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The War in Derna: What's Happening Now, and What's Next

Al-Zubayr Salem¹

As widely anticipated after the liberation of Benghazi, on the fourth anniversary of the beginning of Operation Dignity (7 May) the Libyan National Army (LNA)² launched a new military operation. The target: the mountainous north-eastern city of Derna, the only city in eastern Libya not yet under its control. The new campaign came after a three-year blockade of the city by pro-LNA forces and limited (failed) reconciliation attempts, and has the stated aim of ridding the city of terrorists and terrorism.

This paper aims to answer key questions around the conflict in Derna: its roots, current dynamics on the ground, and its likely impact on the situation in Libya at the local and national levels. It builds on the author's previous policy brief on the crisis in Derna³ and puts forward suggestions for policymakers seeking to minimise the negative effects of the new campaign and to restore legitimate and effective local governance in the city.

1. This paper has been translated from Arabic
2. The self-styled Libyan National Army (or Libyan Arab Armed Forces) was created by military officer Khalifa Belgasem Haftar after the launch of Operation Dignity. The force is a coalition of former military officers, tribal groups and volunteers that had a shared interest in combatting the militancy that had appeared in eastern Libya after 2011.
3. The author published a Policy Brief in January 2018 entitled *The Crisis in Derna: Reconciliation Opportunities in the Midst of War?* (Middle East Directions Programme, European University Institute: Florence, Italy [2018]). http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/50145/PolicyBrief_34MED%28EN%29.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y

POLICY
BRIEF



What Do We Know About the Parties to the Conflict?

There are two main parties to the conflict in Derna, each of which are made up of a mixture of military and civilian players from a range of different religious and tribal backgrounds. The LNA General Command's forces include: the **Special Forces (*Quwwat al-Sa'iqa*)**, the most highly disciplined fighters in the conflict; **recent graduates** from the LNA General Command's military colleges and training centres, most of whom are youths; and the **Avengers of Blood Brigade (*Awliya' al-Dam*)**, which is made up of civilians from various tribal backgrounds who say they are the relatives of people killed by terrorist groups based in Derna. This brigade also includes tribal militias as the Derna campaign has received significant support from the tribes based in areas surrounding the city that are sympathetic to the LNA. A Madkhali Salafist group known as the **Tareq Bin Ziyad Brigade** is also present, but has not as yet joined the battle. Its official role is to undertake counter-terror operations and to enforce public morality.

The most significant actor on the opposing side is the **Shura Council of Mujahideen in Derna and its Outskirts** (Shura Council), accused of links to Al Qaeda. The Shura Council on 11 May dissolved itself and announced the formation of a new group, the **Derna Protection Forces**. This announcement came immediately after Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar declared the launch of the military campaign against the city on 7 May. It is unclear whether the decision to dissolve the Shura Council reflected the views of all of the group's members, or whether there were internal disagreements about this decision. The move to dissolve the Shura Council and change its name may represent an attempt to gain the support of local fighters who were not previously members of the Council, and to ensure that any armed resistance within the city is seen as coming under this umbrella group. It also represents an attempt by the group to distance itself from the terms "shura" and "mujahideen," both of which are commonly associated with Islamist organisations accused of committing terrorist acts. Instead, the group is attempting to rebrand itself as a civil organisation that exists to defend the city from outside attack.

The Shura Council was composed principally of former members of the Abu Salim Martyrs' Brigade, as well as

a limited number of fighters from the now-dissolved Ansar al-Sharia organisation. Additionally, there are reports of foreign fighters within the ranks of the Shura Council, particularly from neighbouring countries such as Tunisia and Egypt. The Derna Protection Forces, since their founding in early May, have also managed to attract and incorporate sympathetic young people opposed to the LNA. The forces besieging Derna had, in recent months, adopted policies that significantly contributed to the local population's overall harm, mistreatment and antagonism, since they were treated either as outright terrorists or as terrorist sympathisers. The LNA's failure to make a distinction in its rhetoric between the Shura Council and the city of Derna in general during the siege must be seen as its most significant mistake in dealing with the crisis.

Hence, the Derna conflict is multi-dimensional, with tribal, military and religious factors all at play. On a military level, there is a conflict between the LNA General Command led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and the Shura Council and its supporters. From a tribal perspective, the conflict is between tribes sympathetic to the LNA and the tribes/families of Derna, with pro-LNA tribes accusing the latter of harbouring extremists, and seeking to avenge those that have been killed. At the same time, on a religious level, there is a conflict between Madkhali Salafists that support the LNA General Command, and the Shura Council, accused of having links to Al Qaeda, which takes the Fatwa Council in Tripoli as its religious authority. The Madkhalists consider members of this group to be *kharijites*⁴ and apostates whom they have a religious obligation to kill.

How Did We Get to This Point?

Since February 2011, there has been a continuous presence of radical groups in Derna, which have launched attacks both within the city and beyond. Extremism in the city reached its height when the city was proclaimed a province of Islamic State's caliphate: 'Barqa Province'. These extremist groups, alongside the now-dissolved Shura Council, fought against the LNA in Benghazi after the launch of Operation Dignity in mid-May 2014. Due to these groups' opposition to Haftar, the deep political rifts between the city's political representatives and the lack of a significant tribal presence, the city of Derna as a

4. Members of an early secessionist movement in Islam.



whole came to be seen as a site of resistance to Haftar and groups supporting the LNA, particularly tribal militias, blockaded the city for nearly three years. Before the campaign against the city was officially announced on 7 May, no forces officially belonging to the LNA had played a part in the Derna campaign.

What Are Haftar's Goals, and Why Is Derna So Crucial?

For the LNA General Command, successfully taking Derna would mean extending its influence across the whole of eastern Libya, and eliminating what it considers to be the most significant remaining hub of terrorist activity and the last site of political opposition to it in eastern Libya. This would, in turn, strengthen the political and popular bargaining power of the LNA and its leader, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, in any future settlement.

As Derna, due to its long history of religious radicalism, is publicly perceived in Libya as a hub for terrorism and extremist groups, controlling the city would have great symbolic value in the LNA's fight against terrorism. The attorney general in Tripoli recently published arrest warrants for over 800 people in connection with terrorism-related crimes, of which 260 were thought to be present in Derna.

Should presidential and parliamentary elections go ahead in December, as laid out in a joint statement issued in Paris by leaders of the key factions⁵ in May 2018, having control over Derna – and hence over all of eastern Libya – could give Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar an important bargaining chip. This could enable him to sideline his political opponents, or even to delay the entire electoral process.

On an international level, the LNA's most significant ally is Egypt, whose state media outlets are closely following and exhaustively reporting the Derna campaign. The Egyptian authorities see the city, which lies less than 270 kilometres from the Egypt-Libya border, as a threat to its national security, and they have in the past claimed that militants responsible for terrorist attacks on its soil are

based there. Whether or not such statements are true, the consolidation of power of its main ally in Libya is a gain for Egypt. It may also contribute to distracting attention from the major counter-terror challenges it faces on a domestic level.

What's Happening Now?

Tens of civilians have been killed in the conflict, and the death toll continues to rise. The majority of civilian deaths have been caused by indiscriminate shelling and stray gunfire on the part of the LNA and its allied forces, as well as by landmines planted around the city by the Derna Protection Forces / Shura Council in districts they withdrew from, much as happened in Benghazi. The humanitarian situation in the city is dire, and important actors in this field (such as UNSMIL's humanitarian affairs officers) have not been allowed to deliver much-needed aid. There are continuous power outages, communication networks are down, and water supplies have been cut since the city's purification plant was targeted. Residents also suffer from severe shortages of staple foodstuffs and medication. The city's only hospital has been unable to provide sufficient care to the rising numbers of the injured and dying, and transferring patients out of the city is difficult. According to UNSMIL humanitarian affairs coordinators, over 2,000 families have fled the city since the beginning of the campaign, and there has been severe damage to the city's infrastructure.

The LNA and forces allied to it have continued to make progress on the ground, seizing control of large parts of the city after less than a week of direct confrontations inside the city. This was thanks to heavy air cover from the first days of the campaign, and intense ground and artillery assaults. In the face of this, the Derna Protection Forces / Shura Council staged a sudden retreat without major fighting to heavily-populated districts in the centre of the city. These districts are now witnessing intense combat. Several military analysts have attributed the rapid withdrawal of the Derna Protection Forces to their heavy reliance on remote-detonated explosives, which could no longer be used after communications in the city were cut on the first day of the assault. This raises the question of what will happen to these explosives once the conflict finishes and communications are restored, and what impact they will have on the stability of the city.

5. The factions represented in Paris were: the head of the Government of National Accord in Tripoli; the head of the House of Representatives in Tobruq; the head of the High Council of State in Tripoli; and the commander-in-chief of the LNA, as well as the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL).



In terms of the city's population, there is a major division between supporters of the LNA General Command and those supporting the Derna Protection Forces / Shura Council. Several whole neighbourhoods have officially announced their support for the General Command and ejected Shura Council fighters – these include Shayha al-Gharbiya, al-Sahel al-Sharqi and Bab Tobruq. This last district established its own military brigade, al-Burkan (The Volcano), which announced its incorporation into the LNA, in a scenario reminiscent of 2011. Securing the support of these districts has significantly boosted the LNA General Command's campaign, as previously happened in Benghazi, and has helped the LNA to advance and expand its influence over large areas of the city without significant fighting.

This time around, unlike during its fight against Islamic State in mid-2015, the Shura Council has very limited support among local fighters. Neither a significant number of local youths nor of other citizens have joined its ranks. This could be because locals are well aware of the power imbalance between the two parties to the conflict, especially with the LNA's air support, and because they have no strong ideological affinity with either side.

On a national level, there is a notable lack of solidarity for Derna from within eastern Libya, with greater sympathy for the city's plight coming from the west of the country. Through its elected local council, the city is affiliated administratively and politically with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. The High Council of State, the Presidency Council and the Fatwa Council of Tripoli have all published statements denouncing the campaign against Derna and calling for an end to military escalation in the city. Despite all of these declarations, nothing has changed on the ground, pointing to the complete failure of local actors to exert pressure on Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. It also suggests that the government in Tripoli is isolated, and has no influence whatsoever in the eastern region. Meanwhile, international attention (particularly the Italian embassy in Tripoli, the British embassy in Tripoli, UNSMIL and the European Parliament) has focused solely on the humanitarian situation and the necessity of protecting civilians, without addressing the issue of the legitimacy of the campaign and the manner in which it is being conducted.

What's Next? The Post-Campaign Outlook

It is clear that it is only a matter of time until the LNA and its allies take control over Derna. This outcome seems certain, especially since the majority of the local population has chosen not to support the Shura Council. While the announcement of the city's 'liberation' seems imminent, stability is by no means guaranteed, in either the short or the long term. Street fighting and outbreaks of violence may continue for some time, especially given the city's geographical situation; the surrounding area is characterised by caves, mountains and rugged passes that are unsuitable for military or civilian vehicles. The nature of the terrain could mean that fighters allied to the Shura Council are able to escape from the city and remain in hiding for long periods, as happened in 1996 after Gaddafi's forces launched an attack on extremists who had been holed up in Derna. Although the LNA and its allied forces are at the time of writing in control of most of Derna's neighbourhoods, and fighting is confined to the last sector of the city, no Shura Council leaders have yet been arrested. This suggests that at least some of them had already escaped Derna to the mountains, or were able to reach cities and regions outside of the LNA's control.

Tribal militias, and in particular the Avengers of Blood Brigade, will continue to be a source of concern for the local population. This brigade is not officially part of the LNA; however, it has been one of its most prominent supporters and played a principal role in maintaining the siege of Derna for almost three years, and subsequently participated in the military campaign against the city. It is expected that civilian members of the brigade will seek revenge, in the form of assassinations, against anyone suspected of involvement in killing their tribesmen over recent years, particularly given concerns about the ability of LNA General Command to control the group. Should this group retain an active presence in Derna after the end of the campaign, this will represent a major threat to the progress of any reconciliation efforts between the city's inhabitants and residents of the surrounding area, and a further blow to the fragile social fabric, already fractured along tribal and factional lines.

The LNA forces are likely to launch a wide-ranging campaign of arrests against those wanted in connection with criminal and terrorism cases, continuing an



operation that began as soon as its fighters entered the city.

Meanwhile, another source of concern for Derna's residents is the Madkhali Salafist Tareq Bin Ziyad Brigade, and Madkhali Salafists in general. As was the case in Benghazi, it is expected that Derna will witness competition over the control of mosques and acts of destruction targeting Sufi heritage sites including lodges and tombs.

In terms of the city's political representation, the competition for legitimacy between rival local councils is likely to persist. Derna is currently represented by two separate councils: the local council elected in 2012, which is allied to the GNA; and the appointed municipal council, which comes under the administration of the interim government in al-Bayda. The members of the appointed municipal council were selected by the LNA General Command in January 2017. On a local level, it seems highly likely that members of the elected local council will be sidelined, since they are accused by the LNA General Command of condoning terrorism and supporting an illegitimate government. Some members are, in fact, wanted for arrest by the LNA. This will give the appointed municipal council space to work in the city, and to present itself as Derna's representative for a limited time. It is expected that the a military governor will be appointed for the city and that the local council will be marginalised. The head of the elected, GNA-aligned local council, who is now based in Tripoli, will completely reject this move, and will put himself forward as the sole representative of the city. He will see the sidelining of the elected council and the prosecution of its members as contravening the wishes of the city's inhabitants and forcing their hands politically and militarily.⁶

Official institutions throughout western Libya have all expressed their opposition to the Derna campaign, and called for an immediate ceasefire. However, these requests have been ignored by the LNA General Command. Political escalation between the governments in the east and west of Libya on this issue could further complicate political negotiations at the national level, and threaten the implementation of elections in December.

In the long term, there is a real danger of the return of religious extremism to the city. Radicalism has historical roots in Derna stretching back to the 1980s. It is in this context that Derna became a haven for extremist groups after the war began in February 2011. It will come as no surprise if, after the end of the campaign, new groups emerge on the scene. This is especially likely if policies including violence, arbitrary arrests, political sidelining, social and economic restrictions continue to be implemented, repeating Gaddafi's practices towards the city during the 1990s. It is important that Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar recognise the danger of this and the threat it poses to the stability of eastern Libya as a whole. Moreover, if Haftar's opponents are able to escape from Derna, they may join up with extremist groups that have been increasingly and persistently active in central Libya since their expulsion from Sirte and Benghazi. The most prominent of these groups is Islamic State, which recently claimed responsibility for four bombing attacks in the space of less than a month, including in Tripoli, Misrata and Ajdabiya. Intense security measures will be needed in Sirte and the surrounding region to reduce the risk of further attacks.

The LNA General Command's control over the whole of eastern Libya after the fall of Derna raises two important questions. Firstly, what will be the future of Haftar and Operation Dignity after the fall of what is considered the last and most significant hub of extremist activity in eastern Libya? Will he seek to launch a fresh campaign to confirm his key role in countering terror in and from Libya, or instead focus on working in the political sphere? What is the future of the alliances that the LNA General Command has formed during its campaigns in the eastern region, such as with tribes and Salafists? To what extent will the heterogenous nature of the LNA (tribal, military and religious) affect its cohesion going forward? And secondly, to what extent will the support of Egypt and the UAE, which has been of critical importance to the LNA in its fight against terrorism, affect decision-making processes in Libya and the country's political future in general? Whatever the answers to these questions prove to be, the fall of Derna will most probably affect the political and security landscape at the national level.

6. Author interview with a local government official, Tripoli, 14 June 2018.



Policy Suggestions: What Can Be Done To Secure the City's Stability?

There are three key priorities in the post-campaign period: seeking local and regional reconciliation between the residents of Derna and its outskirts; stabilising the security situation in the city and re-establishing government presence; and, implementing a political settlement that avoids sidelining any party. If the LNA General Command fails to lead with a clear strategy in the post-conflict period, focusing only on achieving a swift military victory and ignoring other considerations, real stability for the city and its residents may well be a long time coming, just as is the case in Benghazi.

- **Local reconciliation in Derna** is urgently needed, and it will be an indispensable step to establishing stability in the city and to breaking the social isolation to which it has been subject for years. Reconciliation efforts between residents of the city, and between them and residents of the surrounding areas, must start as soon as military operations come to an end. **The establishment of a council of elders and notables from the city, with consensus figures and equal representation for all constituencies within the city, would constitute a positive first step.** Such a council could play an essential role, as it is the body that could oversee the return of displaced communities, follow up on the treatment of detainees and the charges against them. It should prevent arbitrary arrests, malicious allegations and acts of retaliation. Such a council would also have the responsibility of striving to repair the social fabric of the city and surrounding areas. The UN could support these efforts by assisting with investigations into violations committed by parties on all sides during the conflict, and work to guarantee the transparency and credibility of these investigations.
- **Stabilising the security situation** is the most pressing challenge facing the city, and is a priority for local residents. The issue of who will be responsible for ensuring security in Derna could pose a threat to the city's stability. As such, it will be incumbent on the LNA General Command to take all possible steps to ensure the complete withdrawal of tribal militias from the city and begin to disband them in order to protect social peace in Derna. Moreover, whichever force ends up taking charge of security in the city,

it ought to be a combined force that includes individuals and military officials from within Derna. Efforts to reactivate the security apparatus that stopped work several years ago will be key to ensure that tribal militias are sidelined.

- In the short term, meanwhile, the **successful delivery of food, medicine and cash** during the first days following the end of the campaign will help to restore a sense of normality to the city, and will reassure citizens that they are not being targeted and will not be subject to collective punishment.
- With regard to local governance, the unification of Derna's political representation and ending the competition for legitimacy between the local councils should be a priority.
 - **Restoring the municipal council appointed by the LNA General Command and aligned with the Interim Government in al-Bayda could be an immediate practical step** as this council played a key role in allowing daily life to continue during the siege. This is especially true given the general strong wish of the people of Derna to end the conflict and restore stability. The appointed municipal council should work from within the city and present itself as a representative of the city as a whole. Public service employees under the elected local council, which is aligned with the GNA, must not be excluded. Finally, it is extremely important that the LNA General Command differentiates between political work and military action, and does not impose restrictions on the elected local council, particularly by prosecuting or detaining its members.
 - In the medium term, it would be necessary to have representatives for the city that are chosen by the residents rather than imposed upon them. **Holding municipal elections would be an important step** to end the difficulties around political representation and return normal political life to Derna, especially as no elections have been held there since 2012, and the city does not have full and complete representation in either legislative bodies or the Constitutional Drafting Assembly. The head of the appointed municipal council's recognition that he has not been elected and that his role is temporary, as well as his apparent willingness to allow the



people of Derna to elect their own representative at the nearest opportunity, constitute constitute a positive sign.⁷ Similarly, support from UNSMIL and the international community could play a key role in pushing for local elections. Despite the importance of this step, there would be many challenges to holding elections, the first of which would be the LNA General Command allowing them to go ahead, especially given that there have been no local elections in eastern Libya since Operation Dignity was launched in mid 2014.

7. Author's telephone interview with the head of the appointed municipal council Ahmida Tarbah, 12 June 2018.

Middle East Directions
Robert Schuman Centre
for Advanced Studies

European University Institute
Via Boccaccio, 121
50133 Florence
Italy

Contact:

email: MED.Libya@eui.eu
website: middleeastdirections.eu

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