

Deadly Clashes Between Rival Factions in Libya Elicit Fears of Renewed Conflict

Deadly clashes and troubling violence in Libya's capital city of Tripoli was reignited this past Saturday, eliciting fears of the potential for renewed conflict. The fighting was the worst the country has faced in two years and drew concerns among peace activists and other observers that it could plunge the nation back into a full-blown war. The latest clashes were triggered by fighters aligned with the parliament-backed administration of Fathi Bashagha firing on a convoy in the capital while other pro-Bashagha units massed outside the city. A group affiliated with Prime Minister Dbeibah then stormed a military base belonging to entities tied with the parallel government of Bashagha. Impartial analysts point to the destructive role that Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar and his forces have played in fueling instability in Libya, with the eastern-based administration's rival claim to power festering and coming to a head. In the past, Haftar launched an offensive aimed at seizing Tripoli from the internationally-recognized government based there, and the indefinite postponement of initially-planned December 2021 elections in Libya has left rival administrations claiming to hold legitimate power with the potential existing for outbreaks of violence like that which transpired this past weekend.

The Libyan warlord, Khalifa Haftar, who led a months-long assault against the country's legitimate authority was one of the controversial figures who tried to run for president back in late 2021. Concerns over this and disagreements over the rules and procedures for the elections resulted in them being postponed. Khalifa Haftar was reintroduced to Libya through Cairo where he emulated Qaddafi's military-style dictatorship. Cairo supplied Haftar with weapons in violation of the UN-arms embargo on Libya. Haftar's involvement in the post-Qaddafi crisis worsened divisions among Libyans, and as citizens were scheduled to head to the polls in late 2021 for elections, after months of uncertainty in the lead-up they were called off. The divided political classes could not agree on the rules of the election, and there was particular alarm with some of those who were trying to run including Haftar, who had engaged in war crimes and major human rights violations.

Foreign influence has also affected Libya as geopolitical, economic, and ideological reasons have attracted external actors. Outside forces have continued to drive tensions and rival claims to power, with regimes in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates playing especially destabilizing roles. Libya's deep-water ports provide a chance to control a substantial sea area and vital trade routes. The country is also an important energy power, and has one of the world's most productive oil fields as well as natural gas and solar power potential. Turkey and Qatar were two of the foreign actors who provided support for the internationally-recognized government based in Tripoli. Turkey gave them aerial superiority over Haftar's forces with advanced military equipment, including drones. This allowed the internationally-recognized government to retake strategic outposts in the west and south of Tripoli. An eventual ceasefire was put in place which halted Haftar's siege on Tripoli, but underlying tensions have persisted and been exacerbated by a failure to hold elections and thus two rival claims to power in Libya.