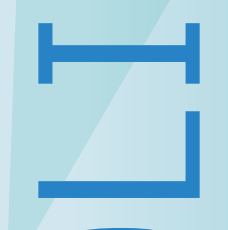




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The Crisis in Derna: Reconciliation Opportunities in the Midst of War?

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Executive Summary

The city of Derna, located in a mountainous region of north-eastern Libya, has been blockaded for over 17 months by forces loyal to Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. This has resulted in dire economic and humanitarian conditions for the city's inhabitants, compounded by campaigns of arrests and occasional airstrikes. Derna has also been politically and socially marginalised in the power struggle since 2011, reproducing historical patterns of exclusion stemming from the city's role as the main base of the opposition to the Gaddafi regime.

Because of this situation, and given the threat of a full military campaign against the city by Haftar's forces, a non-violent solution to the crisis is needed more than ever. While dialogue and reconciliation remain the best possible solutions, the many challenges to such processes have meant that mediators have thus far been in a weak position.

These challenges relate to the specificities of the city and its history. First, Libyans perceive Derna as a hotbed of terrorism, which means there has not been significant public pressure to resolve the crisis. While there is a real presence of extremist actors in the city, these do not represent all local actors. Second, Derna's political actors are

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POLICY BRIEF



fragmented and lack legitimacy and popular support locally. This complicates mediators' efforts to find a party with whom to negotiate, that can represent the city and guarantee the implementation of any outcomes. Third, tribes have very limited influence in the city, in contrast to the tribes from the surrounding area, who have so far demonstrated full support to Haftar's Operation Dignity. They are therefore unable to play an effective role in resolving the crisis.

In this context, the High Reconciliation Committee (HCR), a body made up of social leaders from western and southern Libya, emerged as a neutral traditional social mediator. Despite the difficulties it faced, it succeeded in reaching out to all parties to the crisis during the first nine months of 2017. It also succeeded in more or less uniting the representatives of Derna in backing a peaceful solution. However, it was unable to improve the situation in the city as it lacked leverage over Haftar's forces and the eastern tribes, particularly those living around Derna.

In order to make future reconciliation efforts more successful, a number of elements should be taken into account based on an analysis of Derna's specificities and the HCR's experience.

- The HCR efforts need to be supported and capitalized on as they have already brought about positive outcomes.
- It is important that the HCR communicate with influential branches of the Ubeidat tribe that are not based in the towns surrounding Derna, for example in Tobruk, and engage them in dialogue efforts. Leaders of the Ubeidat tribe could play a key positive role if they were to mobilise their social influence and experience of mediation in support of a peaceful resolution of the crisis.
- Regular military officers living in Derna or sympathising with its cause could also play a positive role in mediating between the Libyan National Army General Command and Derna's representatives.

Introduction

The eastern Libyan city of Derna² has been blockaded for over 17 months by forces loyal to Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar,³ resulting in shortages of essential goods and medicines, social isolation and increasing suffering for the city's inhabitants. These forces have also been targeting Derna's population for arrest, in a campaign which has been particularly intense over recent months.⁴ However suffering and marginalisation are nothing new for the inhabitants of Derna: since the February 2011 uprising, the city has known no stability in its politics or security. Since the first days of the uprising, Derna has witnessed frequent assassinations, primarily targeting former members of the Gaddafi regime's security services who lived in and around the city. Journalists, judges, public prosecutors, civil society activists, notables and members of Libya's reconciliation committees were later targeted. Moreover, no elections have been held in the city since 2012. As such, Derna's inhabitants are not directly and fully represented in the currently-sitting legislative bodies such as the House of Representatives (HoR, elected in June 2014) or the Constitutional Drafting Assembly (CDA, elected in February 2014).

While Derna may not be Libya's largest or most influential city in terms of its population, tribes and economy, it has a particular symbolism, which means its fate could have repercussions at the national level. This comes from its long history of political and military opposition to the Gaddafi regime, and the collective punishment and marginalisation the regime imposed on the city in response. Derna has remained a bastion of opposition, contributing in a significant way both politically and militarily to the February 2011 uprising. This has become even more evident in recent years, particularly following Field Marshal Haftar's announcement of Operation

2. A town located in the mountains in northeast Libya, 300 km east of Benghazi and 270 km west of the Libyan-Egyptian border.

3. Khalifa Belqasem Haftar is a Libyan military officer. He was one of the commanders in the Chad-Libyan conflict in 1980. He later defected from the Gaddafi regime and moved to the US. He returned to Libya in 2011 and fought against Gaddafi's forces. He has played an increasingly important political and military role since mid-2014.

4. This intensification occurred after the Shura Council shot down a plane in the LNA airforce in July 2017, resulting in the death of its captain. The Shura Council refused to return the body to the LNA until the blockade was lifted. However this did not happen, and following mediation from military officers and tribal figures, they released the body.



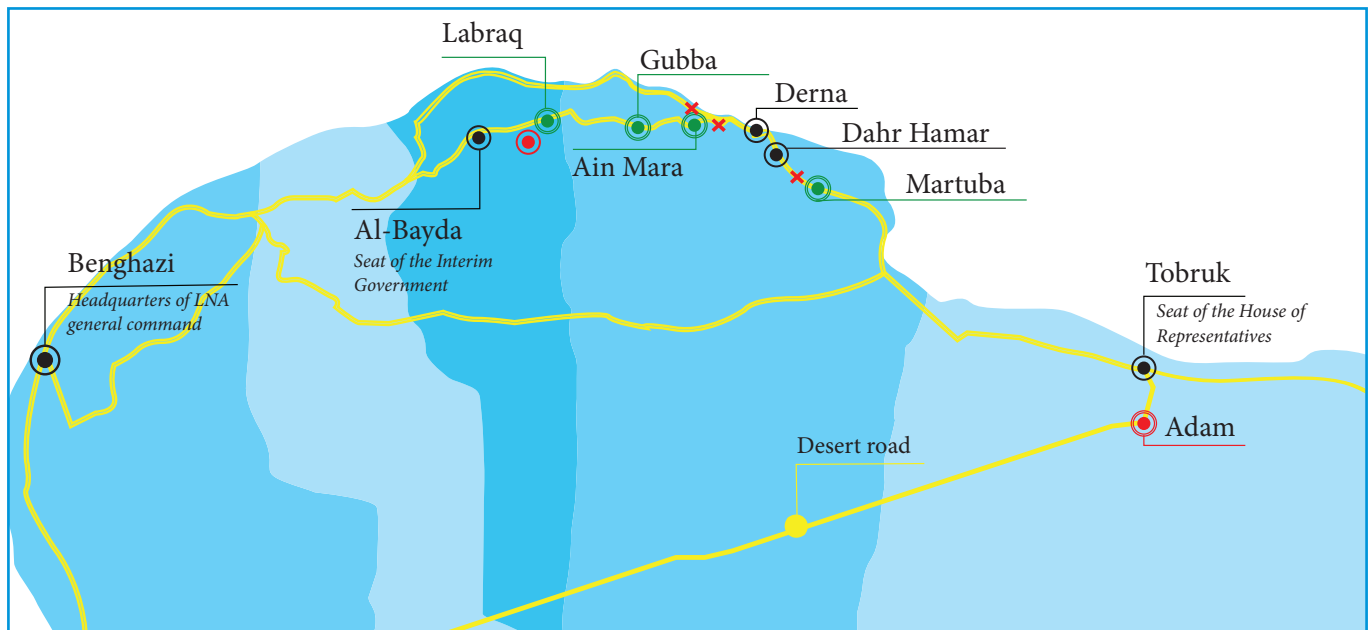
Dignity in mid-2014.⁵ With Haftar's forces, self-styled as the Libyan National Army (LNA), now controlling the city of Benghazi⁶ after more than three years of military struggle, Derna has become the main hub of political opposition to Haftar, and the biggest military threat to his forces in the east of the country, where it is the sole city outside LNA control. However, Derna's relationship with other groups opposing Haftar in western Libya is complicated by the city's association with religious extremism and its perception as an incubator for radical groups both before and after the February 2011 uprising.

Because of this history, reconciliation should be high on the agenda. This needs to take place both between the city's revolutionary fighters and the supporters of the Gaddafi regime, and between Derna and the inhabitants of neighbouring cities that had been targeted by bombings and assassinations carried out by followers of Islamic State (IS) based in Derna until they were expelled from the city in mid-2015. Despite the city's significance, however, serious mediation efforts have so far been rare.

This is perhaps linked to the fact that reconciliation had not until recently been a priority for those seeking to solve the national-level political crisis in Libya. However, the interest in reconciliation demonstrated by Ghassan Salamé since his appointment as the head of the UN Support Mission in Libya offers a new opportunity to focus on the issue of Derna, which is so crucial in the current moment given the city's symbolism, the ongoing blockade, and increasing likelihood of military intervention by Haftar's forces.

The aim of this paper is to identify entry points for a successful reconciliation process in Derna. It starts by analysing the specificities of the Derna case and the challenges these present to reconciliation efforts. It focuses particularly on local perceptions of Derna as a hotbed of terrorism, the large number of divisions among the city's local actors, and the relationship between Derna and its neighbours through the lens of the role of tribal actors. Any solution to the crisis that does not take these specificities into account is likely to fail. The paper then evaluates the efforts of the High Council of Reconciliation (HCR) to solve the crisis, highlighting key successes and failures, and makes recommendations for policymakers inside and outside Libya.

5. A military operation launched by Haftar in the city of Benghazi in the middle of 2014. Its stated goal was to "rid Libya of terrorists," and its political justification and authorization comes from the Tobruk-based House of Representatives.
6. They announced full control of the city on 5 July 2017. See "Haftar announces full control on the eastern city of Benghazi," BBC Arabic, <http://www.bbc.com/middleeast-40515164>.



- Town with a majority of inhabitants from the Ubeidat tribe
- Airport/airbase
- ✕ Checkpoints, forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar
- Towns
- Road



Derna's Specificities

A spectre of terrorism

Since February 2011, Derna, like Libya as a whole, has witnessed many changes in the security sphere. Perhaps the constant throughout this period has been the presence of powerful groups with religious leanings, among them extremist groups. This has contributed, along with the city's history under Gaddafi, to a public perception of Derna as a hotbed of terrorism. As a result, popular sympathy towards the city has been undermined, which has in turn weakened mediation efforts popularly considered as offering concessions to criminals. While young men from the city have fought in the ranks of extremist groups, Haftar's significant propaganda efforts in branding religious-leaning armed groups as terrorists, and the fact that Derna's armed groups have been more significant actors in the city than traditional political actors, have perhaps also contributed to this view.

One of the main constants on the city's security scene since 2011 has been the significant role played by the Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade,⁷ a religious-leaning armed group. However, extremist religious groups started to gain prominence in Derna in early 2013, first Ansar al-Sharia, and then the Islamic Youth Shura Council, which subsequently pledged allegiance to IS and declared the city a province of the Caliphate (*Wilayat Barqa*).⁸ Many inhabitants of the city were involved in these groups, both at the level of leaders and the rank-and-file, and they have openly participated in their operations.

After Haftar's mid-2014 announcement of Operation Dignity, a military operation targeting Islamist groups carried out by his LNA and its allies, Derna became the most important stronghold of opposition to him. Towards the end of the same year, the creation of the Shura Council of Mujahideen in Derna and its Outskirts (Shura Council) was announced with the intent of "uniting the ranks, supporting the oppressed, and

fighting the criminal Haftar and his soldiers."⁹ The Shura Council brought together many different actors: as well as its nucleus the Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade, it included local members of Ansar al-Sharia.¹⁰

Meanwhile, IS fighters were gaining ground in the city. However, after IS assassinated two Shura Council leaders in June 2015, the latter declared war against the organisation. In less than a week, IS was expelled to the eastern outskirts of the Derna.¹¹ Young people from the city joined the battle on the side of the Shura Council. After regular military officers¹² from Derna and its neighbouring cities became involved and foreign airstrikes took place, the remnants of IS fled to the city of Sirte via the desert road. Even though the Shura Council battled against IS, a key opponent of Haftar in Benghazi, this has not altered the position of LNA forces vis-à-vis the Shura Council and its followers, whom they consider as supporters of terrorism. Nor has it materially challenged local perceptions of Derna, which means there is limited public pressure pushing for reconciliation efforts to succeed.

Political fragmentation and lack of representation

As well as the specific position that Derna occupies in Libyan public opinion, its political situation is also relatively specific. It combines extreme fragmentation, lack of legitimacy of political actors and a lack of

7. Founded during the 2011 war by Salem Derbi, who was close to the former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group. The name refers to the massacre committed in 1996 by the Gaddafi regime against more than 1,000 detainees in Tripoli's Abu Salim Prison. The brigade originally included former prisoners, and later young men from the city with different origins and backgrounds willing to fight against Gaddafi.

8. Zelin, Aaron Y., "The Islamic State's First Colony in Libya," *The Washington Institute for Near East Studies*, 10 October 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-islamic-states-first-colony-in-libya>.

9. Statement No. 1 on 12 December 2014.

10. The Shura Council and Ansar al-Sharia fought against Haftar in Benghazi alongside the Benghazi Revolutionaries' Shura Council. A number of its members died in the fighting there.

11. Trabelsi, Seif Eddin and Collombier, Virginie, "The Islamic State in Libya: Strategy and Reality on the Ground," in *Inside Wars: Local Dynamics of Conflicts in Syria and Libya*, edited by Narbone, Luigi, Favier Agnès and Collombier Virginie, 2016.

12. The military in Libya was devastated by the 2011 war, in which some units defected and some continued to fight for Gaddafi. Since that time, some former military officers have been involved in the security bodies created by successive transitional governments while others have not. 'Regular military officers' is used particularly for those who were in the army prior to 2011, and in opposition to the thousands of civilians who fought in the revolution or have formed militias since 2011, and many of whom have also been involved in the security apparatus formed by transitional governments. Efforts to rebuild and reunite the military have so far proved unsuccessful, particularly since the political and institutional crisis in 2014. In eastern Libya, those military officers who have not joined Operation Dignity have been marginalized. The most significant participation of regular military officers in the fight against IS in Derna was from the Ali Hassan al-Jaber brigade, whose members hail primarily from Tobruk and Al-Bayda, but also from Ajdabiya. The brigade is primarily made up of regular military officers though some civilian 'revolutionaries' are also involved.



representation at the national level. The intersection of local dynamics and developments at the national level have led to a proliferation of local actors in the city, many of which are internally divided and none of whom have managed to formally represent the city at the national level or gain legitimacy and popular support. This complicates the reconciliation process in terms of identifying actors with whom to negotiate and who can be seen as representing the city.

Despite the strong presence of the Shura Council, and the fact that its core component, the Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade, has been the only constant actor on the ground since 2011, it has not been willing or able to represent the city politically. The body lacks political legitimacy, in part because of its unwillingness to align itself with any national political or executive authority – be it in Tobruk or Tripoli. This has raised mistrust among Derna's inhabitants and potential mediators. Similarly important is the Shura Council's inscrutable organisation and process of issuing statements, unclear even to the citizens of Derna, and the apparent divisions in its ranks.¹³ There is, for example, a faction within the Council represented by its former spokesman Hafiz al-Dabaa,¹⁴ one of the leaders of the Ansar al-Sharia in Derna. This group takes a hardline position vis-à-vis Haftar and his supporters, and considers the state and government as infidels.¹⁵ In contrast, other voices within the Shura Council advocate for a political settlement and are willing to make concessions in order to avoid the bloodshed that would result from a military confrontation.

In terms of local administration, the elected local council has been the principal body providing services to the citizens of Derna since its election in 2012. However, Libya's post-2014 political conflict and institutional divisions (three governments; two parliaments; two fatwa councils; Libya Dawn and Operation Dignity) have taken their toll on Derna's local politics. There are now two local administrative bodies: the elected local council, which has been continuously loyal to Tripoli

(currently the Government of National Accord, GNA¹⁶), and the municipal council, appointed by the LNA general command in 2016 and loyal to the Interim Government in Al-Bayda.¹⁷ The latter considers support for Operation Dignity and its leader Haftar a non-negotiable matter.¹⁸ The appointed municipal council's role has been limited to coordinating the entry of aid, fuel and essential goods into the city. Both the GNA and Haftar have interests in supporting their respective councils in Derna: Haftar considers Derna an extension of his war in Benghazi, while the GNA seeks to present itself as the representative of all Libyans, not only western Libyans.

Continuing conflict between the two councils and within their ranks has undermined the role of local administration within the city. As part of this struggle, the head of appointed municipal council Brig. Gen. Hamad Miftah al-Shalwi¹⁹ decided to freeze the assets of the elected local council, the impact of which is not yet clear. He also demanded that anyone linked to the elected local council or to the Shura Council be arrested, counting on the fact that forces loyal to Haftar control the checkpoints and airports around the city to be able to implement this. Indeed, reports indicate that an LNA unit securing Labraq Airport²⁰ did arrest a member of the elected local council, as a result of which many other council members chose to move to Tripoli.²¹ The social and religious groups present in Derna appear to have come down on the side of the elected local council in this struggle. In recent weeks, a number of civil society bodies in the city including the council of notables released a statement in support of the elected local council. They maintained that the appointed municipal council does not represent Derna, was appointed without its citizens' knowledge or will, and accused it of preventing aid from reaching the city.

The appointed municipal council, moreover, currently has two presidents, both appointed by official decree.

13. For example, members of the Shura Council had previously expressed their opposition to some of the statements made on the Council's behalf, saying the content did not represent them.

14. Formerly detained by Tunisian authorities (May 2011) on charges of smuggling arms and involvement in terrorist attacks that killed security personnel in Tunisia, he was later released in a prisoner exchange for a Tunisian diplomat kidnapped in Libya (July 2014).

15. Author's telephone interview with a former member of the Shura Council in July 2017. Al-Dabaa was dismissed as the Council's spokesman.

16. Formed as a result of the December 2015 Skhirat agreement and headed by Fayeze Al-Serraj.

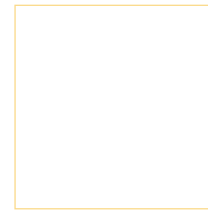
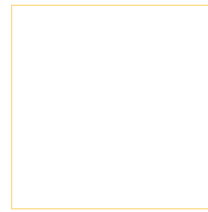
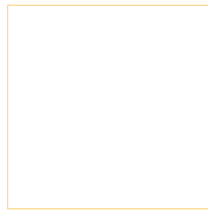
17. The interim government is headed by Abdullah al-Thinni and affiliated to the Tobruk-based parliament, the House of Representatives.

18. Telephone interview carried out by the author on 19 August 2017.

19. A brigadier general, former air base commander, and former candidate for the Ministry of the Interior in national government, he enjoys considerable support among the tribes of Tobruk.

20. International airport, 55 km west of Derna. It is under the control of Haftar's forces and administered by the pro-Dignity Ubeidat tribe.

21. Interview conducted by the author in Tripoli on 22 July 2017.



The secretary of the Interim Government's Ministry of Local Government dismissed the first president, Brig. Gen. Hamad Miftah Shalwi, who had been appointed by Haftar's chief of staff Maj. Gen. Abdul-Razzaq Al-Nazuri. Instead, he appointed Ahmida Fadlallah Tarbah, on the grounds that "Shalwi is a military man and not a civil servant," and that Nazuri "does not have the right to appoint heads of local councils."²² Despite the fact that Nazuri reversed his decision to appoint Shalwi and issued another decree confirming the mandate of Tarbah, Shalwi has continued in his position.

In terms of the relationships between local and political security bodies, the elected local council treats the Shura Council with caution. The Shura Council had previously accused the GNA (to which the elected local council reports both politically and administratively) of "betrayal" and called on its members to "repent to Allah."²³ This "irresponsible" remark²⁴ was one of the factors that led the elected local council to reject the Shura Council. Another key factor was the Shura Council's alliance with Ansar al-Sharia, and its alleged harassment of citizens and actors affiliated with Haftar's forces inside the city, many of whom were arrested and some of whom died under torture in the Council's prisons.²⁵ The elected local council has previously called for transparent investigations into the Shura Council's activities.²⁶ However, despite these tensions, there has been increased cooperation between the two over recent months. This was thanks to the intervention by Yahya Al-Asta Omar, the official in charge of security within the elected local council, and a regular military officer who fought alongside the Shura Council against IS. Nevertheless, the political scene remains extremely fragmented, and as with elsewhere in Libya, there is no clear consensus on who has the right to speak in the name of the city.

Tribes: marginal presence and negative role

The impact of this fragmentation has been further compounded by the strong social and political role that tribes play elsewhere in Libya's Eastern region, which has resulted in Derna's neighbours taking a much more unified stance, and against the city. Derna represents an exception in eastern Libya in terms of its tribal balance. The city has a diverse social structure consisting of small families. Unlike the other eastern Libyan cities, no tribe represents a majority of its population. Furthermore, the origins of most families are from the Libyan west due to an exodus more than 200 years ago, known colloquially as *Tajridat Habeeb* (the Habeeb exodus).²⁷ The developments in Libya over recent years have led to a politicisation of the divide between the *hudour* (urbanites), families with origins in the Libyan west, and the *bawadi* (bedouins), tribes that settled in the Libyan east, the most prominent of which is the Ubeidat and the majority of which support Operation Dignity.²⁸

Given Derna's social composition, it is not surprising that the tribe's role in the city after 2011 was weak. As described by a member of Derna's Council of Elders and Notables: "the tribe in Derna has no authority over its members, and cannot offer them immunity nor act as a deterrent." He added that: "the tribe in the city therefore does not take responsibility for the actions of its members, nor can it make any guarantees about them,"²⁹ implicitly justifying the passive position the notables of Derna took towards the city's youth joining organisations accused of terrorism.

This weakness was also apparent in the fact that the tribe was unable to play a role in uniting the city politically behind specific election candidates, unlike elsewhere in eastern Libya.³⁰ As well as the city's diverse composition,

22. Televised interview.

23. Issued on 9 January 2017.

24. Author's telephone interview with the deputy head of the elected local council on 14 August 2017.

25. *Alaraby Aljadeed*, "Military Tension Around Derna City After the Killing of a Mudkhali Preacher", 7 September 2017, <https://is.gd/kBH7P6> [Arabic].

26. Author's telephone interview with the deputy head of the elected local council on 14 August 2017.

27. For more information, see Jibril, Salaheddine Mohamed, *Tajridat Habeeb*, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Libi, Benghazi, Libya, 1995 [Arabic]; Bazama, Mohamed Mustafa, *A History of Barqa in the Second Ottoman Era*, Al-Hiwar, Beirut, Lebanon, 1994 [Arabic].

28. This division has had a major impact on the situation in Derna. Many of the *bawadi* tribes have felt compelled to support Haftar's Operation Dignity, as the checkpoints and airports around the city facilitate the movement of these tribes, while restricting that of urban families.

29. Author's interview via Skype on 20 August 2017.

30. In the elections that took place in the city (the elections for Libya's first parliament, the General National Congress, and the local council elections, both in 2012), the candidates were nominated by political parties and had political backgrounds (most notably in the Muslim Brotherhood and the National Forces Alliance). None were tribal candidates. This is the opposite of what happened in the eastern city



the Shura Council's open hostility towards supporters of the Gaddafi regime, including former members of the "popular reconciliation committees" and "social leaders" – tribal figures who are now playing an important role in reconciliation and mediation efforts elsewhere in Libya – has weakened the role of the tribe in Derna.³¹

This comes in complete contrast to other areas in eastern Libya, including the towns surrounding Derna (Martuba, Gubba and Ain Mara) that are inhabited by a majority of members of the Ubeidat tribe, the most socially and politically prominent tribe in the eastern region.

Although tribes have facilitated reconciliation based on traditional social mediation elsewhere in Libya, the tribes of the eastern region have played a negative role in the way they have been dealing with Derna since 2011. Their strong support for Operation Dignity has meant that they have been unable to play an impartial role. As a member of the Council of Elders of the Eastern Region put it: "the tribes of Barqa will only side with Operation Dignity and its leader Haftar."³² In relation to the Ubeidat tribe, which has to date played no role in mediation, this is compounded by the fact that it is considered both a party to the conflict and one of its victims. IS claimed responsibility for bombings in Gubba (40 km west of Derna),³³ the tribe's largest town, and Ansar al-Sharia for similar operations in Martuba and Ain Mara. The notables of the Ubeidat tribe also accuse Islamist fighters from the city of Derna, notably Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade of the assassination of Maj. Gen. Abdel Fattah Younis (a member of the Ubeidat tribe) who was the Chief of Staff of the Libyan Liberation Army during the 2011 war (July 2011).³⁴

of Tobruk, for example, where one tribe met with all the potential candidates (and its tribesmen) and agreed on one candidate to be supported, with the rest opting to withdraw from the election (Interview conducted by the author with an adviser to one of Tobruk's tribes, Tobruk, March 2017).

31. Former members of these committees have been assassinated by unknown individuals on the grounds of being "Gaddafi loyalists", most notably Fawzi Muftah al-Zouqi, a member of the Council of Elders and Notables of Derna and its Outskirts. See for example: *Elaph*, "Tribal Leader Assassinated in Derna and an Army Officer Survives in Benghazi", 23 November 2013, <http://elaph.com/Web/news/2013/11/850652.html?entry=arab> [Arabic].
32. Interview conducted by the author, Al-Bayda, March 2017.
33. *Sky News Arabia*, "ISIS Claims Responsibility for the Attacks of Gubba in Libya", 20 February 2015, <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/web/article/725306/شعاعاد-ىنبتى-ىنبتى-ىنبتى> [Arabic].
34. Interview conducted by the author with notables of the Ubeidat tribe, Tobruk, March 2017.

Evaluating the Efforts of the High Council of Reconciliation

In spite of all these challenges, some parties have attempted to move forward with the reconciliation process. The efforts of the High Council of Reconciliation (HCR), a body composed mainly of notables from western and southern Libya,³⁵ have been the most significant attempt at mediation during the six years of crisis in Derna, and have resulted in a clearer understanding of the political dynamics and social complexities of post-2014 eastern Libya.

In January 2017, the HCR conducted a visit to eastern Libya to meet with parties involved in the crisis. This was the first of three visits that aimed to reach an agreement to lift the blockade, which at that time had been in place for 12 months. The head of the HCR, Mohammed al-Housh, also hoped to bring diverse viewpoints closer together and to open channels of communication with all of the different parties to the crisis. He also hoped to better understand their conditions for reconciliation and the extent to which they would accept a peaceful resolution. In undertaking this mission, the HCR was responding to calls from Intesar Shennib, a member of the Tobruk-based parliament, the House of Representatives, for the constituency to which Derna belongs.³⁶ This gave the HCR the opportunity to gain more importance at the national level, in contrast with its limited role up until that point in brokering ceasefires in the western region.

As of September 2017, the HCR had met with most of the parties to the conflict at least once. This included Field Marshal Haftar, Maj. Gen. Abdul-Razzaq al-Nazuri,³⁷ local actors in Derna,³⁸ and notables from the eastern

35. The HCR is essentially a group of reconciliation committees, heads and members of local councils from the Libyan west, except for its president who is from the south (Sebha). The HCR held its founding meeting in Qasr Bin Ghashir (34 km south of Tripoli) in August 2016. The meeting brought together 14 members. Following its efforts on solving the crisis in Derna, new members from different regions of Libya joined the HCR, including from the east. The total number of HCR members as of July 2017 is 67.
36. Although Derna falls within this constituency, voting in the city itself was not possible. As such the city is not directly and fully represented in the HoR.
37. The HCR only met with the LNA General Command (Haftar) once. During this meeting, the HCR president focused on the two main points of his strategy: lifting the blockade before Ramadan, and a general amnesty for those that had fought against IS in Derna.
38. The parties from Derna that met with the HCR were: the Shura Council (represented by its deputy head); the Council of Derna Elders and



region.³⁹ Nevertheless, the HCR did not hold talks with the most influential members of the eastern tribes or their principal leaders (such as the *sheikhs* – or heads of branches - of the Ubeidat tribe from Ait Ghaith-Gubba). In what might have been a deliberate strategy on the part of the tribes, ‘second-tier’ *sheikhs* met Housh and his team. This may have been intended as a way to understand what the HCR was doing and to ensure they were not seen as taking a hardline position or as refusing to consider reconciliation. At the same time, however, the main leaders of the tribes and ‘first-tier’ *sheikhs* did not want to appear as if they were taking a stance against Haftar, or as if they had forgotten the toll that terrorism had taken on their tribesman.

After meeting with various parties involved in the crisis, the HCR conceived its principal strategy. On the side of the LNA, it sought to pressure the General Command to “issue a general amnesty for all those who fought against IS and helped expel it from the city, and who have not been involved in any violent or criminal activity.” In Derna, they sought to encourage local actors to recognise the Tobruk-based parliament (HoR) and its Al-Bayda-based Interim Government, and to allow a neutral military force to take control of the city’s security and to ensure the safety of its people against acts of reprisal and hostility.⁴⁰

The HCR’s president Housh, who hails from the Hasawna tribe in the southern city of Sebha, believed that his council’s work to date has been very successful, insofar as it has opened avenues for dialogue and gained major concessions from the Shura Council. This is in spite of the fact that his efforts have not led to any alleviation of the city’s humanitarian and economic suffering, nor reduced the likelihood of military intervention by Haftar’s forces. Housh considered his “most outstanding achievement” to be the fact that local actors from Derna openly expressed their desire for a peaceful solution, their full readiness for dialogue, and their openness to compromise.⁴¹

Notables (represented by its head Khalil bin Saud); the elected local council (represented by its deputy head Ramzi al-Shaari); Derna Social Council (represented by al-Salhin al-Shahid).

39. This included *sheikhs* of the Ubeidat tribe, with whom HCR was in direct communication because of the type of social work they were involved in and because of the Libyan culture of hospitality.

40. Interview conducted by the author with the HCR president Mohammed Al-Housh, Tripoli, September 2017.

41. Interview conducted by the author with the HCR president Mohammed Al-Housh, Tripoli, September 2017.

However, this result – and the fact that most of the different factions within Derna appear to support it – is likely to stem from the great pressure that the city is under from the ongoing blockade. For many, reconciliation efforts are also the last line of defence against armed intervention from Haftar’s forces, which would take a great toll on the city in terms of human and material loss. Moreover, the presence of extremists within the ranks of Shura Council – a fact recognised by the HCR – makes the concessions it has received rather fragile, and lacking in guarantees.

The HCR has itself admitted that there are many obstacles to successful reconciliation, particularly its lack of political or military leverage over Haftar’s forces, and lack of social leverage over the eastern tribes. The HCR has been unable to push the LNA General Command to commit to the outcome of the dialogue and to the HCR’s recommendations. Housh has also highlighted that the LNA leadership has been unwilling to offer any gestures of good faith, such as the release of those detained on the basis of their identity⁴² and the lifting of the blockade. Moreover, the General Command refused to meet with representatives of Derna, including the Shura Council, despite the willingness of the latter to negotiate. Given the total absence of any means to exert pressure on Haftar and his supporters, Housh has suggested “the need for the UN to supervise reconciliation efforts, and to commit to ensuring the implementation of any results.”

The HCR is in a similar position vis-à-vis the eastern tribes, which have proved reticent to supporting reconciliation efforts and have prevented council members from moving freely in eastern Libya. Despite the HCR’s numerous visits to the east, it was only allowed to enter Derna on one occasion, notably after the Shura Council made significant concessions. The HCR’s members have also been subject to frequent physical and verbal assaults from eastern tribesmen, at airports and their places of residence. The most famous of these incidents was carried out by the *Awliya’ al-Dam* tribal group⁴³ at a hotel in the eastern city of Al-Bayda.⁴⁴ The

42. People that carry identity papers issued in Derna face harassment at the security checkpoints around the city and at airports secured by forces loyal to Haftar.

43. The *Awliya al-Dam* group is made up of young people from eastern tribes. They present themselves as the families of the victims of terrorism in Derna and its environs, and deem the HCR’s efforts to be infringing their rights and disregarding the sacrifices of their relatives.

44. <http://www.eanlibya.com/archives/129624>, <http://www.libyaalkhabar>.



HCR believes that the LNA General Command is unable to control these tribal militias which are ostensibly loyal to it. The HCR delegation was prevented from entering Derna for a second visit, even though it had an entry permit from the LNA General Command.

As such, political or military leverage over Haftar will likely be insufficient to enable reconciliation efforts to proceed, in the absence of leverage over the tribes. This inability to put pressure on the tribes stems in part from the fact that HCR did not at the time count eastern tribesmen among its members, nor among its allies. However, it later realised the significance of this and made an effort to include eastern tribal *sheikhs* and individuals in its ranks.⁴⁵ The strength of some of these tribes means that even though some prominent tribesmen have called for the blockade to be lifted – such as Sulaiman Mahmoud al-Ubeidi, a member of the Free Officers Movement that brought Gaddafi into power in 1969 – and have received a level of support from both military officers and civilians, they have been unwilling to enter into armed confrontation with the members of their own tribe supporting the blockade.

Conclusion

Dialogue remains the best solution to the Derna crisis. Reconciliation efforts could play a major role in supporting and pushing for a peaceful solution, but the many challenges to such a process have meant that mediators have thus far been in a weak position. These stem in part from the specificities of Derna: Libyan public opinion, which sees the city as a hotbed of terrorism, as well as the real presence of some extremist actors; the crisis of political representation and legitimacy in the city, and the fragmentation of political actors; the weakness of tribal actors within the city of Derna, due to the diverse origins of its inhabitants, in opposition to the strong tribes supporting Operation Dignity present in the surrounding area.

Amid these political and social complexities, the HCR – a body whose members hail primarily from western and southern Libya – has emerged as a neutral traditional social mediator. Despite the great difficulties it has faced, it has made progress insofar as it succeeded in reaching out

to all parties to the crisis, and in more or less uniting the representatives of Derna in backing a peaceful solution. However, its lack of leverage over Haftar's forces and the eastern tribes has proved to be a decisive stumbling block, and has prevented the process from having any practical impact on the situation in the city. If the HCR receives greater political and social support, which may be provided by the United Nations as well as by the other major tribes in the Libyan east, then its reconciliation strategy would be more likely to succeed.

Additionally, a new player has appeared on the scene that could play a positive role in reconciliation efforts: regular military officers from the city and its surroundings, who fought alongside the Shura Council against IS in mid-2015. Despite their small numbers and the ongoing divisions in Libya's military institution, these officers played a prominent role in facilitating the entry of the HCR's delegation and deliveries of basic supplies into the city. They have also played an important role in coordinating between the elected local council and Shura Council. Because they belong to the military institution, which is symbolically seen as being 'official', rather than having religious or tribal affiliations, they have received support and acceptance at the local level. This influence means that they could play an important role in bringing together Haftar's forces and their opponents in Derna to reach a political settlement and avoid military intervention.

Based on this analysis, a future reconciliation strategy for Derna would have more chance of success if the following elements were taken into account:

- ✓ The HCR's efforts should be supported and capitalized on, and it should be involved in any future mediation efforts in Derna.
- ✓ It would be important for the HCR to communicate with influential branches of the Ubeidat tribe that are not based in the towns surrounding Derna, for example in Tobruk, and engage it in the dialogue processes. Given the social weight of the Ubeidat tribe and its extensive experience in social reconciliation, there is a clear need to have it play a role in the dialogue, rather than being a party to the conflict.
- ✓ Regular military officers living in Derna or sympathising with its cause need to be included in mediation efforts. It would be important that attempts

com/news/18426

45. There are now more than 10 eastern tribal *sheikhs* and individuals in the HCR.



be made to unify them into a single entity, so that they can play a role in facilitating communication between the leaders of the LNA and the representatives of the city.

As the UN Special Envoy to Libya is now focusing on reconciliation at the local and national level, increased attention to the situation in Derna could have a positive impact. One important first step could be facilitating a meeting that brings together all of the parties to the crisis, including representatives of the LNA General Command, as well as social, political and military representatives of Derna, especially the Shura Council. It is also important that reconciliation efforts conducted by traditional social structures at the local level are recognized as essential and gradually built upon at the national political level.

Inside Libya, members of the House of Representatives who have taken a clear stance against the blockade could also have a positive impact on reconciliation efforts in Derna, should they become more involved in the issue.

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