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The Future of the Libyan Arab Armed Forces

Tim Eaton

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The LAAF's unwieldy network of alliances is threatened by the emergence of a new unity government and hasn't ruled out a return to war.

On May 29, 2021, Khalifa Haftar oversaw a military parade of his self-styled Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF). The field marshal [positioned](#) his forces as a state force that had headed off threats from "terrorist plots" and warned that his LAAF would not hesitate to enforce "peace by force" if the political settlement process is derailed. Haftar's comments and show of force are a stark reminder that, despite the formation of a new government and transitional roadmap, the septuagenarian has no intention of stepping off the national stage, making it unclear where the LAAF goes from here.

The nature of the organization gives some clues to the potential trajectory of the LAAF, which is best understood as a series of networks that traverse the political, economic and security spheres rather than a discrete set of armed actors. Applying Paul Staniland's socio-institutional [framework](#) to analyze horizontal ties between leaders and vertical ties between leaders and a social base suggests that Haftar's LAAF network is actually an unwieldy alliance.

Limits of LAAF Cohesion

Since 2014, Haftar has demonstrated skill to cohere and integrate the LAAF alliance through a combination of narrative-building, coercion, and external support. Unlike other Libyan armed groups, the LAAF expanded its territorial control and absorbed new, diverse forces into its structure. The LAAF has not evolved into an integrated organization due to the contradictory political goals and motivations of its component parts and the predominant role of personal relationships. Indeed, while the LAAF has a formal chain of command, power lies in the hands of Haftar and his close associates.

A significant proportion of the LAAF is formed of parochial networks (with close ties to their local social bases) that operate as franchises whose allegiance appears to depend on personal relationships to Haftar and his inner circle rather than institutional affiliations. Lessons from the failures of other parochial groups illustrate that such a lack of strong horizontal ties among leaders can lead to infighting among rival commanders. This makes the fate of Haftar himself critical, and makes the LAAF vulnerable to fragmentation. In fact, as security has deteriorated in Benghazi, violence has mounted between elements of the LAAF.

Haftar is also increasingly reliant upon his external backers, particularly in the wake of the failed Tripoli offensive of 2019–2020. Since 2014, external support has been critical to the development and maintenance of the LAAF. Haftar has unified LAAF factions by using external sponsorship to control rent distribution. This makes the LAAF especially vulnerable to shifts in policy by those external states, most notably the United Arab Emirates, the LAAF's principal foreign backer. This is also true of Russia, with Russian private military companies playing an important role in support of Haftar on the ground.

Control of State Institutions Under Threat

LAAF gains are also under threat in the "state" space. Through pressure applied to the House of Representatives, the Interim Government, and key institutions such as the Central Bank branch in Bayda, the LAAF established a basis to dominate formal state institutions in eastern Libya with impunity from 2015 to 2021. Meanwhile, the LAAF's Military Investment Authority has expanded to become a vehicle for dominance of the private sector.

The March 2021 creation of a new Government of National Unity (GNU), the first unified national government in Libya since 2014, endangers Haftar's capture of institutions and resources in the east by reuniting state institutions and returning them to oversight from Tripoli. However, the extent to which the GNU will seek to challenge the LAAF's access to resources and preeminent position in areas under

LAAF control remains unclear. The prevention of GNU prime minister Abdulhamid al-Dabaiba travelling to eastern Libya (because his security team was [turned back](#)) in April is likely an illustration of Haftar's attempts to prevent GNU consolidation. Overall, the GNU appears to have limited aspirations in the security space or to meaningfully reshape political structures, which makes a modus vivendi possible.

Haftar and the Political Process

The elections proposed for December 2021 are a source of much uncertainty and Haftar has shown no willingness to be subjected to meaningful civilian oversight. This leaves an inherent tension between a political process designed to share power and Haftar focused on concentrating it.

The goal for the LAAF in the current phase is to ward off threats from the GNU by seeking an accommodation that allows the LAAF to maintain its access to resources, to retain the allegiance of LAAF franchises, and to stall initiatives in the security sector. States committed to supporting sustainable peace in Libya must resist a return to appeasement of Haftar and continue to support the GNU's broadening of its engagement to areas under LAAF control. They should also help the GNU place limits on the LAAF's revenue generation, lest the current interregnum simply provide the LAAF with means of replenishing itself ahead of a future bout of conflict. Through his comments at the military parade, Haftar is making it clear that war remains on the table if his conditions are not met, even if the evidence suggests that he would have little chance of achieving his objectives.

Tim Eaton is senior research fellow in the Middle East and North Africa Program at Chatham House. He is the author of a recently released Chatham House report, "[The Libyan Arab Armed Forces: A Network Analysis of Haftar's Military Alliance](#)."