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Militia chess

Heavy fighting in Tripoli has shaken the city, exposing the illusion of security in a country ruled mainly by rival militias rather than the state

Heavy street fighting broke out between rival militias in the centre of Libya's capital, Tripoli, just weeks before Eid al-Adha (the Feast of Sacrifice). The clashes were the most violent seen in some time and show no sign of abating. The situation has shocked the population to the core, revealing just how fragile the security is that Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh promised to restore after taking office in 2021.

It has become clear that without functioning state institutions and legitimate, democratic structures, long-lasting peace in Libya remains a pipedream. And yet, the political elite are refusing to give up on the status quo, fearing it will lose its grip on power. Instead of seeking compromise, they are consolidating their power by controlling militias, economic patronage networks and institutional influence. While the prime minister fills key posts with family members and loyal businessmen, General Khalifa Haftar is increasingly anchoring his influence through formal state structures.

Political deadlock

Since the fall of Gaddafi, Libya has suffered from persistent instability and political division. Although a unity government was installed under Dbeibeh in 2021 following international negotiations, elections did not take place as promised and the political deadlock remains to this day. In western Libya, the internationally recognised government controls just part of the territory, resting on the support of various militias. In the east, Haftar and his 'Libyan National Army' control around two-thirds of the country, supported by parliament and a parallel government under Osama Hamad. Haftar also has influence on the political agenda and security situation throughout the country through his allies in the High Council of State and militant groups in the west.

The idea behind formally incorporating western Libyan militias into

state structures – such as the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior – was originally meant as a measure to help reform security policy. But this approach resulted in the state being infiltrated, plundered and controlled by the militias. So, the constant conflicts in Tripoli are not isolated incidents, but symptoms of a systemic power struggle between competing interests.

The latest escalation in Tripoli is a prime example: it comes just one day after the most influential militia leader, Abdel Ghani al-Kikli, better known as Ghnewa, was assassinated. Since 2021, he had led the controversial Stability Support Apparatus and was seen as a key ally of Dbeibeh's government. In return, he got to fill major government positions with individuals loyal to him and access state resources, despite his criminal history. He placed confidants in ministries, the central bank and strategically important state-owned companies – particularly in the oil and telecommunications sectors – giving him power over laws and regulations that have a major impact on people's lives, such as monetary policy, women's rights and civil society.

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Dbeibeh portrayed this move as a legitimate security measure. In reality, though, all signs point to an internal power struggle with Ghnewa, who had become too influential, demanding more control and resources and posing a growing threat to Dbeibeh and the other militias who support him. Most recently, he used violence to try to gain more influence over the telecommunications holding company by kidnapping its president, who is close to Dbeibeh.

The reason why militia leaders such as Ghnewa and others have become so influential is because Libya has no functioning government, no independent judicial system and no accountability. International organisations have repeatedly reported human rights violations in Libya; the perpetrators have not only evaded all criminal responsibility for their actions, but have managed to gain even more power instead. Dbeibeh himself also resorted to violence to curb Ghnewa's ambitions for power, rather than holding him accountable through the justice system.

With Ghnewa out of the picture, this could have ushered in more state domination — but other problematic militias are now stepping into his place. Dbeibeh relies on groups like these to protect himself from retaliation by Ghnewa's allies. But their support comes at a high price, just as before. With ties having been broken with Ghnewa, Dbeibeh has

also lost the trust of key supporters. Now that he is more vulnerable, he has no choice but to buy new loyalties at a high cost.

Dbeibeh hasn't won the people over, though. Many held him directly responsible for the ongoing violence and fresh fighting, taking to the streets of Tripoli to demand his resignation, in numbers not seen in a long time. But this anger towards him is nothing new. Even after four years in office, Dbeibeh's government has failed to provide stability, maintain the rule of law or hold elections. And despite Libya's vast oil reserves, there has been no improvement to the socio-economic situation in the country. Around 40 per cent of people live below the poverty line, and around 20 per cent are unemployed. Many places lack electricity and working infrastructure. State schools and hospitals are underfunded and over capacity, all while the political elite – in the west and the east – continue to engage in corruption for power and personal gain.

General Haftar is once again exploiting the situation to expand his influence throughout Libya, as he has done in previous crises. In the west, he is consciously supporting opposition forces to destabilise Dbeibeh's already weakened government even further. Haftar, on the other hand, has been consolidating his power ever since the failed offensive in Tripoli in 2019: militarily through the Libyan National Army and economically through his sons, who control resources. These include oil production and exports, as well as Libya's Development and Reconstruction Fund, for which parliament approved a special budget of $12.71 billion in early June — under the leadership of one of Haftar's sons and outside the regular budget.

Opportunities for change?

But with crises also come opportunities for change. Since the failed elections in 2021, Libya has been stuck in political deadlock and the people are only getting more frustrated, hoping that free elections, the rule of law, social justice and an end to arbitrary rule will bring a fresh start. But in this crisis too, they risk having their hopes dashed yet again. The rival players are taking advantage of the stalemate and obstructing elections or any reform processes that could jeopardise their position of power. It is unlikely that the latest developments will lead to any fundamental change. The battle for Tripoli and the spoils of the rival militias will likely continue until an agreement is reached on power and resource sharing. Even the protests against Dbeibeh's government have waned, as many see him as the lesser evil and preferable to a military coup by Haftar in Tripoli.

The European Union and Germany played a pivotal role in Libyan

politics since 2020, primarily through the Berlin Conference, which resulted in the Dbeibeh government. Together with regional 'spoilers', they have since focused on de-escalation, strengthening the internationally recognised Dbeibeh government and restoring the democratic process. Without effective pressure on all political actors – especially Dbeibeh himself – these efforts could well be in vain. Symbolic measures such as crisis committees formed by the Presidential Council, welcomed by the UN mission (UNSMIL), fail to address the structural causes of the ongoing instability. For as long as Libya is marked by state capture, militia rule and institutional fragmentation, peaceful transitions of power based on the rule of law will remain a fantasy.

The international community should set a deadline for the country to hold free and fair elections.

For lasting political change to occur in Libya, there are three structural conditions: functioning state institutions have to be in place, security forces need to be strengthened based on the rule of law, and clientelist networks must be purposefully dismantled. Genuine steps towards free and fair elections are also needed, embedded in a binding, transparent transition process.

The international community should set a deadline for the country to hold free and fair elections; failure to comply would incur diplomatic consequences, including withdrawing recognition of the government. Proceedings should be launched against militia leaders responsible for human rights violations. International prosecution mechanisms – including the International Criminal Court – must work closely with Libyan judicial authorities. At the same time, targeted sanctions are needed: travel bans, asset freezes, economic sanctions and an effective arms embargo. The international community should also step up its diplomatic, logistical and technical efforts to encourage democratic elections.



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