

to an escalation of conflict between rival armed groups. The armed forces backing the HoR were led by General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) in what Haftar named "Operation Dignity" aimed at eliminating Islamist militias. The GNC was backed by several militias (mainly Islamist), dominated for a time by the "Libya Dawn" coalition. This coalition did not last, but many of these militias remain active in one form or another, along with global extremist organizations and rival armed groups.

In December 2015, to resolve the political stalemate between two competing governments, the United Nations brokered a new agreement to form a Government of National Accord (GNA), intended to serve as the executive branch of a unified national government—and to become the only officially recognized government of Libya. Despite the formation of the Tripoli-based GNA, conflict in Libya has persisted. The authority of the GNA is disputed by several parties—most notably Haftar and his LNA—who launched an offensive in and around Tripoli in an attempt to take control of the capital in April 2019. Haftar announced that the offensive was launched to bring security and stability to Tripoli, later introducing the narrative that they would eliminate the "terrorist militias" in the capital.⁴ The LNA-aligned HoR withdrew their initial support for the GNA in August 2016, choosing to continue support for a rival government in the east.⁵ Thus, for the past several years, Libya has contended with two rival administrations with competing security structures based in the east and west of the country.⁶

Legacy of Gaddafi's Rule

The social and political divisions in Libya that have been exacerbated by the recent conflict have foundations in the decades of authoritarian rule by Muammar Gaddafi. The years under Gaddafi's rule were marked by extensive political repression, intentional weakening of government institutions and the country's security apparatus, and preferential treatment afforded to certain tribes and ethnic groups while others suffered from blatant discrimination and marginalization. These relationships were by no means static during Gaddafi's regime, as tribal and geographic alliances shifted periodically. However, some groups, such as the Tebu (also spelled Tabu, Toubou, or Tubu) and Imazighen/Amazigh, were marginalized consistently throughout this period. These and other ethnic groups continue to face discrimination today. This discrimination is often predicated on their non-Arab identities which are underscored, in the case of the Tebu, by the use of slanders that characterize them as African rather than Libyan.⁷

Resources and positions within the government and security forces during Gaddafi's rule were unevenly distributed not only by tribe or ethnic group, but also by regional origins. This resulted in the neglect of specific towns and geographic areas. This was partially due to the alignment of tribal divisions along geographic lines, but was also a result of political maneuvering related to the concentration of oil resources and historical relations and tensions. The split between east and west is the most significant division, related to assertions by eastern citizens that they have received a disproportionately smaller share of the country's resources compared to the amount of oil their region produces.⁸ The city of Benghazi in particular faced significant underdevelopment and repression under Gaddafi in comparison to Tripoli, an issue that points to the opposition's entrenchment in Benghazi and other eastern areas.⁹

Geographic rivalries have played out in other forms during the course of the conflict as well. For example, militias from Zintan and Misrata engaged in intense fighting in Tripoli in 2014, despite both sides having been among the strongest early forces involved in the overthrow of Gaddafi. The Misratan forces were part of the "Libya Dawn" coalition which moved to push the Zintani fighters out of the capital due to accusations that the Zintanis were aligned with Haftar and