhaa'a taabe'a li-ansaar al-sharee'a sharq Benghazi", *Al-Tadamum*, 17 May 2014.

rumours that Egypt had supported Hifter's offensive.⁵² A similar condemnation came from the Al-Watan political party, which vowed to go to war against Hifter.⁵³ Even Abdallah al-Thinni, who would later voice support for Hifter's offensive, described Operation Dignity as an attempt to carry out a coup and called on Libyan security forces to bring order.⁵⁴ But al-Thinni's directive was overtaken by events on the ground, as the majority of Libyan army units located in Benghazi had already aligned themselves with Hifter, while police units in the city had effectively dissolved months before after being battered by an Islamist-led assassination campaign.

Following the initial two-day barrage of attacks launched by Hifter, Benghazi settled into an uneasy period of calm. Hifter's forces temporarily withdrew from some contested neighbourhoods.⁵⁵ In a 20 May interview with *Washington Post*, Hifter described the withdrawal of Dignity forces from these neighbourhoods as a "military pause" that would allow his troops to regroup and launch a second assault.⁵⁶ Hifter also explained that Islamist fighters had retreated to residential areas, thus forcing Dignity forces to slow the pace of air strikes and adopt a more disciplined approach to avoid civilian casualties.⁵⁷

During this operational pause, Hifter gained several new allies. An air force commander from the Tobruk air base in eastern Libya and forces affiliated with militia leader Ibrahim Jathran officially declared their support for Operation Dignity.⁵⁸ Wanis Bukhamada and the Saiqa forces also declared their support for Operation Dignity, although this declaration was nothing more than a formality, given that Hifter had recruited Bukhamada prior to the commencement of the operation.⁵⁹ A few days after Bukhamada's statement, Colonel Goma al-Abbani, the top commander of the Libyan air force, announced his support for Operation Dignity, thereby solidifying Dignity's air power supremacy.⁶⁰ The offensive also elicited an outpouring of public support from many Libyan citizens. On 19 May, residents of Tripoli's Fashloun District marched in support of Dignity and issued a statement asking other forces to back the offensive against "terrorist groups".⁶¹ Days later, hundreds of protesters congregated in Tripoli's Martyrs Square and in Benghazi to express their support for Operation Dignity. Hifter pointed to such public displays as evidence that the public had given him a "mandate".⁶²

This message framing was part of a broader effort by Hifter to address challenges to his movement's legitimacy. Hifter's offensive had occurred without the imprimatur of Libya's elected legislative body, so he recast the patchwork of militias that joined the Operation Dignity offensive as part of the newly-formed Libyan National Army (LNA), recycling the name of the dissident military force that Hifter had commanded after defecting from the Qaddafi regime in the 1980s. Another part of Hifter's message framing involved emphasising the state's lack of capacity. But at the same time, the credibility of the Dignity campaign was challenged by accusations that Hifter was using the

⁵² Ahmad al-Masri, "Ishtibakat 'aneefa fi Benghazi tu'adee bi'asharaat al-qatlaa wal-jarhaa, ra'ees wuzaraa' Leebyaa: hujoum al-liwaa' Hifter inqeelab 'ala al-shar'eeya, anbaa' 'an qiyaam qa'ed al-'amaliya bi-ziyarat masr wal-imaaraat...wa-'ilaaqatahu bi-qadhaaf al-dam qaweeya", *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 16 May 2014, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=168995>.

⁵³ Hasan Salman, "Qiyaadi bi-hizb al-watan al-leebee: musta'edoun li-khawdh harb jadeeda lil-dafe' 'an al-thawra", *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 20 May 2014, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=170350>.

⁵⁴ "'Asharaat al-qatlaa wal-jarhaa bi-ishtibakaat bi-Benghazi 'aqb qasf al-taa'ira", *Akhbarak*, 16 May 2014.

⁵⁵ "Hathr jawwee fawq Benghazi wal-sulutaat al-leebeeya ta'lin taharrok Hifter muhaawilat inqilaab", *Radio Sawa*, 18 May 2014.

⁵⁶ Abdel Kouddous, "A Q&A with Khalifa Hifter", 2014.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ "Libyan Air Force Base Joins Renegade General in Benghazi Offensive", *Al-Akhar*, 19 May 2014 (describing air force commander joining Operation Dignity). Ibrahim Jathran's declaration of support was posted on Facebook.

⁵⁹ Moutaz Ahmed, "Benghazi's Saiqa Special Forces Join Hifter's 'Dignity Operation'", *Libya Herald*, 19 May 2014.

⁶⁰ "Top Libyan Commander Joins Rebel Forces", *Al Jazeera*, 21 May 2014.

⁶¹ "Tripoli District Residents Express Support for Army Against 'Terrorists'", *Libya Al-Ahrar TV*, 19 May 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=653863191329442>.

⁶² Ali Shu'ayb, "Hifter ya'ataber tadhaahoraat al-jum'a tafweedhaan li-mukaafahaat al-irhaab fi-Leebyaa", *Al-Hayah*, 25 May 2014.

offensive to elevate his political standing. Hifter's equivocation on the issue of his political ambitions provided fodder for critics who charged that Operation Dignity was a thinly-veiled power grab.⁶³

Islamist forces in Benghazi retaliated against Hifter by firing Grad rockets at Benina Airport.⁶⁴ Reports on social media also indicated that ASL forces were setting up anti-aircraft weapons to counter Dignity's air advantage. ASL also released a couple of public statements, one of which accused Hifter of launching a war "against the application of the *sharia* [Islamic law]", and another that accused Hifter's forces of striking the homes of innocent civilians. These statements set the tone for ASL's propaganda strategy, as the jihadist group portrayed itself as defending the faith and protecting the people of Benghazi. Hifter's campaign also elicited a response from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which condemned Operation Dignity as a foreign-backed conspiracy aimed at perpetuating the "Crusader project".⁶⁵

Fighting further intensified in Benghazi on 23 May, when Islamist militias fired rockets at the headquarters of the Saiqa Special Forces unit. One rocket missed, crashing into a home and wounding twenty people.⁶⁶ On 26 May, Islamist forces shelled Benina air base from positions in Sidi Faraj, which would become a highly strategic area for Islamist forces due to its proximity to Hifter's Benina headquarters.⁶⁷ The ability of Islamist militias to move in and out of residential areas while sustaining artillery fire bedeviled Dignity forces.

Islamist militias also escalated assassination attempts against Libyan military officials and other Benghazi figures suspected of aligning with Operation Dignity. On the night of 21 May, a military official in Benghazi was shot twice in an assassination attempt. Two days later, Benghazi security forces discovered the body of the deputy chief of military intelligence, who had been kidnapped in early May.⁶⁸ Islamist militias also targeted members of Libyan civil society. On 26 May, they assassinated Meftah Bouzid, a respected journalist who had been a vocal critic of extremist groups.⁶⁹ The most widely publicised assassination came on 26 June, when unknown gunmen raided the home of noted human rights activist Salwa Bugaighis and shot her dead.⁷⁰

The LNA began to focus on cutting off supply routes used by Islamist forces to bring weapons into Benghazi, targeting supply routes from Derna and other coastal cities such as Ajdabiya and Sirte.⁷¹ The LNA also restarted its air strikes on 28 May.⁷² Over the next few days, LNA jets struck Islamist positions in southern Benghazi, including a palace that LNA officials claimed was being used by ASL as a base.⁷³

But despite the LNA's air advantage, Islamist militias had a more robust presence on the ground in Benghazi, and the LNA often found itself confined to the Benina air base. Islamist forces were able to concentrate indirect fire on and launch massed attacks against the bases in Benghazi under the control of Dignity-aligned units. For example,

⁶³ For examples of Hifter's equivocations, see Khalid Mahmud, "Hifter: hadafunaa tandheef Leebyaa min al-ikhwaan al-muslimeen", *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 20 May 2014, <http://aawsat.com/home/article/100236>; Barfi, *Khalifa Haftar*, 2014, p. 7.

⁶⁴ "Suqout thalaathat sawareekh Grad 'ala qaa'edat Beneenaa al-jawwiya doun wuqou' adhraar", *WAL News Agency*, 19 May, 2014.

⁶⁵ Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, "Statement in Support of Our People in Libya", 27 May 2014.

⁶⁶ "Rocket Attack Wounds 20 in Libya's Benghazi", *Daily Star*, 23 May 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/May-23/257551-rocket-attack-wounds-20-in-libyas-benghazi.ashx>.

⁶⁷ "Missile Attack Forces Further Closure of Libya's Benina Airport", *Libya Herald*, 26 May 2014.

⁶⁸ Ayman Amzayn, "Assistant Commander of Military Intelligence Murdered in Benghazi", *Libya Herald*, 23 May 2014.

⁶⁹ "Libyan Journalist Gunned Down in Benghazi", *Agence France Presse*, 26 May 2014.

⁷⁰ Jon Lee Anderson, "A Death in Benghazi: Salwa Bugaighis", *New Yorker*, 26 June 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/a-death-in-benghazi-salwa-bugaighis>.

⁷¹ Nurah Ibrahim, "Hifter Forces Carrying Out Reconnaissance Missions over Derna", *Libya Herald*, 25 May 2014. For other reports of LNA forces targeting Islamist militias' supply of weapons, see "Al-Hijaazi: Silaah al-jaww qasaf mawaaqe' li-ansaar al-sharee'a bi-Ajdaabiya", *Libyens.net*, 11 June 2014 (reporting the bombing of a weapons depot in the town of Ajdabiya); Saalem al-Ubyadi, "Silaah al-jaw yastahedif makhaazen asliha bi-mintaqat qanfouda", *Al-Wasat*, 9 June 2014, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/21903/> (describing air raid on weapons depot in Benghazi's Al-Qanfudhah District).

⁷² "Muqaatla Leebeeya taqsif mawaaqe' meelesheeyaata islaamiya fi Benghazi", *France 24*, 28 May 2014.

⁷³ Nurah Ibrahim, "Hifter Bombs Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi Royal Palace", *Libya Herald*, 1 June 2014.

Islamist forces carried out a massed assault against the base of the Zawia's Martyrs Brigade, also known as the Special Forces Battalion 21, in the Tabalino neighbourhood, encircling the base and bombarding it with artillery fire. Although arriving Saiqa ground forces and LNA air strikes managed to relieve pressure on the Tabalino base, the attack underscored the obstacles that Hifter's forces faced. The LNA's control over air force and tank units gave it a qualitative advantage over Islamist forces, but the LNA's limited force presence in Benghazi left it struggling to secure its bases. The Saiqa units were the sole LNA ground forces capable of operating in southern Benghazi's Islamist neighbourhoods, severely constraining Operation Dignity's ability to take and hold territory.

One tactic that Islamist forces began to adopt in June was suicide bombings, a sign of the growing influence of jihadist groups. Suicide attacks had been used only sparingly by Libyan rebels during the anti-Qaddafi uprising, and there had been only two suicide attacks in the two-plus years of sporadic conflict in eastern Libya that followed Qaddafi's fall. But after the launch of Operation Dignity, suicide attacks became a relatively common tactic for Islamist forces trying to penetrate LNA strongholds. On 4 June for example, a suicide bomber in a car attacked a villa outside Benghazi where Hifter and other top commanders had been meeting, slightly wounding the Operation Dignity leader and killing three soldiers.⁷⁴ On 11 June, a suicide car bomber attacked a military checkpoint in Barsis, 30 miles east of Benghazi, wounding several soldiers and civilians.⁷⁵

Hifter continued to gain support for the Benghazi offensive through early June, as armed militias from across the country joined Operation Dignity. On 8 June, the Ahmed al-Shareef Brigade, a predominantly Tebu brigade tasked with securing the Sarir and Messla oilfields in southern Libya, announced that it would join Operation Dignity.⁷⁶ A day later, a spokesman representing the town of Daryana, twenty miles northeast of Benghazi, declared that the town would back Operation Dignity.

But Benghazi's Islamist factions also received support from allies outside the city. On 19 June, the Supreme Council of Libyan Revolutionaries, a coalition of Islamist and Misratan politicians and aligned militias that had played a central role in forcing the GNC to adopt the political isolation law, condemned Hifter's offensive and called on other armed groups to support Benghazi's Islamists.⁷⁷

By vowing to eliminate all Islamist factions from Benghazi and failing to recognise distinctions among them, the Operation Dignity offensive prompted the city's myriad Islamist militias to restructure their forces to better confront the Dignity threat. On 20 June, Benghazi's Islamist factions announced the establishment of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC), an umbrella group that included all the Islamist militias fighting Hifter's forces, including ASL, the 17 February Martyrs Brigade, Rafallah al-Sahati Brigade, and the Libya Shield One Brigade. Although these militias had been collaborating tactically prior to the BRSC's creation, the consolidation that occurred under the BRSC helped to cement the strategic alliance between ASL and other factions. Security sources would later view this restructuring, which improved coordination between Islamist units, as an important component in the Islamists' subsequent military successes.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ "Suicide Bomber Kills Three Soldiers in Benghazi", *Al-Akhbar*, 4 June 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/20021>.

⁷⁵ "Suicide Bomber at Army Checkpoint Outside Benghazi Wounds 6", *Reuters*, 11 June 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/06/11/libya-violence-idUSL5N0OS5YV20140611>.

⁷⁶ Jamal Adel, "Tebu Brigade Joins Hifter", *Libya Herald*, 8 June 2014.

⁷⁷ "Supreme Council of Libyan Revolutionaries Condemn Operation Dignity's 'Evil Attacks'", *Libya Herald*, 19 June 2014.

⁷⁸ Abd-al-Sattar Hatitah, "Mikanikiya siyyaraat yaste'adaan lil-'ilaan Benghazi imaara islaamiya", *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 1 August 2014, <http://aawsat.com/home/article/150051>.

5. Formation of the Operation Dawn Coalition

In the aftermath of the al-Qa'qa and Sawa'iq militias from Zintan conducting a 18 May raid against the GNC, Misratan militias flooded into Tripoli at the behest of GNC politicians.⁷⁹ Clashes between these groups and Zintani factions were initially limited, but tension in the capital continued to grow.

The 25 June parliamentary elections, which had been scheduled only after Zintani militias stormed the GNC on 18 May, were the immediate catalyst for a conflagration that would further divide the country. In negotiations prior to the elections, the GNC agreed to eliminate party lists. But while the elimination of these lists forced all candidates to run as independents, it became apparent as votes were tallied that the majority of legislators who had been elected were aligned with Libya's nationalist bloc.⁸⁰ The June elections thus fundamentally shifted the balance of power in parliament away from the Misratan-Islamist bloc, which consequently tried to delay the release of the election results by lodging complaints about the electoral process with Libya's Higher National Elections Congress.⁸¹

There were several reasons that the Islamist-Misratan bloc tried to delegitimise the elections. They were concerned that the incoming nationalist-dominated parliament would reverse such legislative initiatives passed by the GNC as the political isolation law. The GNC feared the passage of new legislation, such as stringent anti-terror laws, that might target militias aligned with the Islamist-Misrata bloc. Islamist militias funded by the GNC, including the Misrata-dominated Libya Shield Force, also stood to lose if nationalist politicians cut militia funding and demobilised these armed groups. And members of the Islamist-Misrata bloc feared that the nationalists in parliament would provide overt funding and political support to Operation Dignity.⁸²

Ultimately, the Islamist-Misrata bloc calculated that the potential costs of ceding power to the new parliament were unacceptable. On 10 July, two weeks after the elections, a previously unknown group called the "Dawn of Libya Operations Room" issued a statement on Facebook calling for fighters associated with the Zintani-based Sawaiq, al-Qa'qa, and al-Madani militias to leave their posts and remain at home. The statement warned that those who remained with "these terrorist coup militias", as the statement called the Zintani militias, would bear "full responsibility for producing the subsequent results". This threatening statement foreshadowed the military offensive that commenced just three days later.

Early in the morning of 13 July, Operation Dawn units launched what would become a month-long campaign to seize Tripoli's international airport from the Zintani militias, which had controlled the airport since Qaddafi's fall. That morning, Dawn forces bombarded the airport with Grad rockets.⁸³ Operation Dawn also targeted the Camp 7 April military base, a former Libyan army base, and the Islamic Call Society complex in southern Tripoli, which was also under the control of Zintani militias.⁸⁴

The Operation Dawn coalition consisted of a number of militias aligned with the Islamist-Misrata bloc, including Islamist-leaning militias from Tripoli, the Libya Shield Force, and a patchwork of Amazigh units and other militias from the Jebel Nafusa Mountains. The Misratan components of the Libyan Shield Force are the strongest military force in the Dawn coalition, with an estimated 25,000 to 40,000 troops, 800 tanks, and 2,000 machine-gun

⁷⁹ "Libya Parliament Moves to Luxury Hotel after Militia Attack", *Daily Star* (Beirut), 20 May 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/May-20/257157-libya-parliament-moves-to-luxury-hotel-after-militia-attack.ashx>.

⁸⁰ Mohamed El-Jarh, "Libya's Islamists Go for Broke", *Foreign Policy*, 22 July 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/22/libyas-islamists-go-for-broke/>.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid. (describing the various concerns of the Islamist-Misrata bloc).

⁸³ "Ishtibaakat fi muheet mataar Tarablis al-duwali janoub al-'aasima", *Al-Tadamun*, 13 July, 2014.

⁸⁴ Lacher and Cole, *Politics by Other Means*, p. 51.

mounted vehicles under the command of the Misratan Union of Revolutionaries.⁸⁵ (Manpower estimates for militias across Libya are generally inaccurate, and are often inflated due to the common practice among commanders of registering civilians as militia members to inflate their payrolls.) Other militia units in the Operation Dawn coalition included:

- The Knights of Janzour militia, located in Janzour, just west of Tripoli, and affiliated with the National Mobile Force, a coalition of former revolutionary brigades.
- Islamist-leaning Tripoli militias. These included the militias linked to Islamist politician and former LIFG commander Abdelhakim Bilhadj. Western officials are concerned about Bilhadj's continuing connections to salafi jihadism. Illustrating their concerns, Bilhadj chose as a media adviser Al-Wathiq Billah, the former emir of the jihadist web forum Global Islamic Media Front.⁸⁶ The North African press also claims that Bilhadj is currently sheltering Abu Iyad al-Tunisi, the emir of the Tunisian jihadist group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST).⁸⁷
- A brigade from the town of Zawiya, west of Tripoli, commanded by Shaaban Hadiya, a salafist sheikh who had been arrested in Egypt in January 2014 for alleged ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.⁸⁸

With Operation Dignity having launched its offensive primarily in Benghazi but also in Tripoli, and Operation Dawn forces assembling in response, the two dominant sides in Libya's civil war were largely set.

One of the major military forces that opposed Hifter in Benghazi was ASL, which was almost the perfect foil for his movement. The group was founded by Mohammed al-Zahawi, a former prisoner in Tripoli's infamous Abu Salim prison, where Qaddafi housed (and tortured) Islamist radicals and political dissidents. ASL's Benghazi branch first announced itself in February 2012, but really began to attract attention in June 2012, when the group hosted its first conference, attended by around 1,000 people.⁸⁹ At the conference, ASL officials led a parade of armed militants in pickup trucks along Benghazi's seaport while calling for the implementation of *sharia*.⁹⁰ In addition to prominent jihadist attendees, also showing up to the June 2012 conference were members of Ansar al-Sharia's Derna branch, which was led by Sufian bin Qumu, a former LIFG fighter and driver for Osama bin Laden who was held at the US Guantánamo Bay detention facility before being transferred to Libyan custody in 2007.

Following ASL's ostentatious conference, the group for some time focused its efforts on *dawa* (proselytism) and providing social services in Benghazi. ASL hoped it could in this way win the support of the local community.⁹¹ But ASL also had a darker, more violent side that became increasingly pronounced. As the US Department of State's designation of the Benghazi and Derna branches of ASL noted, the group's activities included involvement "in terrorist attacks against civilian targets, frequent assassinations, and attempted assassinations of security officials and political actors in eastern Libya, and the September 11, 2012 attacks against the U.S. Special Mission and Annex in

⁸⁵ For differing estimates of the size of the Misratan components of the Libyan Shield Force, see Andrew Engel, *Libya as a Failed State: Causes, Consequences, Options* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2014), p. 16; "Guide to Key Libyan Militias", BBC, 20 May 2014.

⁸⁶ See Nasir al-Haqq2, "Do You Remember the Brother al-Wathiq Billah, the Former Emir of the Global Islamic Media Front?", posted to Ansar al-Mujahedin Network, 14 October 2011 (explaining Billah's relationship with Bilhadj; the post was subsequently removed from the website); author's conversation with senior US military intelligence officer, 28 April 2014.

⁸⁷ See discussion in Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Kathleen Soucy, "Abdelhakim Bilhadj and Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia", *FDD Policy Brief*, 8 October 2013, <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/abdelhakim-belhadj-and-ansar-al-sharia-in-tunisia/>.

⁸⁸ Lacher and Cole, *Politics by Other Means*, p. 51; "Libyan Militia Commander Released in Swap for Abducted Egyptians", *Associated Press*, 27 January 2014.

⁸⁹ Aaron Zelin, "Know Your Ansar al-Sharia", *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/21/know-your-ansar-al-sharia/>.

⁹⁰ Mary Fitzgerald, "It Wasn't Us", *Foreign Policy*, 18 September 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/18/it-wasnt-us/>.

⁹¹ For a description of Ansar al-Sharia's *dawa* work, see Zelin, "Know Your Ansar al-Sharia".

Benghazi, Libya”.⁹² As ASL’s violent tendencies became increasingly apparent, the group’s ties to other jihadist organisations also grew more noticeable. Tunisian officials, for example, reported that ASL militants had funneled weapons to the Tunisia-based jihadist group AST.⁹³ Reports have also emerged that ASL maintains links with the notorious Algerian jihadist Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who heads the al Qaeda affiliate al-Murabitun.⁹⁴

ASL’s involvement in the assassination campaigns in Benghazi made it the primary target of Hifter’s initial Operation Dignity offensive. Hifter’s efforts to extend his campaign beyond Benghazi to Tripoli helped create a convergence of interests between ASL and other Benghazi-based Islamist militias on the one hand and the political and military actors that comprised Operation Dawn on the other.

There is reason to believe there are significant differences between ASL’s outlook and that of many other members of the Dawn coalition. ASL rejects the democratic process and has denounced the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood.⁹⁵ Conversely, some Dawn actors may be unwilling to establish closer relationships with ASL for fear of attracting negative international attention. But despite this tension, ASL and other jihadist groups may benefit from the Dawn-Dignity competition and Libya’s chaos. They may find allies in Operation Dawn even if they also have adversaries within it. Further, jihadist groups may believe that an ongoing conflict will play to the advantage of the most radical factions, and give them room to operate in Libya.

6. Operation Dawn through the Fall of Tripoli International Airport

Operation Dawn attacked Tripoli’s international airport on 13 July. After Salah Badi — a militia leader and former legislator from Misrata who had gained acclaim for his fighting prowess during the uprising against Qaddafi — initiated the attack on the airport, other Operation Dawn forces quickly jumped in as well.

Since taking control of the airport after Qaddafi’s fall, the Zintani militias turned it into their personal fiefdom, exploiting smuggling networks and confiscating shipments of desirable goods that arrived at Tripoli International Airport. For example, in March 2014 Zintani militias seized a shipment of weapons intended for Libya’s military, unloading the weapons directly into trucks sitting on the tarmac. As one Libyan bureaucrat observed of the Zintani militias that controlled the airport: “They do whatever they please, and their guns speak for them. Whatever they want, they will get”.⁹⁶

Operation Dawn forces viewed an attack on the airport as a critical component of the campaign to weaken the Zintanis. Zintani militias’ control of the airport and the road leading from it to central Tripoli enabled them to move troops from their bases in the Nafusa Mountains to the center of Tripoli without passing checkpoints in the western and eastern parts of the city that were controlled by Operation Dawn forces.⁹⁷ Moreover, as long as Zintanis controlled the airport they could receive shipments of weapons from allies in eastern Libya, as well as from external supporters.⁹⁸

⁹² Office of the Spokesperson, US Department of State, Media Note, “Terrorist Designations of Three Ansar al-Sharia Organizations and Leaders”, 10 January 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/01/219519.htm>.

⁹³ Faisal Irshaid, “Profile: Libya’s Ansar al-Sharia”, *BBC*, 13 June 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27732589>.

⁹⁴ “UN Considers Adding Libya Jihadists to Terror List”, *Agence France Presse*, 5 November 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2014/11/libya-conflict-un-france-sanctions.html>.

⁹⁵ See Ansar al-Sharia in Libya, “Sharia-Compliant Perspective on Ongoing Fighting in Libyan Arena”, posted 22 August 2014.

⁹⁶ Laura King, “Libya Remains in the Grip of Rivalrous Rebel Factions”, *Los Angeles Times*, 13 April 2014, <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/apr/13/world/la-fg-libya-militias-20140413>.

⁹⁷ Jason Pack, “Libya on the Brink”, *Foreign Affairs*, 28 July 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141666/jason-pack/libya-on-the-brink>.

⁹⁸ Wehrey, F. *Ending Libya’s Civil War* (2014), p. 23.

Throughout July and August, Operation Dawn carried out a continuous barrage of artillery strikes on Zintani positions in and around the airport, with one Libyan security official estimating that Operation Dawn had massed some 1,500 fighters against 1,000 Zintani forces defending the airport.⁹⁹ Within two days of the commencement of the military operation, rocket strikes destroyed eleven civilian planes sitting on the tarmac and seriously damaged the airport's control tower.¹⁰⁰ In late July, missiles hit two fuel tanks near the airport, engulfing much of the area in flames and prompting accusations that Dawn forces had deliberately targeted the fuel depot.¹⁰¹

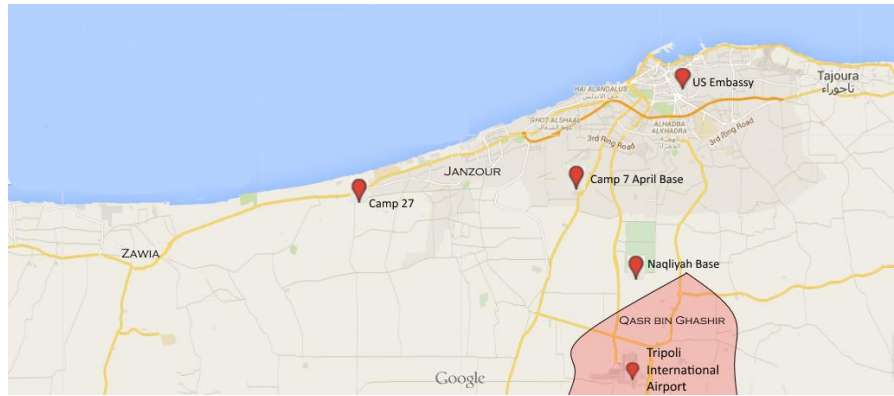


Figure 3: Key Locations in Operation Dawn's Tripoli Campaign. (Source: Valens Global)

Fighting between Dawn and Zintan-linked forces quickly spread to surrounding neighborhoods in Tripoli, and to other western Libya towns. On 14 July, skirmishes broke out in the town of Gharyan, 80 km south of Tripoli, as Gharyani security forces loyal to Operation Dawn tried to prevent military convoys originating in Zintan from fortifying Zintani militia positions in southern Tripoli.¹⁰² Clashes also spread to northern Tripoli in late July, where the majority of foreign embassies are located. This prompted most countries, including the US, to evacuate their diplomats from Tripoli and shutter their embassies.

As swaths of western Libya became engulfed in conflict, the Dawn offensive took on broader regional dimensions. On 18 August, unidentified jets conducted air strikes against Operation Dawn positions in the Qasr bin Ghashir neighbourhood in southern Tripoli.¹⁰³ These strikes triggered intense speculation about who was responsible. Though Hifter's forces claimed credit, a Libyan air force unit that had refused to join Hifter's campaign refuted that notion, explaining that Libyan jets could not fly at night, nor could they refuel in mid-air.¹⁰⁴ Operation Dawn officials fingered the UAE and Egypt as behind the attacks. Though both countries denied involvement, *the New York Times* confirmed their roles on 25 August.¹⁰⁵ The Tripoli strikes came shortly after UAE and Egyptian special forces reportedly conducted an operation against a training camp near the jihadist hotbed of Derna.¹⁰⁶ This underscored the growing regional implications of the conflict in Libya, and other countries' concern about the spread of instability.

But the UAE/Egyptian strikes did little to stem Operation Dawn's momentum. Throughout August, Dawn forces continued to make progress, seizing control of portions of the airport road and cutting off supply lines between Zintani militia forces at the airport and other Zintani bases deeper inside Tripoli, including the highly

⁹⁹ Khalid Mahmud, "Al-Sharq al-Awsat takshif tafaaseel 'ashr saa'at mutheera fi mataar Tarablis", *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 16 July 2014, <http://aawsat.com/home/article/139106>.

¹⁰⁰ "Zintan Militia in Control of Libya Airport", *Al Jazeera*, 16 July 2014.

¹⁰¹ Ashraf Abdul Wahab, "Libyan Misrata Militias Say to Destroy Fuel Depot Controlled by Rival Militias", *Libya Herald*, 28 July 2014.

¹⁰² Ashraf Abdul Wahab, "One Killed and Five Wounded in Ghariyan Clashes", *Libya Herald*, 14 July 2014.

¹⁰³ Nu'aas al-Daraajee, "Qasf Tarablis: Haqaa'iq taa'eha wa-ma'aloumaat mutadhaareba", *Al-Wasat*, 18 August 2014, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/31947/>.

¹⁰⁴ Mohammed Hasni, "New Mystery Air Raid over Tripoli Kills 10 Libyan Islamists", *Agence France Presse*, 23 August 2014.

¹⁰⁵ David Kirkpatrick and Eric Schmitt, "Arab Nations Strike in Libya, Surprising U.S.", *The New York Times*, 25 August 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/26/world/africa/egypt-and-united-arab-emirates-said-to-have-secretly-carried-out-libya-airstrikes.html?_r=0.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

strategic Naqliyah base.¹⁰⁷ By mid-August, Dawn forces had taken over the Naqliyah base, giving its coalition an unfettered path to the Tripoli airport and prompting the UAE and Egypt to launch a second series of strikes on 23 August to slow Dawn's offensive.¹⁰⁸

Although the air strikes killed at least ten Operation Dawn fighters, Egyptian and Emirati intervention again failed to turn the tide. On 23 August, Operation Dawn forces finally took control of the Tripoli airport, marking the end of their month-long campaign to capture it. That same day the GNC announced that it would begin its operations once again, despite its losses in the 25 June elections.¹⁰⁹

7. The Islamists' Counteroffensive in Benghazi (July-October)

By mid-July, as Islamist factions grew in strength by combining their forces, and the LNA struggled to make headway, the conflict in Benghazi grew into a "deadly stalemate".¹¹⁰ Although the LNA tried to move tanks and ground troops into Sidi Faraj, the neighbourhood from which Islamist forces were launching artillery strikes at the Benina airport, Islamist forces rebuffed the LNA's assault and continued their strikes.¹¹¹ The Benghazi conflict took on a familiar pattern afterwards, with LNA air units launching strikes against Islamist forces in southern Benghazi neighbourhoods, while the Islamists countered by lobbing shells toward Benina air base and other LNA positions.

After weeks of stalemate, Islamist forces launched a counteroffensive that tilted the balance of power in the BRSC's favor. The counteroffensive began with a ground assault against the Saiqa Special Forces headquarters in Bu'atni, as well as the 319 Infantry base. On 22 July, suicide bombers carried out twin attacks against the Bu'atni base as the forces inside were breaking their Ramadan fast.¹¹² The suicide attacks and follow-on ground assault prompted Saiqa commander Wanis Bukhamada to call on Libyan army units in eastern Libya to come to their aid.¹¹³ Forces from Bayda and Tobruk, along with military units loyal to federalist commander Ibrahim Jathran, answered Bukhamada's call.¹¹⁴

Despite this, on 29 July, Saiqa forces, facing a barrage of artillery fire from BRSC units, finally decided to withdraw from the Bu'atni headquarters and another nearby base.¹¹⁵ Saiqa's withdrawal was a major setback for Operation Dignity, as Bu'atni had been one of the only bases in Benghazi from which Saiqa units could launch ground assaults and conduct defensive operations to protect LNA bases elsewhere in the city. Without access to the Bu'atni headquarters, LNA forces were confined to the Benina air base, located twelve miles outside Benghazi, which was

¹⁰⁷ "Tajadod al-qasf wal-ishtibaakat bil-'aasima Tarablus 'aqb qasf taa'ira harbiyya li-mawqe' fajn Leebeeya", *El Fajr*, 17 August 2014, <http://www.elfajr.org/668803>.

¹⁰⁸ Mohammed Hasni, "New Mystery Air Raid over Tripoli Kills 10 Libyan Islamists", *Agence France Presse*, 23 August 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/ten-dead-air-raid-libyan-militia-near-tripoli-130830277.html>.

¹⁰⁹ Muhammad Hasni, "Libya Islamist Militias Seize Tripoli Airport", *Agence France Presse*, 23 August 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/libya-islamist-militias-taken-tripoli-airport-165106137.html>.

¹¹⁰ Erin Cunningham, "Ex-Libyan General Battling Islamist Militias Faces Dwindling Support Amid Stalemate", *The Washington Post*, 8 July 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/libyan-ex-general-battling-islamist-militias-faces-dwindling-support-amid-stalemate/2014/07/07/8dc67937-3240-4cbf-b177-d0e30471b25b_story.html.

¹¹¹ "Libya's Benghazi Rocked by Fierce Fighting", *Al Jazeera*, 15 June 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/libya-benghazi-rocked-fierce-fighting-201461513133280325.html>.

¹¹² "Taqrer ikhbaari: Hujoom intihaari muzdawaj fi Benghazi wa-irtifaa' haseelat al-qatla fi al-madeena ila 43 shakhs mundhu al-Ithnayn", *Arabic News* (China), 22 July 2014.

¹¹³ Salem al-Ubaydi, "Abu Khamada yutaaleb ri'aasat al-arkaan bi-inqaadh Benghazi", *Al-Wasat*, 23 July 2014, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/28393/>.

¹¹⁴ Noora Ibrahim and Moutaz Ahmed, "Eight Killed and 19 Injured as Bombs and Rockets Fall across Benghazi", *Libya Herald*, 24 July 2014.

¹¹⁵ Noora Ibrahim and Moutaz Ahmed, "Saiqa Forced to Abandon Benghazi Headquarters to Ansar", *Libya Herald*, 29 July 2014.

linked to the city by only a single road. In the coming months, the LNA was largely limited to launching air and artillery strikes.

The fall of Saiqa headquarters also represented a propaganda coup for the BRSC, which was able to build on its initial gains, destroy the Benghazi security directorate, seize control over three other bases, and establish new roadblocks in the Hawari district.¹¹⁶ The BRSC posted pictures online of weapons and tanks that it had acquired after seizing the LNA bases. Libya Shield One commander Wissam bin Hamid featured prominently in pictures posted online after the Bu'atni offensive, posing beside ASL commander Mohammed al-Zahawi. This underscored Hamid's growing ties with jihadist groups in the BRSC.

Yet even as the BRSC's counteroffensive drove LNA forces to the outskirts of Benghazi, the Islamist militias' efforts to consolidate their control prompted a backlash from the citizens, many of whom had long blamed Islamist militias for the city's growing lawlessness and chaos. On 30 July, following ASL's seizure of the Al-Jalaa hospital in central Benghazi, several hundred demonstrators marched in and tore down the jihadist flag hanging from its gate. The angry crowd ignored warning shots from ASL militants, who were forced to flee to neighbouring buildings.¹¹⁷ When ASL militants retook the hospital the next day by force, Benghazi residents returned to the streets *en masse*, with crowds estimated in the thousands protesting.¹¹⁸ These protests came just two weeks after Benghazi residents blocked Istiqlal Street, a major downtown thoroughfare, to protest the assassination of political activist Khalifa Hamed al-Maghrabi.¹¹⁹ The July protests thus reflected the groundswell of discontent among Benghazi residents.

This backlash grew over time. In late September, a Benghazi crowd killed a man believed to have been tasked with carrying out an assassination in the Majouri district. On 1 October, a group of Benghazi residents attacked an ASL checkpoint near the Zamzam market. The locals clashed with ASL for two hours before the militants retreated from the checkpoint.¹²⁰

But despite pushback from the public, the fall of the Saiqa headquarters fundamentally changed the Benghazi conflict, and Islamist forces began to advance toward Benina Airport. By mid-August, 80 percent of Benghazi was under Islamist control.¹²¹ Most LNA forces were pinned to the airbase, which frequently came under fire from BRSC artillery. Islamist forces also periodically tried to advance toward and overrun the Benina airport.¹²²

Despite their military setbacks, Hifter's forces received a considerable political boost when the House of Representatives (HoR), the elected parliament that had been relegated to Tobruk by Operation Dawn, named a new chief of staff of the Libyan army. HoR chose Major General Abd-al-Raziq al-Nazuri, a high-ranking member of the Dignity coalition and former Hifter deputy.¹²³ Nazuri replaced Jadallah al-Ubaydi, who had been suspected of having sympathies for the Islamist forces. Nazuri's appointment marked a shift in the HoR's attitude toward Operation Dignity, although the relationship between HoR and Dignity forces remained ambiguous for some time.

As Operation Dignity forces' political standing was improving, splits emerged in Benghazi between hardline and moderate Islamists after a group of Benghazi-based Islamist notables with links to Libya's Muslim Brotherhood-

¹¹⁶ "Islamist Groups in Libya Post Pictures of Seized Army Bases", *Daily Star* (Beirut), 6 August 2014.

¹¹⁷ Moutaz Ahmed, "Unarmed Crowd Forces Ansar Out of Benghazi Hospital", *Libya Herald*, 30 July 2014.

¹¹⁸ "Tadhaahoraat dhakhma fi Benghazi tahtef dhad Ansar al-Sharee'a wal-durou", *Al-Wasat*, 1 August 2014, <http://www.alwasat.ly/ar/news/libya/29380/>.

¹¹⁹ Noora Ibrahim and Moutaz Ahmed, "Further Violence in Benghazi; TV Station Hit", *Libya Herald*, 9 July 2014.

¹²⁰ Farah Waleed, "Man Dies as Locals Chase Ansar from Benghazi Checkpoint", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 1 October 2014.

¹²¹ "Splits Emerge between Libyan Islamists and Jihadists", *Agence France Presse*, 18 August 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/splits-emerge-between-libyan-islamists-jihadists-183000425.html>.

¹²² Noora Ibrahim, "Operation Dignity Claims 70 Ansar Supporters Killed outside Benghazi", *Libya Herald*, 7 August 2014.

¹²³ See "Al-Mayyaar ya'alen imtithaal quwwatihi li-ra'ees al-arkaan al-jadeed", *Al-Wasat*, 28 August 2014 (reporting Nazuri's appointment); Joan Tilouine, "Ali Shoaieb Emhemed: 'Non à une Intervention Armée Etrangère en Libye'", *Jeune Afrique*, 5 September, 2014 (explaining that Nazuri had been Hifter's deputy).

linked party JCP announced the establishment on 16 August of a shura council. The council was designed to serve as a reconciliation initiative to “find solutions to the problems of the city”.¹²⁴ The BRSC issued a rejoinder condemning the shura’s creation, accusing the JCP of trying to “control the political landscape of the country while ignoring the revolutionaries”, and asserting that the BRSC would “not fight for the sake of democracy or the National Congress”, but only “for the sake of God”. This wholesale rejection of the reconciliatory shura council presaged a growing gap between Benghazi’s moderate Islamists and hardliners.

But these growing political divisions had little impact on the BRSC’s military capabilities. As September wore on, Operation Dignity’s prospects appeared increasingly grim. Dignity spokesman Muhammad al-Hijazi announced plans on 6 September to launch a decisive offensive against BRSC forces within days, prompting Islamist forces to begin withdrawing from military bases and checkpoints.¹²⁵ But Hijazi’s announcement proved to be a bluff, and Islamist forces soon launched a fresh offensive. On 15 September, BRSC forces attacked Benina airport from three positions, pounding it with artillery fire for three days while Hifter used air strikes to rebuff the Islamist advance.¹²⁶ With the BRSC in control of much of Benghazi, Islamist gunmen carried out an unprecedented spree of assassinations. On 20 September alone, assassins killed ten individuals, including popular youth activist Tawfiq Bensaud and five members of the security forces.¹²⁷

As the conflict near Benina airport intensified, forces from outside Benghazi poured into the city to assist both sides. On 11 September, Operation Dignity air force commander Saqr Geroushi announced that Dignity had received reinforcements of nearly 1,000 Tebu troops from southern Libya, with another 500 Tebu fighters expected to arrive in the coming days.¹²⁸ Conversely, a Dignity spokesman said that forces from Misrata had come to fortify BRSC positions.¹²⁹

8. Clashes in Tripoli and Western Libya (August-December)

With the GNC meeting in Tripoli and the HoR convening in Tobruk in August, Libya had two competing legislative bodies, each with its own claim to legitimacy. On 25 August, the GNC elected Omar al-Hasi as its new prime minister, gifting Libya with two rival prime ministers as well. However, Abdullah al-Thinni’s interim government was generally recognised by the international community.

The HoR pursued a polarising legislative agenda, one purpose of which was to advance the interests of its members. For example, the HoR elected Agila Saleh, a strong critic of the political isolation law, as speaker of the parliament.¹³⁰ This heightened fears within the GNC bloc that the HoR had a counterrevolutionary agenda. But perhaps the most divisive of the HoR’s steps was its decision to align more closely with Hifter’s Operation Dignity offensive.

¹²⁴ “Splits Emerge between Libyan Islamists and Jihadists”, *Agence France Presse*, 18 August 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/splits-emerge-between-libyan-islamists-jihadists-183000425.html>.

¹²⁵ Farah Walid and Noora Ibrahim, “Ansar Withdraws from Benghazi Positions as Operation Dignity Forces Enter City”, *Libya Herald*, 11 September 2014.

¹²⁶ “Clashes Kill 19 People in Libya’s Benghazi”, *Libya Herald*, 15 September 2014.

¹²⁷ Noora Ibrahim, “Benghazi’s Bloody Friday—Ten Targeted Murders in 24 Hours”, *Libya Herald*, 20 September 2014.

¹²⁸ Farah Walid and Noora Ibrahim, “Ansar Withdraws from Benghazi Positions as Operation Dignity Forces Enter City”, *Libya Herald*, 11 September 2014.

¹²⁹ Khalid Mahmud, “Al-naatwq bi-ism al-jaysh al-leebee fi Benghazi: nasta’ed li-ma’araka haasima lil-ijtiyaah al-madina”, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 6 September 2014, <http://aawsat.com/home/article/175671>.

¹³⁰ Mohammed Eljarh, “A Parliament Without a Country?”, *Foreign Policy*, 8 August 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/08/a-parliament-without-a-country/>.

At the same time the HoR made divisive moves, Dawn officials openly rejected dialogue. When a group of Misratan and Islamist legislators met with their Tobruk counterparts in the western town of Ghadames in late September, the Libya Dawn coalition released a statement on Facebook rejecting political dialogue and promising to continue the military campaign. The Libyan Supreme Fatwa Council, headed by Sheikh Sadiq al-Ghariani, demanded that this dialogue be postponed and asserted that negotiations with the HoR could not occur, as the HoR violated Libya's religious and national principles.¹³¹

The political situation became even more perplexing when the Libyan supreme court, which the GNC had asked to rule on the legality of the HoR's move to Tobruk, ruled in November 2014 that the electoral process that ushered the HoR into power was unconstitutional, and thus legally dissolved the HoR. While the GNC saw the supreme court ruling as a validation of its own legal mandate, the HoR rejected the court's decision, claiming that the Tripoli-based supreme court had been coerced into ruling favorably for the GNC.¹³² The UN and key Western actors equivocated on whether they would respect the supreme court's ruling.

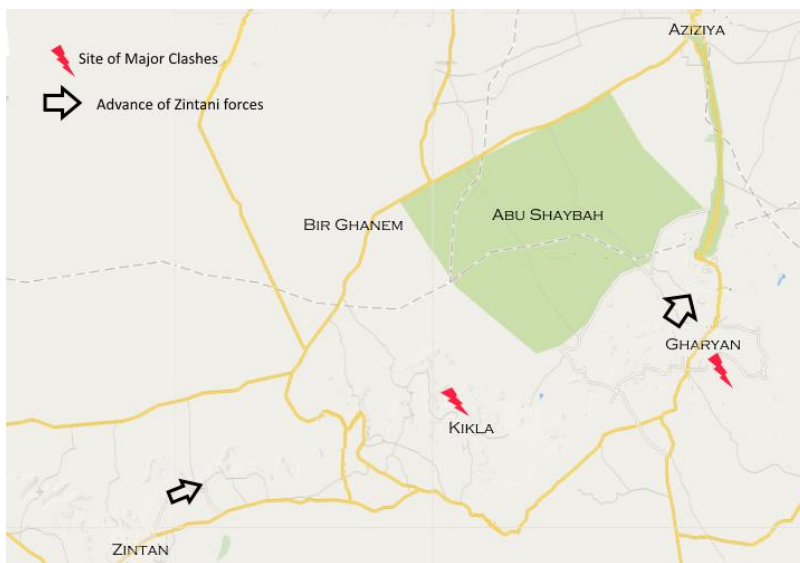


Figure 4: Operation Dawn campaign in the Nafusa Mountains. (Source: Valens Global)

With the political system in a state of gridlock and the battle lines hardening, Operation Dawn sought to consolidate its control over other cities and towns in western Libya. Dawn's focus shifted to the western and southwestern suburbs of Tripoli, which remained under control of Warshefana tribal militias. Throughout September, Dawn forces maintained a steady barrage of artillery strikes against Warshefana forces, who were estimated to be just a third of the size of the assaulting Dawn forces.¹³³ With the Warshefana forces outmatched, Operation Dawn bulldozed through the western suburbs of Tripoli, seizing 70 percent of Warshefana areas by mid-September.¹³⁴

As the Dawn forces continued their offensive, unidentified jets conducted multiple air strikes from 15-23 September against Dawn positions in the towns of Gharyan and Al-Aziziya, both south of Tripoli, and in the Qasr bin Ghashir neighbourhood in southern Tripoli.¹³⁵ Hifter's forces claimed responsibility for the strikes, while Dawn officials blamed the UAE and Egypt.¹³⁶ Regardless, these strikes failed to stall the Dawn forces, who seized control of the entire Warshefana area on 24 September.¹³⁷

¹³¹ "Leebeeya: Daar al-Iftaa' tutaaleb bi-ta'aleeq hiwaar Ghadaams", 24.ae, 30 September 2014.

¹³² Mohammed Eljarh, "The Supreme Court Decision That's Ripping Libya Apart", *Foreign Policy*, 6 November 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/the-supreme-court-decision-thats-ripping-libya-apart/>.

¹³³ "Warshafanah Area Witnesses 'Most Intense' Shelling", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 13 September 2014.

¹³⁴ "Warshafana 'mankouba' that qasf 'fajr Leebeeya'", *Al-Wasat*, 16 September 2014.

¹³⁵ See "Qasf jawwee 'ala madeenat Gharyaan", *Al-Wasat*, 15 September 2014 (reporting bombardment of Libya Shield Brigade headquarters near Gharyan); "Qasf 'aneef wa-insihaab quwwat 'Fajr Leebeeya' min al-Azeezeeya", *Al-Wasat*, 23 September 2014 (reporting aircraft targeting areas near Al-Aziziya); "Unidentified Aircraft Targets Tripoli's Qasr bin Ghashir Area", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 18 September 2014 (reporting airstrike against Qasr bin Ghashir neighbourhood).

¹³⁶ Ayman al-Warfalli and Ahmed Elumami, "Former Libyan General Claims New Air Strike in Western Libya", *Reuters*, 15 September 2014.

¹³⁷ "Quwwat 'Fajr Leebeeya' tusayter 'ala Warshafana", *Al-Arabi Al-Jadid*, 24 September 2014.

From the suburbs of Tripoli, the battle moved south along the Gharyan road. In early October, Zintani and Dawn forces vied for control of Gharyan, while Zintani forces looked to cut off the road leading from Gharyan to Tripoli in order to isolate Dawn fighters in Gharyan and prevent Dawn forces from resupplying and reinforcing troops in the town.¹³⁸ In a rare victory, Zintani forces gained ground in clashes near Gharyan on 8 October, only to be delayed in their advance north when Dawn forces shelled and seriously damaged a bridge on the road north to Aziziya.¹³⁹ Dawn forces also managed to seize control of the Abu Shaybah region northwest of Gharyan on 7 November, further impeding the Zintani northern advance.¹⁴⁰ In response, jets that Zintani forces claimed were flown by Zintani pilots conducted air strikes on 21 November against Dawn positions north of Gharyan. Their targets included the strategic town of Bir Ghanem, which sits at an intersection between roads leading to the Nafusa Mountains and roads leading north toward Aziziya and Zawiyah.¹⁴¹

Fighting also spread further south, as Operation Dawn forces pushed towards Kikla, a strategic town which serves as the gateway to the Nafusa Mountains. On 11 October, with Dawn forces fast approaching, Zintani militias and Warshefana tribal militias who had retreated to the Nafusa Mountains from Tripoli's suburbs launched an operation to slow the southward advance of the Operation Dawn fighters.¹⁴²

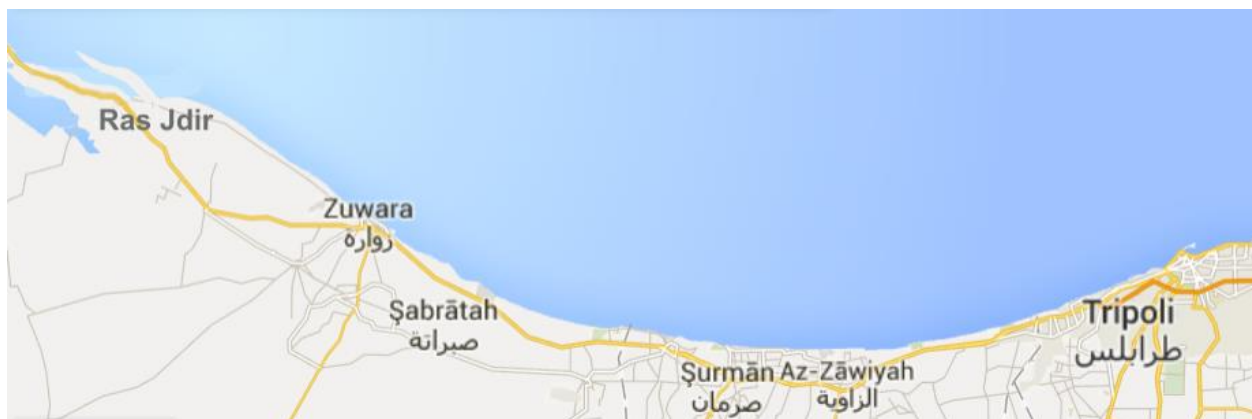


Figure 5: Key locations in western Libya. (Source: Valens Global)

The battle for Kikla proved to be a pivotal clash in the Operation Dawn campaign. As fighting intensified, Dawn forces poured into Kikla from other parts of western Libya to reinforce troops in the town.¹⁴³ But despite the influx of Operation Dawn fighters, the battle for the town shifted in favor of the Zintani and Warshefana militia factions, which held the high ground in areas around Kikla and maintained an intense campaign of artillery strikes on Operation Dawn positions.¹⁴⁴ By 19 November, Zintani forces possessed the clear upper hand in Kikla, with Dawn troops holding only a sliver of territory in the town's north. On 22 November, LNA jets believed to have originated

¹³⁸ "'Source' Says Zintan-Led Forces Advanced, Foiled Attempt by Gharyan Militias to Seize Camp", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 8 October 2014.

¹³⁹ "Zintanis Accuse Libya Dawn of Attacking Important Bridge", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 10 October 2014.

¹⁴⁰ "Fakk al-hisaar 'an madeenat Kikala wa-taqaddom kabeer li-quwwaat Fajr Leebeeya fi mintaqat al-Jabal", *WAL*, 7 November 2014.

¹⁴¹ See "Zintani Air Force Reportedly Bombs Libya Dawn Positions", *Libya Herald*, 21 November 2014. Regarding the claim that the pilots were Zintani, throughout the fall of 2014 the LNA conducted numerous air strikes against Dawn positions in western Libya. It appears that the jets took off from bases in western Libya. If this is the case, LNA forces either rehabilitated the planes they inherited from the Qaddafi regime or else received new jets from outside supporters, such as Egypt or UAE.

¹⁴² "Leebeeya: Kikala bi-qabdhat quwwat 'Fajr Leebeeya'", *Al-Arabi Al-Jadid*, 14 October 2014.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ See "Libyan Reporter Explains Situation on Kiklah Battlefield", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), November 19, 2014 (explaining that the Zintani militias "control the old city" located above Operation Dawn's stronghold); "Aajel: 100 qateel wa-jareeh bi-ma'aarek madeenat Kikala," *Yemen Economist*, November 3, 2014 (describing the Zintani and Warshefana militias' artillery strikes).

from Al-Watiyah airbase in western Libya conducted strikes against the remaining Dawn forces in Kikla.¹⁴⁵ The introduction of airpower proved to be the death knell for Operation Dawn's presence in Kikla, and on 23 November Dawn confirmed that the LNA had seized control of all of Kikla.¹⁴⁶

At the same time, LNA forces also expanded their presence west of Tripoli, along the coastal road leading toward Tunisia. In mid-October, LNA forces moving north from the Nafusa Mountains seized parts of the town of Surman, which sits just west of Zawiyah along the coastal road. The LNA's move into Surman posed an immediate strategic challenge for Dawn forces, as it divided Dawn's territory on the western coast and severed supply lines between Dawn forces west of Surman and Dawn forces in Tripoli. LNA forces then established a Western Region command center under the control of Brigadier General Idris Madi, who reported directly to Libyan army chief of staff Abd-al-Raziq al-Nazuri.¹⁴⁷ This regional command center improved coordination between the LNA's central command and its regional forces.

From Surman, LNA forces pushed further west, relying initially on air strikes to weaken Dawn forces in preparation for a ground assault. In early December, LNA air units conducted strikes against warehouses in the western town of Zuwara, as well as against the Zuwara seaport, in an attempt to cut off supply routes for Dawn forces based in that town.¹⁴⁸ And on December 5, LNA air units began targeting the Operation Dawn-aligned battalion responsible for securing the Ras Jdir crossing, with the strikes causing panic among individuals on the Libyan side of the heavily-trafficked border who were trying to cross into Tunisia.¹⁴⁹

LNA forces based in Surman also began to move east as the resurgent LNA-Zintani coalition eyed an operation against Tripoli. On November 22, Operation Dignity officials declared the commencement of a campaign to retake Tripoli.¹⁵⁰ In the days and weeks following the Tripoli offensive's declaration, Libyan army jets began conducting strikes against Dawn positions in and around Tripoli. On November 24, LNA jets bombed the runway of the Mitiga airport, the lone remaining operational airport in Tripoli. This drew the ire of GNC-appointed President Omar al-Hasi, who promised to "freeze the money" and "restrain the movements" of Operation Dignity officials in retaliation.¹⁵¹ In early December, LNA air strikes hit Dawn positions in the Qasr bin Ghashir neighborhood near Tripoli International Airport.¹⁵² LNA ground troops also began to move on the city of Zawiyah, some 45 km west of Tripoli, as part of their preparation for the promised ground assault against Dawn forces in Tripoli.¹⁵³

As the LNA began the early phase of its campaign to take Tripoli, it became increasingly clear that the momentum of the conflict in western Libya had shifted decisively in favor of the LNA and allied Zintani militias. While Dawn forces remained in control of Tripoli and much of the coastal road from the capital to Misrata, LNA forces had rebuffed Dawn offensives in Gharyan and Kikla, and now stood to gain control of the Libya-Tunisia border crossing as well as much of the Libyan coast west of Tripoli. That the LNA was in a favorable position militarily by December was striking, given that Dawn forces had wiped out Zintani forces in Tripoli in late August and appeared poised at that time to sweep through much of western Libya.

¹⁴⁵ "Masdar 'askaree bi-Kikala: qasf mutaqqate' bil-dabaabaat ma' tahleeq li-tayraan harbee taabe' lil-mad'ou Hifter 'ala manaateq Jabal Nafousah," *WAL*, November 22, 2014.

¹⁴⁶ "Fajr Leebeeya ta'ataref bi-saytarat al-jaysh 'ala Kikala", *Al-Wasat*, 23 November 2014.

¹⁴⁷ "Libyan National Army Claims Advances in the Warshaffanah District", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 18 October 2014.

¹⁴⁸ "Al-Mismaari: Al-jaysh qasafa makhaazin yastakhdemhaa 'al-irhaabeeyoun' fi Zuwaara", *Al-Wasat*, 4 December 2015.

¹⁴⁹ "Taa'iraat Hifter taqsis ra's jdayr wa-idaana umamiya li-gharaatihi", *Al-Jazeera*, 5 December 2014.

¹⁵⁰ "Operation to Liberate Tripoli Has Started, Claim Libyan Army Commanders", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 22 November 2014.

¹⁵¹ "Dawn of Libya Threatens Counterattack Following Air Strikes on Mitiga Airport in Tripoli", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 25 November 2014.

¹⁵² "Al-Mismaari: Al-jaysh qasafa makhaazin yastakhdemhaa 'al-irhaabeeyoun' fi Zuwaara", *Al-Wasat*, 4 December 2014.

¹⁵³ "Libyan National Army Reportedly Getting Closer to Tripoli", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 4 December 2014.

It is difficult to specify all of the most salient factors that contributed to the LNA's rising fortunes, but existing reports suggest that the introduction of airpower was a significant component. The bombardment of Dawn positions along the western coastal road in late November and early December weakened Dawn forces and allowed LNA ground troops to seize control of towns like Surman and Al-Ajaiylat. Similarly, air strikes helped drive Dawn forces from their remaining positions in Kikla. LNA's improved military coordination also benefited the Zintani units.

The involvement of foreign actors, especially Egypt, should also be considered a possible factor in the LNA's newfound success. The LNA's turnaround came just after Operation Dignity launched a fresh offensive in Benghazi in mid-October with the assistance of the Egyptian military.¹⁵⁴ Although Egypt's direct involvement in clashes in western Libya has not been confirmed, one possible hypothesis for momentum swinging in LNA's favor is that Egypt played at least an indirect role.

9. Hifter's New Offensive: 14 October to Present

By early October, conditions for Operation Dignity had deteriorated to their lowest point in the conflict. Islamist forces in Benghazi had escalated their assassination of security forces, imams, and civilians, with another wave of targeted killings kicking off in early October. One remotely-detonated car bomb on 10 October even struck a group of Benghazi residents who were about to demonstrate against the assassination campaign.¹⁵⁵

Meanwhile, the BRSC's advances brought the group closer to Benina airport. On 2 October, four separate suicide attacks targeting Benina killed over forty LNA soldiers.¹⁵⁶ Twelve days later, a suicide attacker in a car struck Operation Dignity forces in Benina district again.¹⁵⁷ Operation Dignity forces at Benina air base stood on the verge of being overwhelmed. A number of BRSC commanders, including ASL leader Muhammad a-Zahawi and Libya Shield One commander Wisam bin Hamid, released a video that declared the BRSC had "conquered the stronghold of the tyrant [Hifter]", and also that it had downed an Operation Dignity plane. (Dignity officials claimed the plane had crashed due to technical errors.)

Operation Dignity intensified air strikes against Islamist positions in Benina and Bu'atni in early October.¹⁵⁸ Then, on the night of 14 October Hifter announced the launch of a new campaign, which Dignity officials termed the "Snake's Sting".¹⁵⁹ Subsequently, the HoR-sanctioned Libyan army, which was under the command of Abd-al-Raziq al-Nazuri, announced that the Operation Dignity campaign was "one operation of the army", the first time Libyan army officials formally recognised the Operation Dignity offensive.¹⁶⁰ While the HoR didn't comment on the 14 October offensive, the statement that Operation Dignity was one of the army's operations definitively showed that Operation Dignity had finally received a stamp of approval from the government in Tobruk.

Some observers suggested that the Egyptian military and intelligence services played a strong role in crafting the 14 October offensive. Subsequent reports seemingly confirm Egypt's growing role in Benghazi. An Associated

¹⁵⁴ See Matt Schiavenza, "An Egyptian Intervention in Libya", *The Atlantic*, 15 October 2014 (explaining that LNA ground forces had been "recently trained by Egyptian forces"); "Fighter in Haftar Forces Says Operation Dignity Gets Ammunition from Egypt 'Only'", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 26 October 2014.

¹⁵⁵ "Infijaar sayyaara mufakhakha muqaabel funduq Tibesti bi-Benghazi", *Al-Wasat*, 10 October 2014.

¹⁵⁶ "Libya Suicide Bombs Leave 40 Soldiers Dead", *Al Jazeera*, 2 October 2014.

¹⁵⁷ "Qateelaan wa-jarha fi tafjeer istahadaf al-jaysh bi-Benghazi", *Al-Wasat*, 14 October 2014.

¹⁵⁸ "Irtifaa' haseelat ishtibaakaat Benghazi ila 40 qateelan", *Al-Riyadh* (Saudi Arabia), 5 October 2014.

¹⁵⁹ Mohammed Eljarh, "The Fight for Benghazi Heats Up", *Foreign Policy*, 15 October 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/15/the-fight-for-benghazi-heats-up/>.

¹⁶⁰ "12 Killed as Libya Army Sides with ex-General Fighting Benghazi Islamists", *Naharnet*, 15 October 2014.

Press report published after the commencement of the 14 October offensive claimed that the operation had been planned by Egyptian forces, and further alleged that Egyptian planes conducted air strikes against Islamist forces in Benghazi on 14 and 15 October.¹⁶¹ Egypt denied that it played any role.

The new offensive was rather sophisticated in its focus on winning the support of Benghazi's citizens, who already were resentful of Islamist domination. Just before initiation of the 14 October offensive, Dignity spokesman Muhammed al-Hijazi issued a public statement calling for a youth uprising, and imploring Benghazi's residents to "secure their districts" to prevent Islamist forces from finding safe haven in them.¹⁶² This appeal to the citizens was aimed at blunting the tactics previously employed by Islamist forces, wherein they would immediately dissolve into residential neighbourhoods upon receiving fire from Dignity artillery and fighter jets.¹⁶³

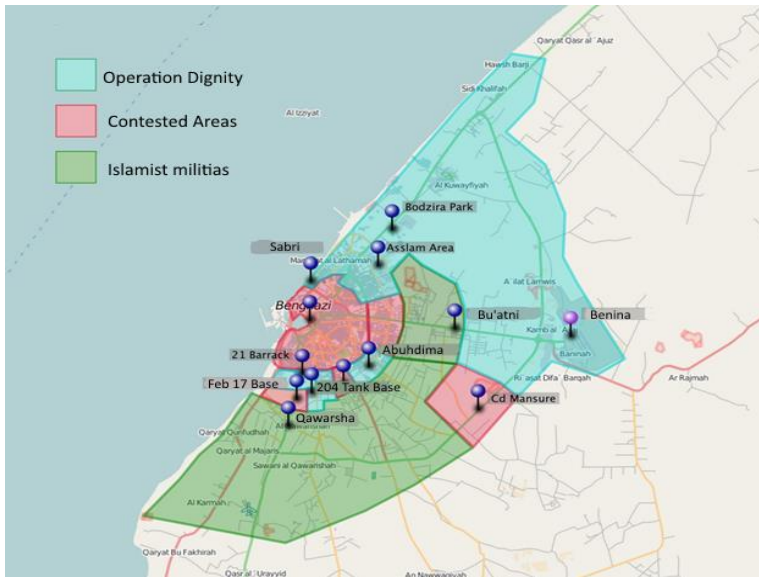


Figure 6: Operation Dignity campaign, 25 October. (Source: Mutaz Gedalla)

Many Benghazi residents proved willing to assist Operation Dignity. The city's youths erected sand barriers to block access to certain districts, and formed night watch groups. Some armed youths carried out vigilante attacks, targeting the families and destroying the homes of militants fighting alongside the BRSC.¹⁶⁴ In turn, ASL announced that it had established the Hunters of Awakening Council Members Brigade, which vowed to kill Benghazi citizens who supported Operation Dignity.

Operation Dignity also benefited considerably from the mobilization of the 204th Tank Battalion, a Libyan army unit whose base was adjacent to the headquarters of the 17 February Martyrs Brigade in southern Benghazi. The 204th had, remarkably, managed to stay largely neutral through months of conflict. Dignity officials said that

they had secretly met with 204th Tank Battalion commanders prior to the 14 October offensive, providing the unit with weapons and ammunition.¹⁶⁵ Tanks from the 204th Battalion quickly jumped into action when the operation commenced, surrounding and penetrating the base of the 17 February Martyrs Brigade.¹⁶⁶ The 204th Battalion's newfound alliance with Operation Dignity prompted retaliation from Islamist forces, which conducted a suicide attack against the 204th Battalion headquarters.¹⁶⁷ Still, just a week after the launch of the Snake's Sting campaign, Operation Dignity had taken control of the 17 February Martyrs Brigade base, thus forcing one of the BRSC's strongest militias out of its main headquarters.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶¹ "Egypt Warplanes Strike Islamic Militias in Libya", *Associated Press*, 15 October 2014.

¹⁶² "Quwwaat 'al-Karaama' tutaaleb min shabaab Benghazi ta'meen manaateqhom", *Al-Wasat*, 13 October 2014.

¹⁶³ Mohammed Eljarh, "Libya: The Lesser of Two Evils", *Atlantic Council*, 22 October 2014,

<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/libya-the-lesser-of-two-evils>.

¹⁶⁴ Hisham al-Shalwi, "Al-sahwaat al-jadeeda fi Leebeeya: takteek aakhar li-Hifter", *Al-Arabi Al-Jadid*, 20 October 2014.

¹⁶⁵ Noora Ibrahim and Adam Ali, "Heavy Fighting in Benghazi as Dignity Makes Gains", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 15 October 2014.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Noora Ibrahim and Farah Waleed, "Operation Dignity Expects Benghazi Battles to End in a Week as Further Reinforcements Arrive", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 21 October 2014.

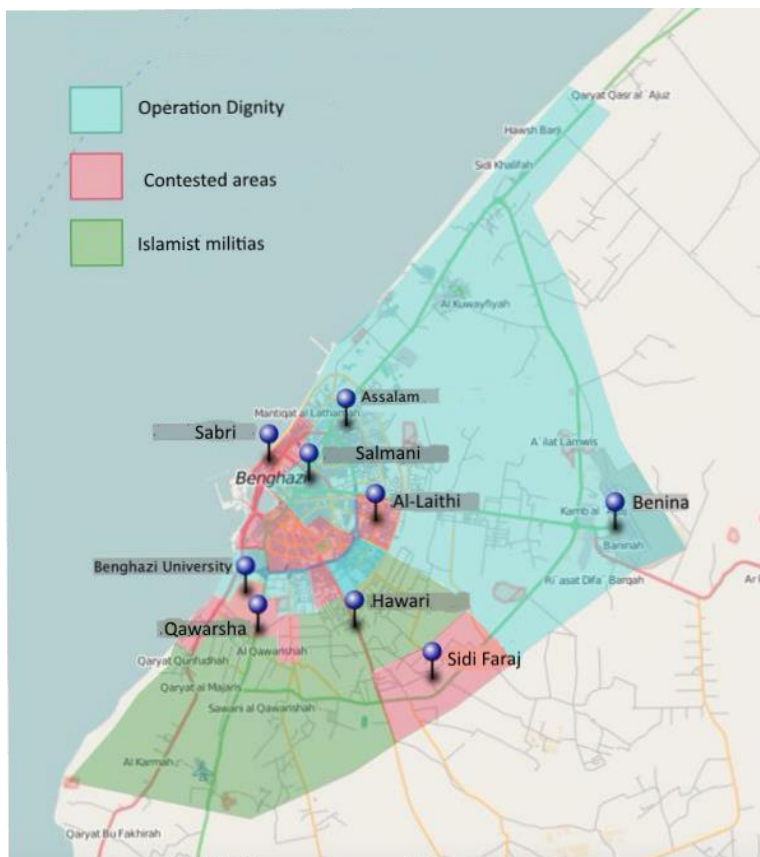


Figure 7: Operation Dignity campaign, 1 November, 2014. (Source: Mutaz Gedalla)

LNA seemed to have a winning combination: air strikes, a robust ground assault led by tank battalion and special forces units, and citizens who were intent on denying BRSC forces a place to hide. Operation Dignity forces retook the entire Benina district, driving back BRSC forces that had established a presence there in the previous weeks.¹⁶⁹ By 21 October, Dignity forces claimed control of 80 percent of Benghazi.¹⁷⁰ On 22 October, Operation Dignity forces seized control of the Qawarsha gate, a highly symbolic location in Benghazi that had previously been under BRSC's control.¹⁷¹ But perhaps the greatest propaganda victory for Operation Dignity came when rumors emerged that Mohamed al-Zahawi, ASL's commander, had been killed in air strikes in early October.¹⁷² These reports of Zahawi's death proved to be premature: Zahawi had been mortally wounded, but wouldn't succumb to his wounds until January 2015.¹⁷³

As Operation Dignity gained momentum, it also received another political boost when, on 17 November, the HoR confirmed its support for Operation Dignity and noted that Dignity now

officially operated under the command of HoR-appointed Libyan Army chief of staff Abd-al-Raziq al-Nazuri.¹⁷⁴

Despite early optimism about the success of the Snake's Sting offensive, it soon became apparent that ASL and other BRSC-aligned Islamist forces maintained a strong presence in Benghazi. The conflict evolved from a long-range fight largely characterised by air and artillery strikes into an urban, street-by-street battle. Though Islamist forces were forced to withdraw from the Benina district and parts of Bu'atni, they relocated to other districts in central and northern Benghazi.¹⁷⁵ Through the middle of November, clashes were ongoing in Sabri and the surrounding areas, as Dignity forces struggled to secure control of the Benghazi seaport, while Islamist forces placed sandbags around Al-Laithi district to prevent Dignity forces from advancing into the area.¹⁷⁶

¹⁶⁹ "Ta'zeezat min Tukra fi tareeqihaa li-Benghazi", *Al-Wasat*, 15 October 2014.

¹⁷⁰ Noora Ibrahim and Farah Waleed, "Operation Dignity Expects Benghazi Battles to End in a Week as Further Reinforcements Arrive", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 21 October 2014.

¹⁷¹ Noora Ibrahim, "Operation Dignity Takes Control of Gwarsha Gate as Fighting Goes into Seventh Day", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 22 October 2104.

¹⁷² "Ansar al-Sharia Leader Muhammad al-Zahawi Almost Certainly Dead", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 22 October 2014.

¹⁷³ "Libya's Ansar Confirms Chief's Death", *BBC*, 25 January 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30971915>.

¹⁷⁴ "HoR Says Operation Dignity under National Army", *Libya Herald*, 17 November 2014.

¹⁷⁵ "Al-Mismaari: al-jaysh al-watani takawwan qabl 'amaliyat al-karraama", *Al-Wasat*, 20 November 2014.

¹⁷⁶ See Maha Sulayman, "Air Force Bombs Benghazi's al-Nuran Hotel", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 15 November 2014 (mentioning Dignity efforts to control the seaport); "Ansaar al-Sharee'a yaghlaqoun tareeq al-nahr bi-Benghazi", *Al-Wasat*, 3 November 2014 (describing ASL's use of sandbags around Al-Laithi district).

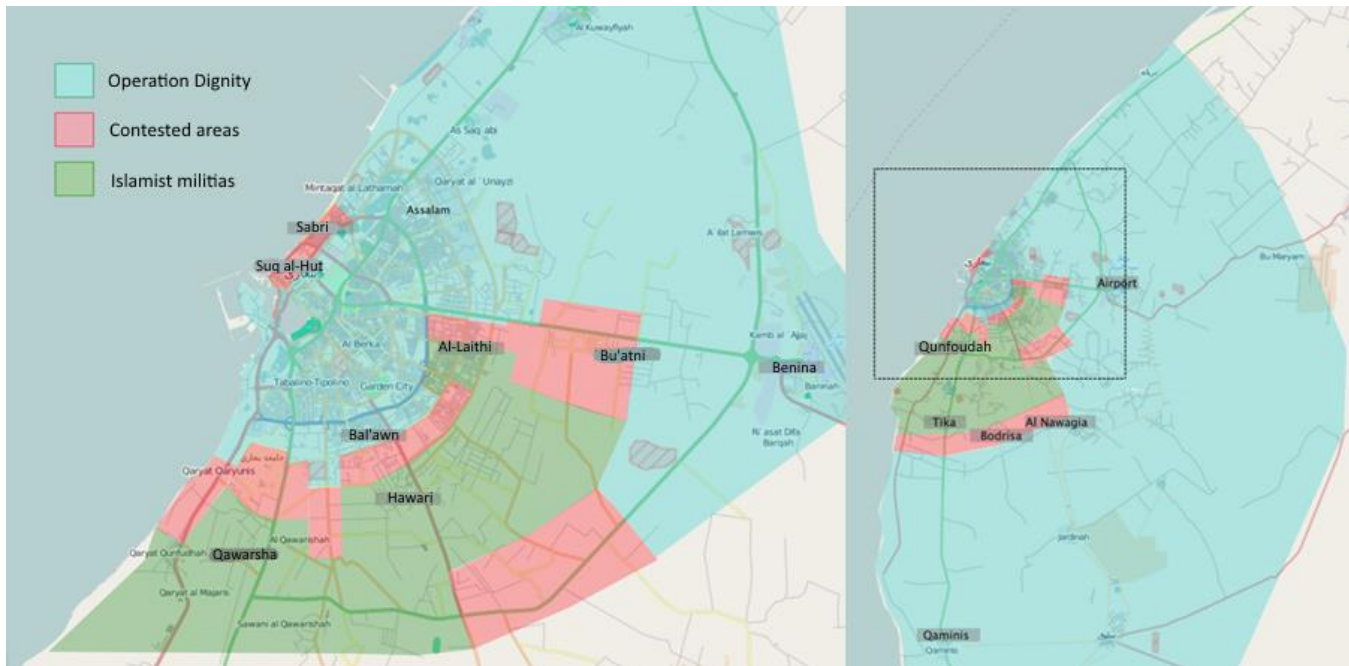


Figure 8: Operation Dignity campaign, 12 December 2014. (Source: Mutaz Gedalla)

As the conflict shifted toward urban warfare, BRSC forces began to rely more on suicide attacks to penetrate Dignity-controlled areas and assault Dignity checkpoints, with reports emerging that many suicide attacks were carried out by militants recruited from Derna.¹⁷⁷ Islamist forces also expanded the use of car bombs, including suicide attacks, beyond Benghazi. On 23 October, a suicide attacker detonated explosives as he drove up to a government checkpoint in Deryanah, 40 km east of Benghazi.¹⁷⁸ On 28 October, a car bomb exploded near the HoR's security headquarters in Tobruk, the first attack inside the city since HoR had moved there in August.¹⁷⁹ On 12 November, Islamist forces detonated car bombs in Benghazi, Tobruk, and Bayda in a coordinated campaign of attacks on cities controlled by HoR-aligned forces.¹⁸⁰ On 1 December, a car bomb detonated outside the security directorate building in Ajdabiya, part of a growing spree of attacks in the eastern city.¹⁸¹

Though security was deteriorating in some eastern cities, security improved markedly in Benghazi during the same period. By mid-December, Operation Dignity forces had consolidated control over much of Benghazi and were conducting sweeps to arrest BRSC supporters.¹⁸² Security in parts of the city improved to such a degree that by 3 December, Hifter and other top Dignity commanders appeared in public in the recently pacified Bal'awn district, which had just days before been the site of intense clashes between Dignity and BRSC fighters.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁷ Noora Ibrahim, "Operation Dignity Takes Control of Gwarsha Gate as Fighting Goes into Seventh Day", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 22 October 2014.

¹⁷⁸ "Several Dead in Violence in Libya's Benghazi," *Al Jazeera*, October 23, 2014.

¹⁷⁹ "Bomb Explodes inside Tobruk Security Perimeter", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 28 October 2014.

¹⁸⁰ "Blasts Hit Three Libyan Cities as UN Warns of War Crimes", *Al-Akhbar*, 12 November 2014.

¹⁸¹ "Infijaar sayyaara mufakhakha amaam mudayreerat amn Ajdaabiya", *Libya TV*, 1 December 2014.

¹⁸² "Benghazi al-mankouba: khareetat al-neeraan fi mahd al-thawra al-Leebeeya", *Al-Wasat*, 20 November 2014.

¹⁸³ "Bil-suwwar: Hifter yatajawwal fi Benghazi wal-jaysh yusayter 'ala Bal'awn", *Al-Wasat*, 3 December 2014.

10. Broader Implications of the Conflict in Libya

As previously detailed, describing the political divisions in Libya as primarily Islamist versus nationalist is overly reductive. One reason that Islamist versus nationalist is so often used to describe Libya's civil war, however, is because it reflects some of the principal concerns that outside states have. Will the conflict result in jihadist groups finding further safe haven in Libya? Will the impact of jihadism spill into such neighbouring states as Tunisia, Egypt, and Algeria? How widespread are the elements in Dawn and the GNC who support jihadist elements, either out of sympathy or naivete? GNC Prime Minister Omar al-Hasi has described ASL, for example, as a "simple, beautiful, friendly idea" that has been misunderstood.¹⁸⁴

When it comes to considering these questions, the fact that many factors other than religion help to drive the conflict between Dignity and Dawn negates neither the advantages that jihadist groups can derive nor the dangers posed to Libya's neighbours. Indeed, the salience of non-religious factors does not mean that the Islamist-nationalist divide is insignificant: just as there is a risk of overestimating religious ideology as a factor in Libya's conflict, there is also a danger of too quickly discounting it.

One thing is eminently clear: The longer the conflict between Dawn and Dignity drags on, the further the Libyan state will deteriorate, with profound implications for the country and the region. The major beneficiaries of state breakdown will be jihadist groups and other VNSAs who can thrive in a lawless environment. This section now examines the major strategic implications of the Libyan civil war.

10.1 Jihadist groups

Jihadist groups have been able to establish themselves in post-Qaddafi Libya from the very outset. They have become increasingly influential in northern Libya, due to the breakdown in order and also because jihadists are often viewed by other actors in the Dawn coalition as a bulwark against Hifter's expansion.

But jihadist groups have long been established in southern Libya as well, which is an ideal environment to launch operations into the Sahel and North Africa. Following Qaddafi's fall, jihadist actors capitalised on the breakdown of Libyan state security to establish safe havens and training camps in southern Libya. The Muhammad Jamal Network (MJN), which is connected to al Qaeda, is one group that used Libya to establish an enclave. The connections between al Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri and the MJN became clear after MJN leader Muhammad Jamal's November 2012 arrest: as the US State Department has explained, Jamal's "confiscated computer contained letters to al-Zawahiri in which Jamal asked for assistance and described MJN's activities, including acquiring weapons, conducting terrorist training, and establishing terrorist groups in the Sinai".¹⁸⁵ MJN has operated camps in Libya that include training for suicide missions, and has been able to smuggle fighters into other countries through Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's established networks.¹⁸⁶

Jihadist groups in southern Libya have focused on establishing training camps and supply lines rather than seizing and holding territory. Locals near Ubari, for example, have reported that jihadist factions have kept a low

¹⁸⁴ Bel Trew, "A Ground Invasion of the Capital Is Imminent", *Foreign Policy*, 29 December 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/29/a-ground-invasion-of-the-capital-is-imminent-libya-dawn-haftar-militias/>.

¹⁸⁵ Office of the Spokesperson, US Department of State, "Terrorist Designations of the Muhammad Jamal Network and Muhammad Jamal", 7 October 2013.

¹⁸⁶ Siobhan Gorman and Matt Bradley, "Militant Link to Libya Attack", *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 October 2012, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390444549204578020373444418316>.

profile, purchasing a large farm to use as a training camp, and that they have tried to ingratiate themselves with local tribes.¹⁸⁷

Weaponry pillaged from Qaddafi's arsenal, as well as other weapons that transited through the country post-Qaddafi, has also made its way into the hands of various VNSAs outside Libya, including jihadists. Jihadists have used southern Libya as a base from which to smuggle arms and fighters to groups operating in active battlespaces in Niger and Mali.¹⁸⁸

Jihadist groups have also fled to Libya to escape recent crackdowns and military operations in such neighbouring countries as Mali, Tunisia and Algeria. When France militarily intervened in northern Mali in early 2013 to dislodge AQIM from the area it controlled, southern Libya was one prominent place to which militants fled.¹⁸⁹ Other major jihadist leaders who have reportedly found shelter in Libya include AST leader Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi and Mokhtar Belmokhtar.¹⁹⁰ Jihadist leaders in Libya may also be able to travel between the country's south and north. Reports suggest that Belmokhtar has traveled to the coastal cities of Sirte and Sebratah and that he met with various groups while in northern Libya.¹⁹¹ Sometimes these groups use the ungoverned space in southern and western Libya as a staging ground for attacks outside Libya's borders. For example, jihadist groups used safe havens in Libya as a jumping off point for a counteroffensive in Mali and elsewhere in the Sahel against French and African forces.¹⁹²

10.2 The Islamic State

IS's foothold in Libya has often been overstated, including inaccurate mainstream press reporting that the group had taken over the city of Derna or that ASL is now operating "largely under the umbrella of the Islamic State".¹⁹³ Nonetheless, the fact remains that the group has been engaged in a series of increasingly brutal attacks in Libya.

Indeed, one of IS's purposes behind its brutal beheading of 21 Egyptian Copts may have been to suck Egypt more deeply into the Libya conflict. IS has for some time been trying to gain supporters in Libya and delegitimise the more accommodationist elements within the Dawn coalition. In drawing Egypt further into the conflict, IS likely hopes to attract hardline elements within Dawn who are fervently opposed to Egypt's intervention. It is not clear that this is a sound strategic calculation: indeed, IS's tendency to keep opening new fronts and making new enemies in Iraq and Syria has ended up causing a significant decline in the jihadist group's strength in that theatre.¹⁹⁴

But regardless of whether IS's plan to draw Egypt further into the Libya conflict ends up being wise, the fact that the jihadist group has been able to gain more visibility in Libya is a testament to the deterioration of security

¹⁸⁷ Remi Carayol, "Libye: L'autre Jihadistan", *Jeune Afrique*, 29 September 2014, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2802p038.xml0/>.

¹⁸⁸ Alain Barluet, "L'armée Française Monte un Poste avancé aux Portes de la Libye", *Le Figaro*, 3 October 2014, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2014/10/03/01003-20141003ARTFIG00354-l-armee-francaise-monte-un-poste-avance-aux-portes-de-la-libye.php>.

¹⁸⁹ Adam Entous, Drew Hinshaw, and David Gauthier-Villars, "Militants, Chased From Mali, Pose New Threats" *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 May 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323336104578503464066163002>; Chivvis and Martini, *Libya After Qaddafi*, p. ix (noting that "southern Libya verges on becoming a safe haven for al-Qaeda-linked groups recently chased from Mali by French military forces").

¹⁹⁰ See "Ex-Tunisian Premier Says 2012 Operation to Arrest Ansar al-Sharia Leader Halted 'to Avoid Bloodshed'", *Tunisia Live*, 2 June 2014 (noting that Abu Iyadh "is believed to have fled to Libya"); Robert Verkaik and Robert Mendick, "Al-Qaeda Leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar Sparks New Jihadi Terror Threat", *Telegraph* (U.K.), 13 July 2014 (noting that Belmokhtar "fled to Libya after surviving a counter-terrorist operation" that targeted him).

¹⁹¹ "Aalaaf al-jhaadeeyeen al-leebeeyeen ya'oudoun min Soureeya wal-Iraq li-muwaajahat Hifter", *Asharq al-Awsat*, 15 July 2014.

¹⁹² See Serge Daniel, "Jihadists Announce Blood-Soaked Return to Northern Mali", *Agence France Presse*, 9 October 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/jihadists-announce-blood-soaked-return-northern-mali-04431121.html>.

¹⁹³ For the claim that IS had taken over Derna, see Maggie Michael, "How a Libyan City Joined the Islamic State Group", *Associated Press*, 9 November 2014. For the claim that ASL is fighting under IS's umbrella, see Benoît Faucon and Matt Bradley, "Islamic State Gained Strength in Libya by Co-opting Local Jihadists", *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 February 2015.

¹⁹⁴ For discussion of the Islamic State's decline in Iraq and Syria, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "ISIS is Losing Its Greatest Weapon: Momentum", *The Atlantic*, 6 January 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/01/the-decline-of-isis-syria-iraq/384261/>.

conditions. To date, despite IS's attention-grabbing acts of brutality, the jihadist group has been a less powerful and less important actor than other jihadist factions. Yet though IS isn't one of the major players in Libya at this point, its brutal attacks have attracted a massive amount of attention, and Libya is clearly of high organisational importance to IS. Momentum is of great importance to the group, and now that it is experiencing losses in Iraq and Syria, IS is attempting to show that it is rapidly expanding internationally. It has placed great emphasis on sending this signal about its presence in Libya.

10.3 Spillover into North African countries

Egypt has perhaps the most at stake among North African countries with respect to the conflict in Libya. Jihadist groups in eastern and southern Libya directly threaten Egypt's security, and Egypt is also concerned that Islamists in the Dawn coalition could provide aid to exiled Muslim Brotherhood figures.

There is growing evidence that Libyan jihadist groups have developed relationships with the Sinai-based jihadist group Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), which renamed itself Wilayat Sinai after pledging an oath of *bayat* (allegiance) to IS. Libyan jihadist groups have reportedly provided safe haven to ABM militants fleeing Egyptian crackdowns, and have provided ABM with weapons from Qaddafi's old stockpiles.¹⁹⁵ One ABM commander confirmed that some ABM militants had fled to Libya, while another member said militants from Libya had traveled to ABM strongholds in Sinai in April 2014 to offer weapons, logistical support, and fighters.¹⁹⁶

Al Qaeda has more of a presence in Libya than does the Islamic State, so it remains to be seen if ABM's recent pledge of *bayat* (loyalty) to the Islamic State will reduce its ability to gain from events in Libya.¹⁹⁷ But even if it does, the situation in Libya has also benefited other Egyptian militants and political Islamist leaders hostile to the Egyptian government. Those who established a presence in Libya include, for example, Thurwat Shihatah, a former Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al Qaeda commander and close confidante of Ayman al-Zawahiri. During his time in Libya — after which he was arrested by Egyptian authorities — Shihatah may have met with a number of al Qaeda members, including Zubayr al-Maghrebi and Abu Anas al-Libi.¹⁹⁸ According to Egyptian officials, Shihatah also was involved in running militant training camps in and around Derna and Benghazi.¹⁹⁹

The conflict in Libya is also damaging Egypt economically. As Egypt's economy falters, it has become increasingly reliant on other countries, including Libya, to provide jobs for Egypt's underemployed population. Prior to the outbreak of the current conflict in Libya, there were an estimated 300,000 to 1.5 million Egyptian workers in Libya.²⁰⁰ But as violence in Libya grew, Egyptian workers were increasingly targeted: Coptic Christians were victimised in particular even before IS's cold-blooded execution video. Thus thousands of Egyptian workers have streamed back

¹⁹⁵ David Kirkpatrick, "Militant Group in Egypt Vows Loyalty to ISIS", *The New York Times*, 10 November 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/11/world/middleeast/egyptian-militant-group-pledges-loyalty-to-isis.html>.

¹⁹⁶ See "Islamic State Guides Egyptian Militants, Expanding its Influence", *Reuters*, 5 September 2014 (quoting an ABM commander who said that "we have individuals who went to Libya"); "Egyptians Fear Islamist Militants Gathering on Libyan Border", *Reuters*, 13 July 2014 (quoting an ABM member saying that Libyan militants had "offered support, weapons, supplies and fighters").

¹⁹⁷ On this point, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis's Oath of Allegiance to the Islamic State* (Wikistrat, 2015).

¹⁹⁸ Adam Goldman, "Senior al-Qaeda Figure Leaves Iran amid a Series of Departures by Terrorist Suspects", *The Washington Post*, 14 February 2014.

¹⁹⁹ Maggie Michael, "Egypt Arrests a Top Aide to al-Qaida Chief", *Associated Press*, 7 April, 2014.

²⁰⁰ Frederic Wehrey, David Bishop and Ala' Alrababa'h, "Backdrop to an Intervention: Sources of Egyptian-Libyan Border Tension", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 27 August 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/08/27/backdrop-to-intervention-sources-of-egyptian-libyan-border-tension>.

across the border into Egypt, abandoning their jobs in order to escape violence. This sudden influx of newly unemployed Egyptians will likely place further strain on Egypt's economy.²⁰¹

Egypt has taken several steps to mitigate the threat emanating from its western neighbour, ranging from border protection measures to direct military intervention. This study has already discussed Egypt's use of air strikes in support of Dignity, and Western diplomats also believe that Egyptian special forces have conducted kinetic operations in eastern Libya, including raids near Benghazi's Benina airport and against a training camp near Derna.²⁰² Egypt has also offered other overt and covert support to Operation Dignity forces, including offering training and intelligence-sharing to Operation Dignity forces.²⁰³ And though Egypt denies it, an Operation Dignity soldier claimed that much of the ammunition in the Dignity arsenal is provided by Egypt.²⁰⁴

Tunisia shares many of these concerns about the way VNSAs can exploit the situation in Libya, prompting Prime Minister Mehdi Jomaa to describe the situation in Libya as the greatest threat that Tunisia faces.²⁰⁵ Tunisia has been engaged in a crackdown against jihadists, primarily AST. Though the crackdown went well initially, jihadists have increasingly been able to rebound in Tunisia, in part because they have been able to find safe haven in Libya. In addition to AST emir Abu Iyad al-Tunisi, growing numbers of Tunisian militants have also entered Libya in recent months to attend training camps.²⁰⁶ The flow of weapons from Libya to Tunisia has also strengthened the capabilities of Tunisian militants.

Tunisia also has more general concerns about the impact that Libya's civil war will have on Tunisian stability, concerns that Tunisian officials have been articulating for some time. In a June 2014 interview, Tunisian foreign minister Mongi Hamdi said he was "extremely worried" about the explosion of violence in Libya, and acknowledged that the Libya conflict posed an "internal problem for Tunisia".²⁰⁷ One way Libya's situation poses an internal problem is a budding refugee crisis along the Tunisia-Libya border, as thousands of Libyans are trying to flee their country. Clashes have erupted on the border on numerous occasions, with Tunisian security forces opening fire on Egyptians who tried to storm the border crossing after being denied entry because they lacked visas.²⁰⁸ The influx of Libyan refugees into Tunisia has also stressed Tunisia's economy and health system, as wounded fighters seek treatment in Tunisian hospitals and thousands of Libyan refugees take advantage of Tunisian economic subsidies.²⁰⁹

Algeria also has similar security concerns. AQIM, which considers the Algerian state a primary target, has directly benefited from the proliferation of weapons in Libya and the deterioration of security in the country's south. This has helped AQIM and other like-minded groups to operate unmolested in the area. Algerian security fears were realised in January 2013, when militants who had received training in southern Libya stormed the In Amenas oil

²⁰¹ "Egypt's Improving Economy and Stabilizing Politics Reduce Downside Risks", *Moody's Investor's Service*, 27 October 2014, https://www.moodys.com/research/Moodys-Egypt-improving-economy-and-stabilizing-politics-reduce-downside-risks--PR_310960.

²⁰² David Kirkpatrick, "Car Bombs Explode Near Egyptian and U.A.E. Embassies in Libya", *The New York Times*, 13 November 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/14/world/africa/car-bombs-explode-near-egypt-and-uae-embassies-in-libya.html>.

²⁰³ "Egypt Offers to Train Libyan Army to Bolster Fight against Islamists", *Al-Akhbar*, 1 October 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/21790>.

²⁰⁴ "Fighter in Hifter Forces Says Operation Dignity Gets Ammunition from Egypt 'Only'", *Libya Herald* (Tripoli), 26 October 2014. For Egypt's denials on this point, see "Egypt Offers Military Training to Libya, Cites Islamic State Threat", *Reuters*, 1 October 2014.

²⁰⁵ "Tunisia Prime Minister Sees Main Threat from Libya", *Associated Press*, 3 January 2015.

²⁰⁶ "Tunisia Remains in the Crosshairs of the Libyan War", *Al-Akhbar*, 11 December 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/22847>.

²⁰⁷ Mohammad al-Makki Ahmad, "Tunisia Foreign Minister 'Extremely Worried' about Libya", *Al-Hayat*, 3 June 2014.

²⁰⁸ "Tunisia Seals Libya Border after Violence", *Al Jazeera*, 2 August 2014.

²⁰⁹ See Carlotta Gall, "Libyan Refugees Stream to Tunisia for Care, and Tell of a Home That Is Torn Apart", *The New York Times*, 9 September 2014 (noting that "hundreds of wounded fighters, from opposing sides, have arrived" in Tunisia since August); "No Stability in Tunisia Without Stability in Libya: Tunisian FM", *Asharq Al-Awsat* (London), 29 November 2014 (quoting the Tunisian foreign minister's concern that "more than a million Libyans are in Tunisia and many of them go to state-owned hospitals and enjoy almost free public health services").

facility in southeastern Algeria.²¹⁰ The In Amenas attack deeply rattled the Algerian regime and prompted a restructuring of Algeria's security apparatus.²¹¹

The launch of Operation Dignity sparked concerns that the conflict in Libya would spread into Algeria, thus prompting Algeria to deploy an additional 5,000 soldiers and police officers to the Libyan border.²¹² Algerian officials are now beginning to reconsider Algeria's commitment to a policy of non-interference in the affairs of its neighbours. In recent months, Algerian security officials have told the press that the country's security forces won't remain on the sidelines if actors in Libya pose an imminent threat to Algeria and Tunisia.²¹³

Nevertheless, for now Algeria remains opposed to international intervention in Libya, arguing that outside involvement would exacerbate the problem.²¹⁴ Instead, Algeria has been at the forefront of efforts to reconcile opposing Libyan factions, utilising its connections with Islamist groups to try to bring the Dawn forces to the negotiating table. Similarly, Tunisia has sought to facilitate talks between both sides, condemning efforts by other regional actors to intervene militarily.²¹⁵

10.4 Qatar and the United Arab Emirates

Even as Libya's neighbors warn of the deleterious impacts of Libya's civil war, Qatar and UAE continue to support their respective sides. Both Qatar and UAE view Libya as part of a broader regional struggle for influence and power.

During the uprising against Qaddafi, both Qatar and UAE provided significant aid to revolutionary militias. Although *realpolitik* can explain the Gulf states' broader strategy in Libya, ideological considerations may have also influenced Qatari and Emirati calculations about whom to support. While Qatar aided a network of Islamist militias, including former LIFG fighters, the UAE, long suspicious of Islamist parties at home, supported Zintani militias.²¹⁶

In the wake of the outbreak of the current round of fighting, both Qatar and the UAE have intervened in the hopes of swaying the conflict in favor of their Libyan clients. UAE has collaborated with Egypt in conducting military operations, including air strikes, against Islamist-leaning militias. Conversely, Qatar has sent arms shipments via Dawn-controlled Mitiga airport in Tripoli.²¹⁷ The Sudanese government has also been accused of sending arms through Mitiga airport to Dawn fighters.²¹⁸

10.5 Europe

Europe has several concerns related to developments in Libya. In addition to fears that the situation could directly lead to a terrorist attack on the continent, there are immediate concerns for the security of European companies operating in Libya and neighboring countries. Several European states have evacuated their citizens, including

²¹⁰ Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister, "Algeria Attack May Have Link to Libya Camps", *CNN*, 23 January 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/18/world/africa/algeria-attacks/>.

²¹¹ Imad Mesdoui, "Algeria: North Africa's Reluctant Policeman", *National Interest*, 29 September 2014.

²¹² Alex MacDonald, "Algeria Deploys 5,000 Troops to the Libyan Border", *Middle East Eye*, 30 May 2014.

²¹³ Yacine Boudhane, "Algeria's Role in Solving the Libya Crisis", *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 28 August 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/algerias-role-in-solving-the-libya-crisis>.

²¹⁴ Mesdoui, "Algeria: North Africa's Reluctant Policeman".

²¹⁵ Raghida Dargham, "Tunisia's President Says IS, Syrian Regime Must Go", *Al-Hayat*, 26 September 2014 (translation published in *Al-Monitor*).

²¹⁶ Frederic Wehrey, "Is Libya a Proxy War?", *The Washington Post*, 24 October 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/10/24/is-libya-a-proxy-war/>.

²¹⁷ "Libya Threatens to 'Sever Relations' with Qatar over Arms Delivery to Islamist Rebels", *World Tribune*, 16 September 2014, <http://www.worldtribune.com/2014/09/16/libya-threatens-sever-relations-qatar-arms-delivery-islamic-militia/>.

²¹⁸ Chris Stephen, "Libya Accuses Khartoum of Flying Weapons to Islamist Rebels in Tripoli", *The Guardian*, 7 September 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/07/libya-khartoum-weapons-islamist-rebels>.

expatriate workers, from Libya out of concern about such attacks.²¹⁹ Facilities owned by European companies in Libya, including the Mellitah oil and gas complex, remain vulnerable to attack. As the In Amenas attack shows, jihadists based in Libya are also capable of launching cross-border attacks against facilities in Algeria.

The Libya conflict has also exacerbated Europe's growing refugee crisis. Libya has become the most popular departure point for East and West African migrants trying to reach Europe, both because of Libya's geographic proximity and also because the Libyan state lacks the capability to enforce security on its borders or detain migrants once they enter.²²⁰ While Libya's ability to handle the influx of African migrants was limited even before the outbreak of civil war, recent instability has further handcuffed the government's capabilities. The International Organization for Migration warned in August 2014 that migration from Libya into Europe could drastically increase in the coming months due to rising violence.²²¹

11. Exploring US and European Policy Options

The United States and European Union face two major policy questions regarding Libya. First, what are the prospects of success for the current round of negotiations? Second, if they fail, should Western states support the internationally-recognized HoR government against its rivals?

While Western states have affirmed the legitimacy of the Tobruk-based HoR, other countries have the opposite view. Turkey has thrown its support behind the GNC, and became the first country to send an envoy to meet with GNC Prime Minister Omar al-Hasi after the GNC reconvened in August.²²² Sudan has also continued to support the GNC, and was recently accused by the HoR government of providing military assistance to Dawn forces.²²³ Qatar, which has long been accused of backing GNC and Dawn forces, recently sent Foreign Minister Khalid al-Attiyah to meet with Mohamed al-Dairi, the foreign minister of the HoR, a move that some have seen as indicating a possible shift in Qatari policy.²²⁴

11.1 Political negotiations

Though Western countries see the HoR rather than the GNC as legitimate, these states have endorsed political negotiations as the best means for resolving the conflict. In late January 2015, the African Union also affirmed its support for political talks, with a spokesperson noting that "the situation in Libya cannot be resolved by force, but only by a political agreement between Libyans themselves".²²⁵ Regional analysts are nearly unanimous in concluding that political dialogue between the rival blocs is the most promising option. Analysts have emphasised that, for negotiations to succeed, the international community must be willing to engage with the GNC even though many international actors view the GNC as an illegitimate body that elbowed its way to the negotiating table through the

²¹⁹ See "Libya Violence Forces Countries to Evacuate Workers, Nationals", Voice of America, 31 July 2014; Benoit Faucon, "Eni, Repsol Expatriates Evacuated from Libya", *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 July 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/eni-repsol-expatriates-evacuated-from-libya-1405893922>.

²²⁰ Arezo Malakooti, "Mixed Migration into Libya: Mapping Migration Routes from Africa to Europe and Drivers of Migration in Post-Revolution Libya", International Organization for Migration, January 2014, <http://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/what-we-do/migration-policy-and-research/migration-policy-1/migration-policy-practice/issues/december-2013-january-2014/mixed-migration-into-libya-mappi.html>.

²²¹ "Libya Fighting Hits Migrants Hard: IOM", *Daily Star* (Beirut), 29 August 2014.

²²² "Turkish Envoy Meets Libya's Rival Leader in Tripoli", *Daily Sabah*, 23 October 2014.

²²³ Khalid Mahmoud, "Sudan Aided Libyan Militants in Oil Terminal Attack: Tobruk Minister", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 31 December 2014.

²²⁴ "Qatari FM Meets Libya's Rival FM in Doha", *World Bulletin*, 5 January 2015.

²²⁵ "No Military Solution to Libyan Crisis: African Union", *Agence France Presse*, 29 January 2015.

use of force.²²⁶ This prioritisation of negotiations as preferable to taking sides in the civil war is proper. But what are the chances that negotiations will succeed?

The UN's track record in Libya provides some reason for pessimism, though the possibility of a breakthrough shouldn't be ruled out. In late September, UN special envoy to Libya Bernardino Leon brokered what was expected to be the first stage of political talks, but there was little enthusiasm for the negotiations, as key actors were quick to criticise the UN-led initiative for excluding many key players. Members of the HoR expressed skepticism that Dawn military actors wouldn't recognise the outcome of the negotiations.²²⁷ Indeed, members of the Dawn coalition soon issued a statement condemning the talks.²²⁸ The BRSC also condemned the talks in a statement it posted to Facebook. But the UN hasn't given up on its efforts to foster a political settlement, and is currently engaged in a new round of talks in Geneva. There has been prominent skepticism about this round of talks, with one member of Adullah al-Thinni's cabinet saying that the negotiations were a "waste of time", and would fail "due to the strictness of the extremists who control the capital Tripoli".²²⁹ Ongoing fighting in Benghazi between Hifter and Islamist forces also threatens to scuttle talks.

Even if negotiations don't yield the sort of comprehensive political agreement necessary to bring the fighting to a halt, other benefits may result from political dialogue. For one, negotiations could cause discord within the Dawn-GNC coalition, possibly leading more moderate factions to distance themselves from extremist groups. There have already been signs of dissension within Dawn: in September, the hardline BRSC accused those who engaged in negotiations of betraying Islam and siding with the enemy.²³⁰ A spokesman for the Libyan Central Shield militia, a Misrata-based armed faction aligned with Dawn, distanced his group from Dawn's statement.²³¹ And after the UN Security Council added ASL to its al Qaeda sanctions list in November 2014, the Misrata Municipal Council, a democratically-elected local governance body, called for ASL's dissolution.²³²

Furthermore, political dialogue could help international actors map out the various actors within both Dawn and Dignity, as many outside observers view the two coalitions' internal dynamics as largely opaque. But international actors should be realistic in their expectations about what can be achieved through negotiations.

11.2 Military support for the HoR/Operation Dignity

If negotiations appear unlikely to attain their objectives, US and European 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 and forces aligned with the Tobruk-based parliament. The majority of Libya analysts are lukewarm about this option, or outright opposed to it, arguing that negotiations should be the international community's first choice. The downsides that they identify are real, but advocates of supporting Dignity factions might counter that the alternatives are so unpalatable that supporting Dignity is nonetheless justified.

To flesh out concerns about support for Hifter and Dignity, Hifter's indiscriminate targeting of all Islamists in Benghazi helped unite disparate Islamist militias into a single coalition. Even in Benghazi, the militia landscape had

²²⁶ For arguments concerning the need to engage with the GNC, see Jason Pack, "Situation Report: Libya", *Tony Blair Faith Foundation*, 10 November 2014; Frederic Wehrey and Wolfram Lacher, "Libya's Legitimacy Crisis", *Foreign Affairs*, 6 October 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142138/frederic-wehrey-and-wolfram-lacher/libyas-legitimacy-crisis>.

²²⁷ Ulf Laessing, "Libya's Parliament Holds Crisis Talks with Rival Assembly", *Reuters*, 30 September 2014.

²²⁸ "Libya Dawn Militia Rejects UN Talks", *Al Jazeera*, 30 September 2014.

²²⁹ Khalid Mahmoud, "Libyan Peace Talks Will Fail: Minister", *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 15 January 2015, <http://www.aawsat.net/2015/01/article55340441>.

²³⁰ Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, statement no. 20, posted to Facebook, 30 September 2014.

²³¹ "Dare' al-wustaa al-leebee yanfee silatihi bi-bayaan 'fajr leebeeya'", *Al-Masri Al-Yaum*, 30 September 2014.

²³² "Misrata Tells Ansar to Disband, Demands UN Sanction Hifter Too", *Libya Herald*, 23 November 2014.

been ideologically diverse, and included a number of moderate Islamist contingents who had been willing to align with the state. Hifter's approach, rather than accentuating the divisions among his foes, provided them with a common cause. This ended up strengthening the most problematic of groups in Benghazi, notably ASL, as the differences between the various Islamist militias in Benghazi melted away in the face of Hifter's offensive. As one Islamist politician explained, "When you are fighting against an intruder, sometimes you have hard choices. You are brothers in arms now and work out your differences later".²³³ Thus, Hifter's offensive had a deeply polarising effect on the political landscape in Benghazi, and Western support for Dignity may further polarise the country.²³⁴ In addition to these strategic considerations, concerns about Hifter's personal ambitions and authoritarian tendencies remain.

But while Hifter is a polarising figure, growing concerns about the proliferation of VNSAs in Libya may cause many Western policymakers to believe that supporting Dignity is the "least bad option" if negotiations fail. The argument will be that despite "Dignity's flaws", it may be the most promising partner for the West, if for no other reason than because it has been "attacking groups that, frankly, are on our list of terrorists", as US Ambassador to Libya Deborah Jones noted.²³⁵ Support for Dignity will look even more attractive if Hifter can be sidelined in favour of leadership that is more inclined to distinguish among the various Islamist factions, though it is not clear that such a change in military leadership is likely. One policy option that Western states might pursue, however, is to pressure Hifter to completely cede command authority to HoR-appointed chief of staff Abd-al-Raziq al-Nazuri.²³⁶

Perhaps the greatest risk associated with a policy of offering aid to Dignity forces is that doing so could push moderate Islamist elements in Dawn into a closer alliance with jihadist actors. This move would present an additional challenge both to political reconciliation efforts and to Western counterterrorism interests.

But the dire situation in Libya is unlikely to recede anytime soon, and the cost to other countries, including in Europe, is likely to rise. There is no easy answer to the policy questions explored herein. But it is important that policymakers understand the course of the conflict, the mistakes that were made along the way, and what is at stake. They need to consider these policy questions with open eyes, rather than being blindsided when they are eventually forced to confront them.

²³³ David Kirkpatrick, "Strife in Libya Could Presage Long Civil War", *The New York Times*, 25 August 2014.

²³⁴ For scholars advancing this argument, see Jason Pack, "Situation Report: Libya"; Frederic Wehrey, "Mosul on the Mediterranean?: The Islamic State in Libya and U.S. Counterterrorism Dilemmas", *Lawfare*, 17 December 2014 (arguing that "a more dangerous risk of direct support to Operation Dignity is its elastic definition of terrorism").

²³⁵ Barbara Slavin, "U.S. Ambassador Says Libyan General is Going after 'Terrorists'", *Al-Monitor*, 21 May 2014.

²³⁶ For this policy option, see Engel, *Libya as a Failed State*, p. 24 (arguing that Western countries should "press Haftar's Operation Dignity forces to operate more transparently under the command of Abdul Razzaq Nazuri, the HOR armed forces chief of staff, or some type of military committee with clear civilian oversight").

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