

THE STRUGGLE FOR SECURITY IN EASTERN LIBYA

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Despite successful parliamentary elections in early July, localized clashes over identity, power, and resources persist in Libya, straining the capacity of the weak government, deterring foreign investment, and possibly stunting the emergence of democratic institutions. The most pressing of these conflicts—growing insecurity in Libya’s eastern region of Barqa—is fueled by agitation for autonomy, Salafi militancy, and fighting between ethnic Tabu and Arab tribes. Lacking an effective police and national army, the state is struggling for legitimacy and control of the east. It must act to restore the periphery’s confidence in the center.

Key Themes

- Barqa suffered from political and economic neglect under Qaddafi; there are mounting fears that this discrimination will persist despite his overthrow.
- Although the parliamentary elections represented a referendum on national unity, the issue of federalism and decentralization is not dead; a host of new federalist parties have sprung up in the east and pro-autonomy armed groups can still play a spoiler role in national politics.
- A militant Salafi faction has emerged in the east that opposes electoral participation and has launched attacks on Western interests and Sufi sites.
- The most intractable eastern conflict is the ongoing violence in the Saharan town of Kufra, where clashes have erupted between the Tabu, a long-marginalized non-Arab African minority, and the Zway, an Arab tribe favored by Qaddafi.
- The central government has devolved enforcement and mediation in these conflicts to revolutionary brigade coalitions and tribal elders, frequently inflaming the situation and handing an unhealthy degree of leverage to informal actors.

Findings

- Establishing an effective constitution and formalizing the security sector are the best ways to address the sources of eastern instability in the near term.
- The constitution must carefully strike a balance between the central government and local administration. The issues of local autonomy and the role of Islam in legislation are likely to lead to deadlock and polarization.
- The parliament must build consensus among the people on the institutionalization of the police, army, and judiciary. A top-down directive will be seen as a Qaddafi-like attempt to centralize authority.
- To help quell violence and restore eastern confidence in the state, the government must demobilize the country’s numerous revolutionary brigades and strengthen the national army and police.
- A priority should be professionalizing the Supreme Security Committees, police-like bodies that have become unaccountable and widely distrusted.

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