



Misplaced Optimism In Libya

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Is the long-running civil war in Libya winding to a close? The Libyan National Army (LNA) and its larger-than-life leader, Gen. Khalifa Haftar, seem to think so.

Over the last five years, the LNA has fought to dominate the country as part of a civil war that has raged there since the death of ousted dictator Col. Muammar Gadhafi in 2011. For the most part, it has done so successfully. To date, the LNA controls roughly 80 percent of Libyan territory, including the entirety of the nation's oil reserves. The lurching success of this national conquest, in turn, emboldened Gen. Haftar and the LNA this spring to begin "Operation Flood of Dignity" — a final push into Northwest Libya to capture Tripoli, the country's capital.

Gen. Haftar's representatives hope that this will be a quick and relatively painless process, and have told interlocutors in Washington and European capitals as much. The general himself recently traveled to a number of foreign locales (like Russia) in an effort to drum up support for the siege of Tripoli.

But his optimism is likely to be quite misplaced, for a variety of reasons.

For one thing, the LNA isn't properly equipped to sustain conflict in an urban environment like the country's national capital, and has historically done poorly in similar circumstances. The so-called Battle of Benghazi, during which the LNA fought against a number of factions in a city with a population half the size of Tripoli's, lasted over three years (2014-2017). Gen. Haftar's forces also have, on several occasions, fought Islamic State- or al Qaeda-affiliated militants in the city of Derna. None of those engagements were completed in less than nine months — and, on more than one occasion, the fighting lasted as long as two years. Indeed, the LNA is still fighting in the southern city of Sabha in a conflict which has been raging since January of this year. There's no reason to think that the fight over Tripoli will turn out any differently.

For another, Tripoli's status as a veritable coastal fortress, and the plethora of armed factions ensconced there virtually guarantees that seizing control will be a long (and very likely bloody) process. In Tripoli, a broad array of militias and armed factions work together and co-exist, however tentatively, under the banner of the rival Government of National Accord (GNA). Even though each separately lacks the capacity to rebuff the LNA, a combined defense would severely complicate matters for Gen. Haftar and his followers. And because all of the factions are stakeholders with deeply-rooted interests in the city, the LNA's only viable strategy — forcing GNA coalition fighters south and out of the city — will be resisted at almost any turn.

Politics can also be expected to play a role in tempering Gen. Haftar's offensive. The wily general announced his offensive just days before U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was set to arrive in Tripoli to negotiate a ceasefire. The LNA's subsequent push to capture the capital has garnered it no shortage of international enemies, and made foreign support for its efforts exceedingly hard to come by. It has also dimmed prospects of internationally-brokered mediation putting an end to the fighting any time soon.

Finally, retaking Tripoli may simply be beyond the LNA's resources. Gen. Haftar's charm offensive in recent weeks, which included a very public jaunt to Moscow, suggests that for all of their bluster the general and his forces are lacking in supplies and actively seeking international sponsors. GNA airstrikes, meanwhile, have shrewdly targeted established LNA supply lines in Jufra, eroding the capacity of Gen. Haftar's forces to sustain combat.

All of which suggests strongly that, notwithstanding the public optimism of Gen. Haftar and his surrogates, Libya's long-running civil war is likely to continue raging for some time to come. A speedy victory in Libya, which Gen. Haftar is promising, will be a great deal harder to achieve than the general thinks.

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