

A Police State With an Islamist Twist: Inside Hifter's Libya

Khalifa Hifter, the military ruler of eastern Libya, is trying to take over the entire country. To see what that would look like, we paid a rare visit to the part he already controls.

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BENGHAZI, Libya — The field marshal stares from billboards into the wreckage of the Libyan city of Benghazi. His uniform is festooned with epaulets and honors, even as the civil war he is waging has stalled into a bloody stalemate.

His plainclothes security agents loiter and listen in cafes and hotel lobbies. He has handed control of the mosques to extremist preachers. And he has showered patronage on a tribal death squad called the Avengers of Blood, blamed for a long string of disappearances and killings of his political opponents.

“We are living in a prison,” said Ahmed Sharkasi, a liberal activist from Benghazi who fled to Tunis because of threats on his life.

Khalifa Hifter, the 76-year-old commander known in his dominion as “the marshal,” is the military ruler of eastern Libya. He has been fighting for nearly six years to take control of the country, and he has been waging an assault on the capital, Tripoli, for the last 10 months.

The United Arab Emirates, Egypt and others have lined up behind him, and Russia has sent mercenaries. The largely powerless United Nations-sponsored government in Tripoli is defended mainly by regional militias and, recently, Turkey, which has flown in hundreds of paid Syrian fighters.

Mr. Hifter has cut off Libya's oil production for the past month to try to deprive the Tripoli government of revenue. This week he began shelling its civilian port, killing three people, narrowly missing a ship loaded with liquefied natural gas and derailing United Nations-sponsored cease-fire talks.

Mr. Hifter has promised to build a stable, democratic and secular Libya, but he has largely shut Western journalists out of his territory. A rare visit there by a New York Times correspondent and photographer revealed an unwieldy authoritarianism that in many ways is both more puritanical and more lawless than Libya was under its last dictator, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi.



Cadets in Mr. Hifter's militia, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces, trained at a military academy in eastern Libya.

A few families have returned to the ruins of their former apartments in the center of Benghazi, which was heavily damaged by fighting.

In Mr. Hifter's Benghazi stronghold, we found a half-ruined city beset by corruption, where security agents trailed foreign journalists, residents cowered in fear of arbitrary arrest, and pro-government militias answered to no one.

Residents complain of corruption and self-enrichment by tribal militia leaders and former Qaddafi officers. There are reports of unexplained bombings, abductions and detentions without trial. Islamist extremists have taken over the mosques and may be infiltrating the police force.

"Everyone is afraid, even afraid of their fellow citizens," one Benghazi resident said, speaking on condition of anonymity for his safety.

Jonathan Winer, a special envoy to Libya under President Obama, described a brutal system. "If you are with Hifter then you are under his umbrella and you can do whatever you want," he said. "If you aren't, you are an enemy and you may be jailed, killed or exiled."

The United Nations Secretary General warned last month of "a deterioration of law and order" in eastern Libya, "including numerous cases of crimes and intimidation," reportedly by groups affiliated with Mr. Hifter's forces.

Aging and distracted, Mr. Hifter is seldom seen in Benghazi. He presides from his mountain home an hour's drive to the West. He holds salons with tribal elders and depends on family as his closest advisers. Two of his sons are among his top military commanders, as well as his caretakers.

"They make sure he is well fed," said Faraj Najem, a director of a government-run research center who is close to Mr. Hifter. "They make sure he takes his medicine. They provide him with security when they are around him."

A Destroyed City. A Fearsome Ruler.

The center of Benghazi is little different today than it was in 2017, when Mr. Hifter seized it after a four-year campaign of shelling and bombing.

Neighborhoods on the periphery now bustle with newly opened stores and cafes. But the streets of the city center are crumbling ruins. A few desperate residents have begun returning with their families to squat in the wreckage of their former apartments. Their crude light fixtures cast an eerie, nighttime glow on the desolate alleys.

Libya is rich with oil, but it is a volatile prize. It has been in turmoil since an Arab Spring revolt and NATO's intervention toppled Colonel el-Qaddafi nine years ago. Its deserts shelter Islamist militants, and its Mediterranean coastline teems with migrants.

Mr. Hifter had served as an officer in Colonel el-Qaddafi's army, but later fled to the United States where he lived for decades as a C.I.A. client before returning to Libya during the uprising in 2011.

He began his drive for power by promising to save Benghazi. In 2014, when Islamist militias were terrorizing the city, he vowed to declare military rule and rid the country of Islamists.

Armed by foreign sponsors, he started by recruiting fighters from local tribes and welcoming the help of former Qaddafi officers and officials.

Then he won the support of Saudi-style Islamist fighters — known as Salafists — who saw a common enemy in the rival schools of Islamists that Mr. Hifter was battling. He has never acknowledged any contradiction between his avowed hostility to political Islam and his brigades of Salafists.

The deals he struck with tribal militias, Salafists and former Qaddafi henchmen in Benghazi now threaten to run roughshod over his promises of secular law and order.

Many Benghazi residents celebrate Mr. Hifter for restoring security to the streets, an attitude reinforced in his official media. Images of Mr. Hifter's face are ubiquitous. A pro-Hifter satellite television network broadcasts his propaganda and sometimes Salafist sermons. Weekly street demonstrations, organized by the government's Office of Supporting Decisions, recall Qaddafi-era displays of forced enthusiasm.

On one recent Friday, about two dozen adults and an equal number of children marched for about 150 yards while holding photographs of Mr. Hifter. Then everyone settled listlessly into plastic chairs and chanted profanities about the president of Turkey.

During an interview, a spokesman for Mr. Hifter required a visiting journalist to watch a video of more than a dozen gruesome beheadings.

"Some of the terrorists are now in Tripoli and hiding in the militias there," the spokesman, Col. Ahmed Mismari, said. "That is why we decided to go to Tripoli."

Access to Benghazi by foreign journalists or rights groups is severely restricted. Residents must obtain official permission to travel abroad, sometimes requiring interrogation by security agents. Some are forced to submit reports about who they met outside Libya — or, sometimes, on friends and neighbors at home.

Return of the Qaddafi Machine

Mr. Hifter leans heavily on members of the old Qaddafi machine, and a surge of former Qaddafi loyalists have rushed back from Egypt and elsewhere over the previous 10 months.

With Mr. Hifter focused on Tripoli, the most powerful figure in the day-to-day governance is widely considered to be Aoun Ferjani, a former senior officer in the Qaddafi intelligence service who is now in charge of the internal security agencies.

"Don't even mention his name," one former official in Mr. Hifter's government said, looking anxiously over his shoulder. "He is the boss. He is the most dangerous."

Opposition views are not welcome.

Mr. Sharkasi, the activist now living in Tunis, was forced to flee Benghazi after he posted an online video urging peace talks and circulated the hashtag "War is not the solution." Other critics have been detained or suspended from jobs at government-run companies.

Last July, a British-educated politician, Seham Sergiwa, 57, publicly questioned Mr. Hifter's assault on Tripoli. A group of armed men abducted her that night. They spray-painted a warning against criticizing the army on the wall of her house.

Her relatives outside Libya said the power was cut before the attack and the police had ignored calls for help. Most family members now believe she is dead. But the Benghazi authorities have told her husband that they believe she is alive and advised him to keep quiet.

"All the evidence points to Hifter," said her brother, Adam Sergiwa, a doctor living in Indiana. "We know that. Everybody knows that. He wanted to teach a lesson."

A spokesman for Mr. Hifter called the killing an act of terrorism and said that his military had nothing to do with it.

Another former Qaddafi associate now working with Mr. Hifter is the former Air Force Gen. Muhammad el-Madani el-Fakri. Mr. Hifter authorized General el-Madani el-Fakri to create a for-profit investment arm for Mr. Hifter's military.

He seized prime real estate, imposed a \$500 entry fee for foreign workers, and claimed a lucrative monopoly on the sale of scrap metal. But he also used his position to press for a personal stake in private ventures, according to Western diplomats and Benghazi businessmen.

Mr. Najem, of the government-funded research center, insisted that the general had been sidelined because of abuses, but Mr. el-Madani el-Fakri served as Mr. Hifter's representative at recent United Nations cease-fire talks.

Rise of the Salafis

The modest mosque in the Benghazi neighborhood of El Leithi was once a hub for leaders of Ansar al Shariah, the jihadists who carried out the 2012 attack that killed the American ambassador J. Christopher Stevens.

These days, noon prayers are often led by Ali el-Omani, a 23-year-old Salafist with a bearded baby face. Like other extremists, the Salafists backing Mr. Hifter oppose liberal ways like electoral democracy or the mixing of the sexes. Unlike their jihadist cousins, though, these Salafists preach absolute obedience to an earthly ruler, in this case Mr. Hifter.

"For sure the army supports us," said Mr. Omani, insisting that the Salafis had restored "the true teaching of the Quran."

Benghazi liberals complain that the Salafis are scarcely an improvement.

"The Salafis want to 'purify' Libya just like Ansar al Sharia tried to," said Fathi Baja, a political scientist and former Libyan ambassador to Canada.

The Salafists now boast of their control of Benghazi's mosques and religious broadcasting.

Salafist brigades under Mr. Hifter have demolished shrines and lodges belonging to Sufis, practitioners of a Muslim mysticism that ultraconservatives consider heresy, including another one leveled last month in the city of Surt.

Salafist fighters shut down a celebration of Earth Day, also deemed heretical. And a general close to the Salafists tried to ban women from traveling without a male guardian, an order later rescinded after an outcry.

Some of Mr. Hifter's supporters argue that he is using the Salafists in a temporary alliance of necessity and keeping them in check. They point to a locally notorious episode in 2018 when police officers raided a meet-up of female Twitter users at a Benghazi cafe. A top security official apologized and Mr. Hifter reassigned the Salafi police commander who had been in charge.

But Lt. Col. Naji Hamad, a Qaddafi-era veteran who now runs the Benghazi police academy, said the operation was legitimate. The meet-up violated "public decency," he said.

A Fragile Future

Although no longer a battleground, Benghazi is hardly free of violence.

A car bomb in August killed three U.N. staff members and two others. The United Nations pulled its diplomats from the city.

U.N. reports warn of frequent kidnappings, forced disappearances and assassinations by unknown assailants. In the second half of last year, that included the killing of a bank employee, the kidnapping of a prominent lawyer and the abduction of the official in charge of policing corruption. Two Sudanese women were tortured and killed on suspicion of practicing witchcraft.

In October, a mass grave was uncovered in the Benghazi neighborhood of Hawarri.

Responsibility for the violence is impossible to determine, but many Benghazi residents point to tribal militias that fought with Mr. Hifter.

One of the biggest sources of fighters was the Awaqir tribe. Members of the tribe now boast of their impunity, and some have claimed prime jobs in government-owned companies or even the local university.

"The Awaqir are the big beneficiaries," said Mr. Najem, the director of the research center. "They claim that they have paid a dear price — too many martyrs — and they want the rewards."

Awaqirs formed the Avengers of Blood in 2013 to seek revenge after a deadly clash with an Islamist-leaning militia. The Avengers became known as enforcers for Mr. Hifter, widely blamed for disappearances and killings.

A spokesman for Mr. Hifter said the Avengers were unarmed civilians who collected information about "terrorists."

But during the abduction of Ms. Sergiwa, her attackers scrawled the name of the Avengers of Blood on the wall.

A prominent Awaqir militia leader often linked to the Avengers declined to comment.

The militia leader, Ezzedine el-Waqwaq, said he was busy with civilian matters. In the construction industry before 2013, he was appointed to the potentially lucrative role of director of the Benghazi airport after Mr. Hifter captured the city.

Now Mr. el-Waqwaq has an even better job: director of a popular Benghazi soccer team, Al Nasr.