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Haftar's unsteady grip on southern Libya

After five months of clashes in southern Tripoli, the fighting between the Libyan National Army (LNA) and militias affiliated with the Government of National Accord (GNA) does not seem to subside. The fighting also spread to other parts of the country, with airstrikes reported in Jufra, Misrata and Zuwara among other places. The consequences also started to be visible in the south, where the LNA had rapidly extended its influence at the beginning of 2019. Indeed, on the 18th of August the South Protection Force (SPF) announced it took control of Murzuq. The announcement came after the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) reported that 90 people were killed and over 200 injured in the fighting in Murzuq in two weeks [Libya: Communal Violence in Murzuq, Flash Update, UNOCHA, 14 August 2019].

The SPF was established in February 2019 and includes mostly Tebu militias that opposed Haftar's advance in the Fezzan region [Conflict Parties, Libya, Armed Conflict Database, IISS]. The SPF posed significant resistance to the LNA's campaign in particular in Murzuq, but was forced to withdraw following intense clashes at the end of February. Nevertheless, the LNA's insistence on the presence in Fezzan of 'Chadian criminal gangs and militants' did not help rebuild the social fabric of the area, based on a fragile coexistence between Arab tribes and Tebu and Tuareg minorities. The marginalisation of Tebus and their association with Chadian armed groups led to an increasing resentment that exploded in early August when clashes resumed in Murzuq between the SPF and the al-Ahali, an Arab tribe associated with the LNA.

A turning point was the 4th of August airstrike on Murzuq, which caused at least 43 dead and more than 60 injured. The airstrike that targeted a meeting of tribesmen and local elders discussing a peaceful solution to the rising tensions in the city, was carried out by the LNA. Haftar's forces claimed that the target was Moussa Hassan al-Teboui, leader of the SPF, accused by the LNA of recruiting Chadian militants and having strict relations with jihadist groups [Libya: quelles étaient les cibles du raid aérien de l'ANL à Morzouk?, Radio France Internationale, 09 August 2019].

The LNA's sectarian narrative and the resulting intercommunal violence in Murzuq suggest that Haftar's hold on the Fezzan and southern Libya is more precarious than what has been touted. As far as the conflict drags on in Tripoli, the LNA is also forced to send reinforcements and resources to the frontline, thinning its units in other areas. Moreover, raising doubts about the outcome of the Tripoli offensive could push Haftar's affiliates to reconsider their options, shifting alliances and adopting a bandwagoning strategy. Reports suggesting that the Khalid Ibn Walid Brigade took part in the fighting in Murzuq in support of the SPF are particularly indicative, given the fact that the same group affiliated with the LNA in January 2019.

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