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Libya's Haftar and the Fezzan

One year on

Since early 2019, Libya's eastern-based military commander Khalifa Haftar has exerted significant efforts to position his self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) as the territorially-dominant force across the country's western half. An ostensible takeover of the Fezzan, the country's southwestern province, was the first step of that conquest attempt. This policy brief examines the depth of the LNA's territorial gains there, and describes the dynamics used. Haftar's discourse, which depicts his armed coalition as the sole entity capable of countering extremism and ensuring stability, stands in contrast with the reality. The LNA's policies of outsourcing, deploying proxy forces and short-term alliances inflamed relations between local communities. Towards the end of 2019, the LNA displayed greater conflict sensitivity in its operations in the Fezzan, but risks remain. The international community must use diplomatic pressure on Libyan authorities to ensure steady socioeconomic investment in the traditionally neglected province.

Haftar and the Fezzan – One year on

Exactly a year ago, the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA)¹ and its leader, eastern-based field marshal Khalifa Haftar, embarked on a campaign to take control of the Fezzan, a vast region encompassing Libya's southwest.

The southern advance was ostensibly framed as a move to rid the region of terrorist and criminal groups,² but the underlying rationale

was twofold. First, there was an opportunity to improve the LNA's international legitimacy by addressing issues in the Fezzan that were affecting key global actors. For example, there was growing international unease at local armed groups' three-month-long blockade of al-Sharara, the Fezzan's largest oil field. Also, there was a desire from certain international actors, mainly France, to curb the potential of Chadian rebel groups stationed in southern Libya.³ Second, territorial control of the Fezzan was a means of boosting the image of the LNA as a more legitimate representative of the Libyan populace than the Government of

1 The official title is the Arab Libyan Armed Forces, although Libyan National Army is used more conventionally.

2 Mahmoud, K. (2019), *LNA Launches Operation to Secure South as Sarraj Reveals Root of Dispute with Haftar*. Online: <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1548056/lna-launches-operation-secure-south-sarraj-reveals-root-dispute-haftar> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

3 In August 2018 an attack was carried out against the Chadian government from Libyan soil, the first such cross-border attack since 2009.

the LNA's policy of courting Arab tribes opposed to the Tubu, the creation of the GNA in 2016 and their desire to align with the 'legitimate' Tripoli government, as well as Haftar's recent blanket denunciation of all Tubu armed groups as Chadian rebel armed groups. This shift in stance reflects Haftar's political ambitions, keen to be seen as ousting Chadian rebels from the Fezzan to appease international actors such as France. On the domestic front, the military commander seeks to seduce southern Libya's key Arab tribes, many of which have a history of conflict or strained relations with the Tubu.

As per the latter policy, Haftar sought to co-opt certain Arab groups on the ground in Sebha, such as the Awlad Suleiman and Magarha tribes.⁷ The Magarha had been ostracised in the post-revolution era due to their pro-Gaddafi history, and were eventually won over by Haftar's gradual, often languid, efforts to reintegrate pro-Gaddafi elements.⁸ Although significant armed factions of the tribe had been incorporated into the LNA in 2017 and 2018, some elements of the Awlad Suleiman remained sceptical of Haftar's Fezzan advance, and as the dominant entity in Sebha were under little immediate pressure to submit to the LNA. The latter stuck to its anti-Tubu rhetoric and afforded Arab tribes free rein, which manifested itself in the form of a frontal clash in the Murzuq area.

The initial response from local Tubu armed groups in Sebha was markedly muted, perhaps owing to their being considerably outnumbered by Arab armed groups. Additionally, the LNA had initially approached them in a relatively diplomatic manner, framing the Fezzan advance as Haftar's commitment to security in the southwest. Tubu armed groups, now outnumbered

and uninterested in obstructing the LNA conquest, ceded their positions in Sebha as a 'gesture of goodwill' and re-stationed themselves further south as LNA affiliates advanced, giving the LNA an early-statement victory.⁹ Once in position, Haftar shored up his Sebha incursion with a deployment of security forces from Cyrenaica and other aligned areas, establishing an exogenous military presence and checkpoints within the city. The negotiated move was championed by pro-LNA media as a display of sheer military strength, a rhetoric that only served to enrage the Tubu further south in the Fezzan.

A closer inspection of the campaign: an introduction to Murzuq and Ghat

Murzuq is a Fezzan town where Ahali (a collective term for tribeless Arabs, relatively low in military strength and cohesiveness) and Tubu make up the majority of the population. Economically, the town plays a key role in Libya's gold mining operations, with an estimated 70 percent of the local population connected to the activity, which has been dominated by Tubu.¹⁰ Strategically, the town is significant because it has emerged in recent years as the stronghold of anti-Haftar sentiment in the region.

Since the post-2011 closure of the Algerian border, Ghat has become an economically isolated town in the Fezzan. It is also the homeland of the Libyan Tuareg, who make up the overwhelming majority of the population. Strategically, the town is important because of its location at the southwest tip of Libya, making it a transit hub for migration and for licit and illicit trade. It is also close to Ubari, the nearest major town to the al-Sharara oil field. Ubari hosted tribal consultations where Tuareg armed groups collectively declared

7 Murray, R. (2019), *Libya: Haftar's 'Divide and Rule' Plans on the Edge of the Sahel*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies. Online: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/libya-haftars-divide-and-rule-plans-edge-sahel-23866> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

8 In particular, Haftar's embrace of the Magarha's 12th Brigade and its anti-Misratan coalition from 2015 onwards proved pivotal.

9 Lacher, W. (2019), *Libya's Conflicts Enter a Dangerous New Phase*. German Institute for International and Security Affairs. Online: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2019C08/> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

10 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/179-how-libyas-fezzan-became-europes-new-border>.

their allegiance to the LNA on 9 February, paving the way for the resumption of oil production.

By the end of February, and following the events in Sebha, some observers suggested Haftar had secured control of other strategic towns such as Ghat and Murzuq, and indeed the Fezzan at large.¹¹ Yet these optimistic early perceptions began to contrast radically with the reality. In the months that followed, the weaknesses and unforeseen by-products of the LNA's somewhat successful strategy in Sebha – particularly the use of local groups – were laid bare in the more volatile ethnic context of Murzuq. Simultaneously, the LNA's policy of securing short-term territorial gain in the south and then almost instantly turning its attention to a sustained assault on Tripoli, at the expense of short- and medium-term security or governance provision in the Fezzan, has been keenly felt in the peripheral town of Ghat. The remainder of this policy brief will examine key themes with particular reference to these two towns, both of which offer unique insights into the lasting impression of the LNA campaign in the south.

The legacy of outsourcing

The LNA's incursion into the Fezzan was an atypical military advance in the sense that it was largely implemented via proxy forces. Field marshal Haftar enlisted the services of mercenaries from abroad, most notably Sudan, alongside empowering certain local actors, in a policy that served to undermine local peace agreements and stoke hostilities between different ethnic and tribal groups.¹²

From Haftar's perspective, outsourcing the advance in the Fezzan not only enabled him to contest territory with minimal LNA casualties against the militarily powerful Tubu, but also allowed him to concentrate LNA personnel and resources in the northwest of the country and Tripoli, in particular from March onwards. In Murzuq, the LNA deployed Darfuri mercenaries and also enabled local Arab tribes such as the Awlad Suleiman, Zway and local Ahali to fight against the dominant Tubu forces.

Haftar, who has Zway lineage,¹³ enlisted Zway Arabs from southeastern Libya to fight against the Tubu in Murzuq, despite, or wilfully ignorant of, the post-2011 clashes between the two communities. Disputes between the Zway and Tubu have taken place predominantly in the southwestern city of Kufra, where the Zway constitute the majority, and reached violent peaks in 2011-2013 and 2015 over control of smuggling routes. A truce was mediated in 2015 and has been in place ever since, but relations remain highly volatile and vulnerable to external provocation.¹⁴ With licence from afar via LNA commanders in Tobruk, the Zway, Awlad Suleiman, Sudanese mercenaries and others perpetrated indiscriminate violence against the Tubu community in early 2019. There was particularly heavy conflict in February, resulting in more than a dozen civilian deaths and 200 displaced families.¹⁵ In response to this incident, and considering the LNA's recruitment of the Zway to be an act of deliberate provocation, the Tubu of Murzuq set about displacing entire communities of the Ahali population. By March the LNA and associate proxies had turned their attention towards Tripoli, and GNA-aligned Tubu forces regained control of Murzuq. In the

11 Wilson, L. and Pack, J. (2019), *The Islamic State's Revitalization in Libya and its Post-2016 War of Attrition*. Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point. Online: <https://ctc.usma.edu/islamic-states-revitalization-libya-post-2016-war-attrition/> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

12 Profazio, U. (2019), *Push for Southern Libya Tests Ethnic Ties and Regional Alliances*. International Institute for Strategic Studies. Online: <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2019/03/southern-libya> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

13 Profazio (2019), *op. cit.*

14 McGregor, A. (2016), *The Strategic Topography of Southern Libya*. ETH Zürich Center for Security Studies. Online: <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/77004588-f3fc-4b4c-83a9-b1ff37cb64d9/pdf> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

15 Zaptia, S. (2019), *Over 200 Displaced in Recent Murzuq Fighting*. Online: <https://www.libyaherald.com/2019/02/27/over-200-displaced-in-recent-murzuq-fighting/> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

months that followed the Tubu continued to enact revenge upon the Ahali. Conflict was brutal towards the end of summer, with an intensification of clashes culminating in a notorious Tubu assault on 17-18 August; approximately 10,000 Murzuq residents were displaced in that month alone.¹⁶

When the LNA approached Ghat in early 2019, it negotiated an alignment with the town in exchange for recognition that local Tuareg tribes and governance structures would administer proceedings on the ground. The LNA also provided assurances that it would increase investment and resources in the town as part of a longer-term commitment to the Fezzan. As a result, in early March 2019 the LNA announced it had taken control of Ghat without a fight.¹⁷ Yet, by once again being reluctant to intervene directly, it is questionable whether, aside from media optics, the LNA had secured any tangible presence or influence in Ghat. Sources within the Tuareg military relations council, speaking to Clingendael in May and June, claimed that for military issues Tuareg armed groups were first and foremost accountable to national-level forces, whether from Tripoli or Tobruk, rather than to their tribe. Yet for daily governance, the population of Ghat continued to recognise Tuareg tribal structures.

LNA reluctance to act as security provider

Another prominent theme stemming from the LNA's 2019 activities in the Fezzan is its reluctance to act as a security provider in multiple settings. Haftar has courted local and international support on the grounds that he can restore security and stability to Libya and rid the country of extremist

elements, yet the recent experiences of Ghat and Murzuq indicate that this is not the case in practice, and certain LNA policies have only served to further destabilise the country. Ghat witnessed consistent heavy rainfall in June that flooded an estimated 70 percent of the municipality. This led to a humanitarian crisis, with over 1,000 residents displaced, entire food stockpiles destroyed, drinking water contaminated, and telecommunications shut down in the region. Despite promising to provide basic services to local Tuareg tribes for facilitating the LNA advance into the Fezzan, Haftar offered little practical assistance in Ghat during or after the flooding, having largely abandoned the region since March.

The LNA's decision not to provide material support in Ghat, despite its commitment to Tuareg forces there, stems from a desire not to invest heavily in the area's security sector in light of priorities elsewhere. Yet in Murzuq, the reluctance to provide security as the local ethnic conflict escalated is strategically more complex. After announcing its control of Sebha in February, the LNA brought in its own security force from Benghazi to shore up its position. Reluctant to deploy similar resources in Murzuq, where local conflict inflamed by external provocations has been far more intense than in Sebha, the LNA has effectively contributed to growing insecurity in the Fezzan. The subsequent power vacuums and cyclical violence have created an environment of insecurity in which extremist groups can prosper. In turn this has slightly damaged the LNA's international image – with notable international forces losing patience with events they perceive to be counter to the image of Haftar as a counter-terrorism actor.

The role of the GNA in the Fezzan

Part of the LNA's motive behind its 2019 Fezzan campaign was to gain territory at the expense of the GNA, to posit Haftar as in control of not only eastern Libya, but also the southwest. Early efforts by the GNA to counter this were insufficient. For example, in February 2019 the GNA appointed Ali

16 International Organization for Migration (2019), *Murzuq Flash Update (20 August 2019)*. Online: <https://displacement.iom.int/reports/murzuq-flash-update-20-august-2019> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

17 Zaptia, S. (2019), *LNA Claims Control of Ghat and Awainat*. Online: <https://www.libyaherald.com/2019/03/03/lna-claims-control-of-ghat-and-awainat/> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

Kana, a prominent Tuareg military figure, as commander of the Sebha military zone, although by this time the LNA had already made progress in co-opting Tuareg and Arab tribes and had gained control of Sebha.¹⁸ Although the GNA continues to liaise with powerful armed groups in the region, this has not translated into an effective foothold. For example, in Murzuq, the Southern Protection Force (SPF) came to the fore from May onwards as a prominent armed entity. Headed by the late Hassan Musa Sugi,¹⁹ the Tubu-majority SPF is loosely affiliated with the GNA,²⁰ and announced it had taken control of Murzuq in August. However, GNA-SPF affiliation is an opportunistic relationship, predicated on the LNA being a mutual enemy, and is therefore unlikely to provide the GNA with long-term tangible influence in Murzuq.

In Ghat, the GNA had an opportunity to garner local support in the wake of the widespread flooding, especially with LNA interests focused elsewhere. In June the GNA announced it had allocated LD 10 million (EUR 6.5 million) as a disaster relief fund.²¹ However, a local resident spoke to Clingendael in November and asserted that this fund never materialised in the town. He went on to say that ‘The only external assistance we received was from Algeria.’²² The extent of Algeria’s assistance was corroborated by Moulay ag-Didi, head of the Supreme Social Tuareg Council in Libya.²³ Moreover, a GNA commitment to

provide humanitarian aid via daily air drops lasted only two days, while trucks carrying supplies were late or failed to arrive due to the poor roads surrounding Ghat. As such the GNA failed to exploit the governance vacuum created by LNA neglect, and local groups assumed responsibility. The mayor of Ghat, Qomani Salah, is quoted as saying that ‘Most relief materials came from civil society organizations and [ordinary] people.’²⁴

The future of the Fezzan

In September 2019, the United States conducted four airstrikes against ISIS targets within the space of ten days in the Fezzan. The strikes killed 43, or roughly a third of the ISIS force believed to be active in the province. Locals also assert a fifth strike took place that was not officially acknowledged, suggesting an accompanying operation by the CIA, which has been increasing its drone capacity in the region.²⁵ Both the timing and location of these strikes is significant. Prior to September the US had not conducted a single airstrike in Libya in 2019.²⁶

The US intervention is an indication that the LNA’s involvement in the Fezzan, instead of reducing jihadi activities there, contributed to bolstering them. Indeed, months after the LNA allegedly took over the area, the US Department of Defense said it was seeing ‘regeneration of the ISIS capability’, adding that it was now easier for the terror organisation to recruit in the Fezzan.²⁷

18 Profazio (2019), *op. cit.*

19 Hasan Musa Sugi was killed in the November 2019 assault on al-Feel oilfield.

20 Heras, N. (2019), *The GNA’s Muscle in Southern Libya – Southern Protection Forces Leader Hasan Moussa Keley*. The Jamestown Foundation Militant Leadership Monitor. Online: <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/August-2019-MLM-1.pdf?x96934> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

21 Zaptia, S. (2019), *Ghat Flooding Causes Deaths and More Than 1,000 Displaced*. Online: <https://www.libyaherald.com/2019/06/05/ghat-flooding-causes-deaths-and-more-than-1000-displaced/> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

22 Telephone conversation between Clingendael and Ghat resident, November 2019.

23 Telephone conversation between Clingendael and Moulay ag-Didi, November 2019.

24 Karnfouda, R. (2019), غات بعد السيول: النازحون يشكون من، التلاعب في مواد الإغاثة. Online: <http://alwasat.ly/news/libya/247539> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

25 Schmitt, E. (2019), *U.S. Drone Strikes Stymie ISIS in Southern Libya*. Online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/18/world/africa/drone-strikes-isis-libya.html> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

26 Stancy Correll, D. (2019), *AFRICOM Conducts Third Airstrike in a Week Against ISIS-Libya Members*. Online: <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2019/09/27/africom-conducts-third-airstrike-in-a-week-against-isis-libya-members/> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

27 Babb, C. (2019), *VOA Interview with US AFRICOM Spokesman*. Online: <https://www.voanews.com/africa/voa-interview-us-africom-spokesman> (Accessed 01-01-2020).

US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said in November that the US would ‘continue to mow the lawn’²⁸ to contain extremist threats in Libya, implying ongoing US counter-terrorism activity despite the LNA claiming to be on top of the issue.

Whether directly prompted by the airstrikes or otherwise, the LNA and its international backers have undertaken efforts to rectify the situation. For example, following the dramatic escalation of violence in August, both Russia and the UAE – the LNA’s primary international financiers – have embarked on diplomatic ventures to achieve reconciliation with the Tubu. In September the UAE enlisted Mohammed Adam Lino, Murzuq deputy in the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, to find common ground between the LNA and the Tubu as a means of going forward after months of violence in Murzuq. Lino is a prominent figure in the Tubu community, and during his visit to Abu Dhabi was encouraged to accept an LNA-aligned presence in Murzuq. He officially rejected this proposal, yet upon his return he reportedly received a vehicle as a gift from the UAE,²⁹ implying that other material offerings may have been granted and that the Tubu had in fact signalled some form of approval. In Moscow, Adam El Tibawi, head of the Tubu National Assembly, led a Tubu delegation to meet with the Russian deputy foreign minister in November, where they discussed the situation in southern Libya.³⁰

As for the LNA, in October, Haftar appointed Belkasem al-Abaaj as Governor of Southern Military Zones, responsible for the southern

Fezzan, in addition to southern Cyrenaica. Unlike other Zway officers, al-Abaaj possesses a strong track record of mediating with Tubu forces. His appointment suggests an attempt by Haftar to be more inclusive in forthcoming policies towards the Fezzan. In the first few weeks of his appointment, al-Abaaj toured the Fezzan region, starting in Ghat and including a visit to Murzuq. The tour was intended to reaffirm the LNA’s presence in the region, and to reassure local allies and aligned groups.

Haftar’s change in tack, coupling inclusive, regionally sensitive recruitment with international mediation, heralds a more optimistic outlook for the LNA’s future in the Fezzan, although the question remains as to why such considerations were not manifest during the January and February advance. The likely answer is that Haftar sought to use the Fezzan as an opportunity to curry political favour with key Arab constituencies and international actors, consequently exacerbating local ethnic tensions in a manner that could have been avoided.

Finally, in mid-November, forces affiliated to Ali Kana launched something of a renewed offensive against LNA interests in the Fezzan, with eyewitness reports first suggesting a presence of military units near the al-Sharara oil field. Days later, the SPF were reported to have entered al-Feel, another Fezzan oil facility. The LNA’s response was decisive, with a series of airstrikes – likely foreign, given their high precision – allowing the LNA to reassert control of al-Feel, but what is more indicative is the reluctance of most Tuareg to get involved or join Kana’s approach. This suggests a collective Tuareg mindset not to go against the LNA, and a substantial component of the Tubu now appear to be resigned to the LNA’s presence in the region in 2020. Yet, the death of nine Tubu children in the southern town Um al-Aranib, as a result of a 29 November LNA airstrike, acts as a reminder that the LNA’s ability to abandon its ethno-nationalistic bias should not be overestimated³¹.

28 Snow, S. (2019), *AFRICOM Demands Return of US Drone Shot Down by Russian Air Defenses Over Libya*. Online: <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2019/12/10/africom-demands-return-of-us-drone-shot-down-by-russian-air-defenses-over-libya/>. (Accessed 01-01-2020).

29 Telephone conversation between Clingendael and local Tubu resident, November 2019.

30 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2019), *Press Release on Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov’s Meeting With a Delegation of the Libyan Toubou Tribe*. Online: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3885744 (Accessed 01-01-2020).

31 Xinhua. (2019), *Airstrikes in Libya Kill 14 Children in 72 Hours*. Online: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/02/c_138598934.htm.

Recommendations

Based on the above overview, this policy brief offers the following key recommendations for policymakers:





1. **The Fezzan warrants continued international engagement and investment.** As we enter 2020 the GNA's influence at national level continues to diminish. In turn, the LNA's positioning as the de facto representative of Libya in the international arena becomes more of a reality. As the international community increases its engagement with the LNA in 2020, it must also demand accountability on the part of the actor, from a security perspective and a socio-economic perspective alike. Libya's southwest remains pivotal to the future stability of Libya, given its abundant natural resources, the presence of powerful armed groups there, and its geographical position as gateway on the East African migration route.
2. **External pressure on the LNA could contribute to stabilisation.** Events in the first two months of 2019 highlight the ill-conceived strategy deployed by the LNA, which did much to provoke ethnic tensions and local conflict throughout the year. However, the latter half of 2019 has seen the LNA, and its international backers, responding somewhat to external pressure, most notably from the United States.

Haftar's early 2019 tactic of acquiring territory or local alignment but then failing to provide security or services demonstrated a reluctance to be held financially or materially responsible in the Fezzan. In its more recent appointments and initiatives, the LNA has demonstrated a conflict-sensitive approach, but is still falling short. If the international community chooses to view the LNA as a legitimate political and security actor, it must pressure the LNA to make long-term investments in the southwest. In the months ahead, international policymakers should apply pressure on the LNA to improve Fezzan livelihoods and access to services, particularly as Haftar seeks enhanced international legitimacy. In turn, such stabilisation endeavours in the Fezzan would positively contribute to other international policy priorities, such as the protection of migrants and counter-terrorism.

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