

MENA Desk

North Africa Programme

Report

July 2025

Libya's political crisis and public dissent: Examining governance, security, and prospects for stability



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Executive summary

In mid-May 2025, Libya's fragile political order in the west nearly unravelled when violent militia clashes in Tripoli triggered mass protests against the Government of National Unity (GNU). The clashes that erupted after the killing of militia leader Abdel Ghani al-Kikli "Ghaniwa" left at least eight civilians dead¹ and exposed the government's inability to assert control. In the aftermath, hundreds of Libyans rallied in Tripoli's Martyrs' Square demanding the ouster of Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah and immediate elections. Three ministers of the GNU resigned in solidarity with the demonstrators, underscoring the depth of elite discontent. One security guard was killed as protesters briefly attacked the PM's office. These events followed a flurry of weekend violence at Dbeibah's order, in which pro-government brigades had assaulted the Stability Support Apparatus (SSA), leading to Ghaniwa's death and a fierce multi-front battle in Tripoli.

This report traces the timeline of these events and analyses their implications. Key findings include evidence of pervasive public disillusionment: citizens blame the political elite for chronic misgovernance (power outages, inflation, security failures) and demand accountability. The protests also laid bare the militia-state nexus: armed groups nominally under government patronage waged open combat, then mobilised parts of the political system for political ends. High-level resignations and multiple claims that the GNU has lost its legitimacy (from both rival institutions and civil society figures) indicate a collapse of trust in the current leadership. International observers warn that without urgent reform, Libya risks a return to large-scale conflict.

The unfolding crisis matters for decision-makers because it threatens Libya's long-sought transition. The government's fracturing undermines any interim mandate, endangers the already-postponed elections process, and empowers militias whose priorities may diverge from national stability. The report concludes with policy implications in which political actors must rebuild legitimacy through inclusive dialogues (possibly overhauling both rival administrations and parliament), while security reform must integrate or disband militias. Governance reforms are urgently needed to restore citizen trust and ensure that forthcoming elections (and any interim administration) genuinely represent Libyan will. If these reforms stall, Libya's decade of dysfunction marked by polarisation, militia rule, and stalemate is likely to persist or worsen.

1. Introduction

Libya remains gripped by a deep and drawn-out political crisis over a decade after the 2011 NATO-backed uprising that overthrew Muammar Gaddafi. Instead of ushering in a new era of stability, Gaddafi's ouster left a fractured state plagued by rival governments, entrenched militias, and persistent foreign interference. The most recent wave of unrest, triggered by the death of influential militia leader Abdel Ghani al-Kikli in May 2025, has once again exposed the fragility of the country's security

¹ Al Arabiya English, "Libyan Protesters Demand Prime Minister Quit as Three Ministers Resign." *Al Arabiya*, May 17, 2025.

<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/north-africa/2025/05/17/libyan-protesters-demand-prime-minister-quit-as-three-ministers-resign>

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landscape and the volatility of the power dynamics in Tripoli. In the wake of deadly clashes and mass protests demanding Prime Minister Abdulhamid al-Dbeibah's resignation, three ministers resigned from the (GNU), signalling both internal disarray and growing public dissent.²

Prime Minister Dbeibah, who was appointed through a UN-backed process in 2021 to lead a transitional government towards elections, has instead remained in office amid repeated delays, institutional deadlock, and the collapse of trust among Libya's competing factions. His authority, once reinforced by a delicate balance of militia alliances, now stands severely undermined and at its weakest since taking office in 2021, as public frustration mounts over insecurity, corruption, and lack of political progress.³ The GNU's recent moves to dismantle militia influence have not brought order but have instead plunged Tripoli into the most violent confrontation in years.

At the heart of Libya's crisis lies the collapse of a unified state apparatus and the rise of armed factions that operate above or alongside formal institutions. These militias, deeply embedded within the country's security and administrative structures, have transformed from revolutionary forces into powerful political stakeholders. Backed by competing foreign powers—notably Turkey in the west and Russia in the east—and fueled by control over oil revenues and illicit economies, both the Tripoli-based GNU and the rival eastern government aligned with Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) continue to resist compromise and cooperation to achieve a resolution.

This report examines the ongoing Libyan political crisis by exploring the root causes and consequences of public dissent. It investigates how rising frustration, mass resignations, and protests reflect a deeper crisis of legitimacy, and considers what these developments might mean for Libya's prospects of stability, governance reform, and a meaningful democratic transition.

2. Research Questions

What do recent protests in Libya reveal about the legitimacy crisis of the Government of National Unity and the broader challenges to political stability?

2.1. Sub-Research Questions

1. What are the root causes of growing public dissatisfaction with Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah's government?
2. How have recent clashes between armed groups impacted governance and civilian security in Tripoli?

² Al Arabiya English, "Libyan Protesters Demand Prime Minister Quit as Three Ministers Resign."

³ Emadeddin Badi and Wolfram Lacher, 'A Power Grab Backfires in Tripoli', *New Lines Magazine* (blog), 28 May, 2025, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/a-power-grab-backfires-in-tripoli/>.

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3. What implications do mass resignations and public unrest have for Libya's political transition and electoral roadmap?

2.2. Background and Rationale

Since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has struggled with fragmented governance, armed conflict, and weak institutions. The external intervention that contributed to the regime's removal failed to establish a unified governing authority. As a result, the power vacuum that was created after the regime's collapse led thousands of militias to take control of state institutions, each vying for local influence.⁴ Despite repeated efforts at national reconciliation, rival governments in the east and west continue to function as separate entities backed by their own militia alliances.⁶

In early 2021, the UN-facilitated Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) established the Government of National Unity (GNU) as a temporary unity government led by Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah. The GNU received support from both the Tripoli-based House of Representatives (HoR) and the eastern parliament to serve as the transitional government until the scheduled elections in December 2021. However, in September 2021, the HoR dismissed the government and appointed an eastern rival premier, Fathi Bashaga, who was later replaced by Osama Hamad. These developments occurred during a period of stalled elections and deepening institutional rivalries.⁷ National cohesion efforts have gradually deteriorated. Groups such as the Stability Support Authority (SSA) and the Special Deterrence Force (Rada) began clashing in Tripoli, highlighting the GNU's limited control over security apparatus.⁸ Moreover, the 2023 Derna floods and continued clashes have demonstrated that political fragmentation undermines both effective governance and humanitarian response.⁹

Tensions escalated in early 2025 when public protests erupted across Tripoli in response to violent clashes between rival militia factions and the government's ongoing failure to organise long-promised elections. The protests represented widespread public frustration not only with the lack of security but also with systemic governance failures. Protesters demanded immediate democratic reforms,

⁴ Wolfram Lacher, "Libya's Militias Have Become the State," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)*, July 31, 2023, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/libyas-militias-have-become-the-state>.

⁵ Jasheil Athalia, "A Critical Analysis of Libya's State-Building Challenges Post-Revolution," *E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/07/07/a-critical-analysis-of-libyas-state-building-challenges-post-revolution/>

⁶ Gregory Aftandilian, "Libya: Despite Talks on a Unified Government, Impasse Remains," *Arab Center Washington DC*, March 27, 2024, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/libya-despite-talks-on-a-unified-government-impasse-remains/>

⁷ Center for Preventive Action, "HYPERLINK "https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?broken=bew40U"Civil Conflict in Libya," *Global Conflict Tracker*, July 15, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-libya>

⁸ The Unit for Political Studies, "What Do the Latest Tripoli Clashes Mean for Libya's Political and Security Landscape?," *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, May 20, 2025, <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/tripoli-clashes-implications-for-the-libyan-political-and-security-landscape.aspx>

⁹ Ali Bin Musa, "Division and Disaster: Libya's Political Fragmentation and Response to the Derna Flood," *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, August 22, 2024, <https://mccouncil.org/publication/division-and-disaster-libyas-political-fragmentation-and-response-to-the-derna-flood/>

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complete transparency, and accountability, as well as Dbeibah's resignation. Moreover, the GNU faced an intensified legitimacy crisis when three government ministers, including the interior and finance ministers, resigned in May 2025.¹⁰ The recent wave of protests reveals the deeper and long-standing legitimacy crisis that has affected Libya since 2011. The GNU faces daily grievances because of its failure to hold the promised elections, its compromised security, and persistent corruption. The current situation reflects the long-standing structural challenges that emerged since 2014, including state-backed armed groups, rival administrative bodies, and a political system driven by personal gain rather than public accountability.

This section aims to trace the path from Gaddafi's fall through various transitional arrangements, to demonstrate how entrenched militia influence and governance deadlock set the stage for the 2025 protests. The aim is to contextualise the present unrest not merely as political disruption, but as the outcome of prolonged institutional failure and a decade of unmet expectations in Libya. Understanding the significance of these protests is essential to grasp Libya's broader governance challenges.

3. Conceptual Framework

This report draws on theories of state legitimacy, post-conflict governance, and elite bargaining. It evaluates Libya's transitional governance through the lens of political legitimacy and security-sector fragmentation, exploring how non-state armed groups influence political outcomes in weak-state environments. The concept of legitimacy in this context refers to the public perception of governing authorities' right to rule, which depends on both formal institutional mechanisms that include elections, and informal factors, such as effective governance, responsiveness to public demands, and transparency.¹¹

The post-conflict environment in Libya created legitimacy deficits due to fragmented political authority, while state institutions remained weak and elite factions continued their ongoing competition. Indeed, the GNU under Dbeibah faced difficulties in maintaining control while dealing with widespread public dissatisfaction and the integration of non-state armed actors within governance structures.¹² The existence of multiple power centers, each with differing claims to authority, exacerbates governance crises, particularly when elite interests oppose the public's general aspirations.

Furthermore, the framework considers the significant influence of armed groups within Libya's political landscape. These groups control key territories and shape political outcomes through the use

¹⁰ "Libyan Protesters Demand Prime Minister Quit as Three Ministers Resign," *Al Arabiya English*, May 17, 2025, sec. North Africa, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/north-africa/2025/05/17/libyan-protesters-demand-prime-minister-quit-as-three-ministers-resign>.

¹¹ Florian Weigand, "Investigating the Role of Legitimacy in the Political Order of Conflict-Torn Spaces," Security in Transition, LSE, Working Paper, 04/15, no. SIT/WP/04/15 (2015), <http://www.securityintransition.org/>.

¹² Wolfram Lacher, *Libya's Fragmentation: Structure and Process in Violent Conflict* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).

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of force and negotiations with political elites.¹³ The complex relationship between political actors and militias represents a form of elite bargaining, which often undermines broader governance objectives and public welfare. Consequently, the state's monopoly over legitimate violence, a fundamental principle of state-building, remains profoundly compromised.

Elite bargaining functions as a key factor in either facilitating or hindering post-conflict stability. Political elites in Libya focus more on establishing power-sharing agreements that prioritise short-term stability and factional interests instead of implementing sustainable governance reforms.¹⁴ Such arrangements, while temporarily stabilizing, often lead to institutional dysfunction and fragmentation, preventing genuine democratic progress and fuelling legitimacy crises.

By integrating these theoretical insights, the report seeks to explain how state legitimacy interacts with elite bargaining and non-state armed groups' influence in Libya's ongoing governance crisis. This nuanced approach provides a deeper understanding of why Libya's political transition remains unstable and offers insights about the challenges that could affect future stabilization and democratization efforts.

3.1. Case Selection: Tripoli (2024–2025)

This report focuses on recent events in Tripoli during May–June 2025 as a case study to examine the legitimacy crisis facing the Government of National Unity (GNU) and the broader challenges to political stability in Libya. As the capital and focal point of Libya's fragile political transition and ongoing power struggles, Tripoli is where the intersecting dynamics of popular protest, militia activity, and institutional crisis are most apparent and politically consequential. Since the NATO backed uprising that led to the ousting and death of President Muammar Gaddafi, Libya has endured political instability, resulting in a divide between two rival governments.¹⁵ In the west of Libya, the internationally recognised Government of National Unity (GNU), Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, governs from Tripoli. Meanwhile, in the east, Prime Minister Osama Hammad governs Benghazi with the backing of General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) military forces.¹⁶

¹³ Emadeddin Badi, "Exploring Armed Groups in Libya: Perspectives on SSR in a Hybrid Environment," DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 23 November 2020, <https://www.dcaf.ch/exploring-armed-groups-libya-perspectives-ssr-hybrid-environment>.

¹⁴ Frederic Wehrey, "Ending Libya's Civil War: Reconciling Politics, Rebuilding Security," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 24, 2014, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2014/09/ending-libyas-civil-war-reconciling-politics-rebuilding-security?lang=en>.

¹⁵ Al Arabiya English, 'Libya Armed Group Leader among Dead in Tripoli Clashes: Media', Al Arabiya English, 13 May 2025, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/north-africa/2025/05/13/libya-armed-group-leader-among-dead-in-tripoli-clashes-media->.

¹⁶ Sally Abou AlJoud, 'Deadly Clashes Rock Libya's Capital after Militia Leader Killed', Middle East Eye, 13 May 2025, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/deadly-clashes-rock-libyas-capital-after-militia-leader-killed>.

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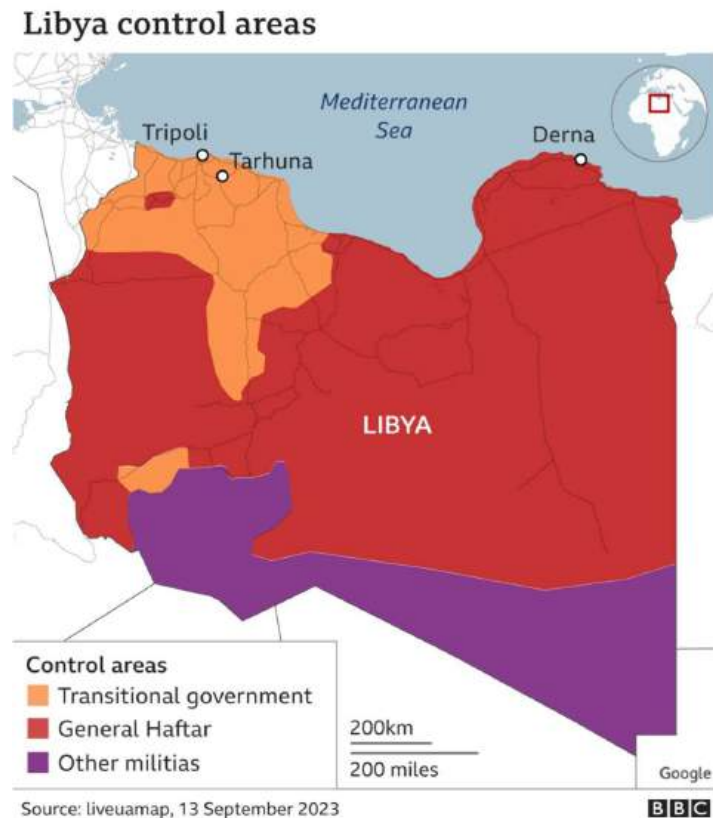


Figure 1: Libya control areas (source: GOV.UK)¹⁷

Tripoli offers a unique case for examining the role of armed groups in governance and civil security, as it hosts a complex network of militia groups, some of which are formally integrated into state institutions, while others operate autonomously or in competition with state actors. In the post-Gaddafi era, failures in state building have demonstrated Libya's vulnerability to militia domination and power struggles over resources, particularly in Tripoli,¹⁸ where control is divided among rival armed factions.¹⁹ Although Prime Minister Dbeibah controls public spending and state institutions, his security apparatus depends on a fragile network of militias.²⁰ The three main dominant militias that currently operate in the capital are the Stability Support Authority (SSA), the Special Deterrence Force (Radaa), and the 444 Brigade.²¹ In particular, the SSA, led by Abdel Ghani al-Kikli, has been

¹⁷ GOV.uk, "Country policy and information note: security situation", *GOV.uk*, 22 April 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/libya-country-policy-and-information-notes/country-policy-and-information-note-security-situation-libya-april-2025-accessible#fnref:56>

¹⁸ Jonathan Fenton-Harvey, 'Why Libya Almost Descended into Chaos Again', <https://www.newarab.com/> (The New Arab, 19 May 2025), <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/why-libya-almost-descended-chaos-again>.

¹⁹ Reuters, 'Libya Clashes Point to Growing Power of Turkey-Allied PM', *Reuters*, 13 May 2025, sec. Africa, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/libya-clashes-point-growing-power-turkey-allied-pm-2025-05-13/>.

²⁰ Jamal Jawhar, 'From Haftar to Dbeibah: The Map of Control and Influence in Libya', 5 June 2025, <https://english.aawsat.com/node/5151154>.

²¹ Talmiz Ahmad, 'Libya Once Again in the Abyss of Despair', Arab News, 7 June 2025, <https://arab.news/nr5ze>.

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strategically embedded within state institutions with loyalists placed in key positions across the banking and telecommunication sectors.²²

The recent clashes in Tripoli between rival militia factions were provoked by the assassination of Abdel Ghani al-Kikli, who was in a tense power struggle with Prime Minister Dbeibah over control of state institutions.²³ Al-Kikli's death has effectively reshaped the balance of power in Tripoli and diminished the influence of the SSA.²⁴ Furthermore, this demonstrates Prime Minister Dbeibah's unprecedented removal of a rival militia leader in order to centralise power under forces loyal to the GNU.²⁵ These developments make the May–June 2025 events a valuable case study for examining the challenges facing the GNU and how it has impacted governance, security, political stability in Libya, and the GNU's legitimacy.

While the GNU sought to consolidate and stabilise its authority, Al-Kikli's assassination and subsequent militia clashes instead provoked public demonstrations in Tripoli, further challenging the government's legitimacy. The GNU framed these events as a decisive step towards restoring state control. However, the inability to maintain order reinforced public perceptions that this was merely an internal power struggle for dominance among armed factions.²⁶ Furthermore, demonstrators have called for Dbeibah's resignation and for elections to be held, accusing the GNU of obstructing the electoral process since his UN-backed appointment.²⁷ Therefore, the May-June 2025 events provide a valuable case study to assess the growing legitimacy crisis and broader challenges to political stability facing the Government of National Unity.

4. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach to explore Libya's evolving political crisis and public dissent, with particular focus on governance, security, and legitimacy in the capital, Tripoli. Given the complexity of Libya's transitional landscape and the fragmentation of formal governance structures, qualitative methods offer a flexible and interpretive framework to examine both elite behaviors and grassroots responses. This research primarily relies on qualitative content analysis of a wide range of publicly available materials. These include local and international news reports, official statements from the United Nations, government speeches, public protest footage, and resignation letters from key ministers. These sources were selected for their relevance to the key events between early 2024 and mid-2025 and were analysed thematically to identify narratives surrounding legitimacy, political accountability, and the evolving role of militias in governance.

²² AlJoud, 'Deadly Clashes Rock Libya's Capital after Militia Leader Killed'.

²³ Tim Eaton, 'Escalating Conflict in Tripoli Exposes the Realities of False Stability – and International Neglect in Libya | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank', 11 June 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/05/escalating-conflict-tripoli-exposes-realities-false-stability-and-international-neglect>.

²⁴ Fenton-Harvey, 'Why Libya Almost Descended into Chaos Again'.

²⁵ Karim Mezran and Dario Cristiani, 'The Killing of Abdul Ghani Al-Kikli May Be a Turning Point for Libya', *Atlantic Council* (blog), 16 May 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-killing-of-abdul-ghani-al-kikli-may-be-a-turning-point-for-libya/>.

²⁶ Emadeddin Badi, 'In Tripoli, A War on Militias Quickly Becomes a War of Militias', *Middle East Council on Global Affairs* (blog), 21 May 2025, https://mecouncil.org/blog_posts/in-tripoli-a-war-on-militias-quickly-becomes-a-war-of-militias/.

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In order to capture the developments, a timeline analysis was conducted, mapping out significant political, military, and social events from early 2024 to the present. This chronological perspective allowed for a structured understanding of how clashes, protests, and institutional shifts emerged and evolved, contributing to the current crisis of legitimacy affecting the Government of National Unity (GNU).

To contextualize the current situation, the study draws on comparative insights from previous episodes of political instability in Libya, particularly those following the 2014 political divide and the 2019 Tripoli offensive. This comparison provides a deeper understanding of recurring patterns such as elite fragmentation, security vacuums, and foreign influence, while also identifying new dynamics in the current wave of political dissent. Finally, this research incorporates existing commentary from Libyan analysts and civil society figures, drawn from academic publications and policy reports. These expert perspectives provide valuable insights into local perceptions and the broader implications of recent political developments. While no original interviews were conducted, the use of publicly available expert analysis helps contextualise the findings within ongoing debates on Libya's governance and stability.

5. Development— What happened?

Between May 12 and late May 2025, Tripoli witnessed a critical sequence of events involving militia infighting, violent protests, high-level resignations, and political manoeuvring that deepened the widespread legitimacy crisis facing the GNU. This section outlines the rapid evolution from militia clash to public unrest and political response, situating these developments within Libya's long-running state fragmentation.

5.1. Al-Kikali's fallout with Prime Minister Dbeibah

Abdel Ghani al-Kikli, emerged as a key power broker in post-revolution Libya, having established his militia during the 2011 uprising and gradually transforming it into one of Tripoli's most powerful armed groups. He played a pivotal role in supporting Prime Minister Dbeibah following his appointment through a UN-led process in March 2021 to lead a transitional government ahead of scheduled national elections. When elections were cancelled, Dbeibah's position became weakened, as rival factions in western Libya aligned with General Haftar to form a parallel government. In response, Dbeibah relied heavily on Al-Kikli and other militia leaders to retain authority in Tripoli.²⁷²⁸ In exchange for their support, Al-Kikli and allied militia leaders were granted extensive influence over state institutions, enabling them to install loyalists in key ministries and state-owned companies. Al-Kikli's growing authority was most visible in his monopoly control over the Central Bank and

²⁸ Emadeddin Badi and Wolfram Lacher, 'A Power Grab Backfires in Tripoli'.

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influence over ministerial appointments. He leveraged this position to exert pressure on Dbeibah, at times threatening to withdraw his support and endorse the formation of an alternative government.²⁹ Tensions escalated when Al-Kikli and his SSA forces abducted Salaheddin Elnajih, the newly appointed chairman of the Libyan Post Telecommunications and Information Technology Company (LPTIC), and a close ally of Prime Minister Dbeibah. Al-Kikli's refusal to hand over those responsible and engage in a negotiated settlement marked a turning point, prompting demands for action from the government and rival armed factions.³⁰

5.2. Assassination and militia clashes: May 12-13

On the evening of May 12, Al-Kikli was assassinated at the headquarters of the 444 Brigade, during what was reportedly a staged meeting under the pretext of negotiations.³¹ The operation, allegedly orchestrated by Mahmoud Hamza, commander of the 444 Brigade with support from the 111 Brigade, was swiftly followed by a coordinated military campaign to dismantling Al-Kikli's power base. SSA strongholds, particularly in the Abu Salim district, were seized, and dozens of SSA fighters were detained.³² Prime Minister Dbeibah publicly praised the operation, framing it as a successful and decisive step towards restoring order and emphasising the limited harm to civilians.³³

On May 13, Prime Minister Dbeibah issued executive decrees formally dissolving units affiliated with both the SSA and the SDF, including the Judicial Security Apparatus. Furthermore, senior officials across key institutions were replaced, and loyalists were installed in their place. This demonstrated that the GNU was mobilising to consolidate power in favour of Dbeibah-aligned factions at the expense of established Tripoli-based factions.³⁴

However, fighting between the SDF and Brigade 444 soon broke out across Tripoli, spreading densely populated neighborhoods and military zones. Armed groups affiliated with the General Security Apparatus also engaged in looting and attacks on former SSA strongholds. This was caused by a failed attempt to transfer control of positions previously held by the Judicial Security Apparatus to Brigade 444. Fighters aligned with the SDF refused to comply with the agreement, leading to skirmishes. This quickly escalated, drawing in additional militia groups and spiralling into a broader, multi-front urban conflict.³⁵

5.3. Ceasefire: May 14

By midday on May 14, a ceasefire was brokered and formally announced to halt the intense fighting in Tripoli. The Ministry of Defence stated that the truce aimed "to protect civilians, preserve state

²⁹ Badi and Lacher, 'A Power Grab Backfires in Tripoli'.

³⁰ Mezran and Cristiani, 'The Killing of Abdul Ghani Al-Kikli May Be a Turning Point for Libya'.

³¹ Mezran and Cristiani, 'The Killing of Abdul Ghani Al-Kikli May Be a Turning Point for Libya'.

³² Samy Magdy, 'A Warlord and 6 Other People Killed as Militia Infighting Rocks Libya's Capital, Officials Say', AP News, 13 May 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/libya-clashes-militias-tripoli-9ffda29d0071470df0b406e16f9cc8eb>.

³³ Badi and Lacher, 'A Power Grab Backfires in Tripoli'.

³⁴ Badi, 'In Tripoli, A War on Militias Quickly Becomes a War of Militias'.

³⁵ Badi and Lacher, 'A Power Grab Backfires in Tripoli'.

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institutions, and avoid further escalation”.³⁶ Dbeibah’s government also claimed that the military operation had successfully restored control over Tripoli.³⁷ The violence caused the death of at least eight civilians,³⁸ and significant damage and destruction in several civilian neighbourhoods, including Ain Zara, Ras Hassan, and Bin Ashur.³⁹

The clashes led to notable territorial shifts. While the SDF managed to hold onto its southern bases, it lost ground in several central areas, including the port. Dbeibah-aligned forces, particularly Brigade 444, took over some of these positions. However, other key areas, such as those surrounding the Central Bank, were secured by Misratan forces, who were neither aligned with Dbeibah nor the SDF.⁴⁰

Despite the ceasefire, brief clashes broke out between Brigade 444 and Rada in central Tripoli, including around the port, before fighting subsided, and the ceasefire resumed later that day.⁴¹

5.4. Protests and resignations: May 16

On May 16, large-scale protests erupted across Tripoli and several towns in western Libya, making it the most significant anti-government mobilisation since the GNU took power in 2021. Demonstrators gathered in Martyrs’ Square, voicing anger over deteriorating public services, corruption, and the growing influence of armed groups. Most importantly, protesters also demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Dbeibah and the immediate departure of all existing political bodies, including parliament in favour of transparent elections.⁴²

While the protests reflected genuine public frustration, there were also indications of interference by rival factions. Protesters were reportedly directed to storm the Prime Minister’s Office by provocateurs linked to rival political factions, triggering confrontations with security forces and the use of live ammunition. This enabled Dbeibah to portray the unrest as a coordinated attempt to destabilise the government.⁴³ The government later confirmed that a security officer had been killed during the confrontation.⁴⁴

Amid the growing unrest, three ministers from the GNU resigned in support of the protests. Economy and Trade Minister Mohamed al-Hawij, Local Government Minister Badr Eddin al-Tumi, and Housing Minister Abu Bakr al-Ghawi called on Dbeibah to step down.⁴⁵

Microsoft.QuickAction.WiFi ³⁶ Turkia, Hazem, ‘Ceasefire Starts in Libyan Capital after Renewed Armed Clashes’, *Anadolu Agency*, 14 May 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/pg/photo-gallery/anadolu-a-witness-to-damage-in-conflict-zones-of-libyas-capital-following-ceasefire/0>.

³⁷ Mustafa Fetouri, ‘Could Domestic, International Shifts Bring Change to Libya?’, *New Arab*, 21 May 2025, <https://www.newarab.com/news/could-domestic-international-shifts-bring-change-libya>.

³⁸ France 24, ‘Libya’s Tripoli Back to Calm after Bout of Deadly Violence’, *France 24*, 16 May 2025, 2, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250516-libya-s-tripoli-back-to-calm-after-bout-of-deadly-violence>.

³⁹ Hazem Turkia, ‘Ceasefire Starts in Libyan Capital after Renewed Armed Clashes’.

⁴⁰ Badi and Lacher, ‘A Power Grab Backfires in Tripoli’.

⁴¹ France 24, ‘Clashes Erupt in Libya’s Tripoli despite Ceasefire’, *France 24*, 15 May 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20250515-gunbattles-resume-in-tripoli-despite-ceasefire-un-expresses-alarm>.

⁴² Fetouri, ‘Could Domestic, International Shifts Bring Change to Libya?’

⁴³ Badi and Lacher, ‘A Power Grab Backfires in Tripoli’.

⁴⁴ Aljazeera, ‘Libyan Ministers Resign as Protesters Call for Government to Step Down’, *Al Jazeera*, 17 May 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/17/libyan-ministers-resign-as-protesters-call-for-government-to-step-down>.

⁴⁵ Aljazeera, ‘Libyan Ministers Resign as Protesters Call for Government to Step Down’

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5.5. PM Dbeibah's speech and international reaction: May 18-19

On May 18, Prime Minister Dbeibah delivered a televised address that was widely criticised by the public. He dismissed the protests as the work of “paid demonstrators” backed by political rivals, including General Haftar.⁴⁶ He also announced an “ongoing project” to dismantle militias in Tripoli, pledging to eliminate corruption and extortion, and declared: “We will not spare anyone who continues to engage in corruption or extortion. Our goal is to create a Libya free of militias and corruption.”⁴⁷

To prevent a renewed outbreak of violence, the Presidential Council and the UN Support Mission in Libya established a Truce Committee to monitor the ceasefire and protect civilians and formed a Security and Military Arrangement Committee to stabilise Tripoli and reform the armed forces. UN officials highlighted distrust in the current leadership and public disillusionment with the prolonged transitional period. In response, UNSMIL committed to presenting a time-bound, pragmatic roadmap towards democratic elections.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan voiced support for the formation of a unified Libyan government as a prerequisite for national elections. Similarly, during the Arab Economic Summit on May 19, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi emphasised the need for a Libyan-led political process centered on national reconciliation and elections.⁴⁹

5.6. Renewed protests: May 24

Thousands of Libyans protested on May 24 in Tripoli and other western cities, rejecting the legitimacy of all existing political bodies and demanding the removal of the Government of National Unity, the eastern-based parallel government, the House of Representatives, the High Council of State, and the Presidential Council. Demonstrators also called for an end to corruption, militia dominance, and the prolonged transitional period, urging for immediate elections and the establishment of a unified government.⁵⁰

5.7. Ceasefire breach: June 7-9

Tensions escalated as Prime Minister Dbeibah demanded the SDF hand over control of Mitiga Airport and prison to state authorities, warning of consequences if they refused. In a televised interview, he accused the group of protecting 125 wanted individuals and reaffirmed his objective to centralise control over all critical infrastructure. In response, the Souq al-Jumaa Movement, affiliated with the SDF, rejected any handover of the territory.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Fetouri, ‘Could Domestic, International Shifts Bring Change to Libya?’

⁴⁷ Fenton-Harvey, ‘Why Libya Almost Descended into Chaos Again’.

⁴⁸ United Nations, ‘Aftermath of Tripoli Clashes Puts Libya’s Fragile Stability to the Test | UN News’, 24 June 2025, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164891>.

⁴⁹ Fetouri, ‘Could Domestic, International Shifts Bring Change to Libya?’

⁵⁰ Abdulkader Assad, ‘Protests in Tripoli and Other Cities Call for the Ouster of All Political Bodies | The Libya Observer’, Libya Observer, 7 July 2025, <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/protests-tripoli-and-other-cities-call-ouster-all-political-bodies>.

⁵¹ The Libya Observer, ‘Escalating Tensions between the Government and the Special Deterrence Force Could Reignite War in Tripoli’, *The Libya Observer*, 26 June 2025, <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/escalating-tensions-between-government-and-special-deterrence-force-could-reignite-war-tripoli>.

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On June 9, the ceasefire was violated, with brief clashes erupting overnight in Tripoli between the SDF and the General Security Forces. In response, the Ministry of Defence announced it had intervened to restore order, enforce the ceasefire, and secure the withdrawal of armed groups back to their prior positions.⁵²

6. Analysis—Why It Matters

The Libyan protests are symptoms of long-standing structural failures: the collapse of public trust, the entrenchment of militia influence, and the deep crisis of political legitimacy form a triad of dysfunction that threatens Libya's stability, with implications for both the country's democratic aspirations, as well as the wider region facing increasing violence and instability.

6.1. Public trust

The 2025 Libyan protests highlight a profound collapse in public trust toward the political establishment. Triggered by escalating clashes between rival militia factions and the government's persistent failure to organise long-promised elections, the protests were not isolated expressions of discontent - they reflect years of cumulative public frustration and demands for transparency, accountability, and democratic reforms, including the resignation of Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah.

Public disillusionment stems from chronic misgovernance: frequent power outages, inflation, corruption, and severe security lapses have become daily realities. Protesters directly blame the political elite for these conditions. High-profile resignations reinforce public perceptions that the GNU is unravelling from within, and no longer capable of representing or serving the Libyan people. This reinforces public sentiment that have been expressed by many Libyans over the years, emphasising the "fundamental requirement" for political stability and accountability in order for Libya to progress.⁵³

Significantly, the mass mobilisations of May 2025 represented the largest anti-government demonstrations since the GNU came to power in 2021. The protests revealed the scale of societal anger and the urgency of reform. The erosion of public trust matters deeply because without it, no electoral process—no matter how well-designed—can produce a legitimate or stable outcome. Libya's failure to build an accountable, responsive state has left it vulnerable to fragmentation, humanitarian failure, and further violence. Restoring trust demands urgent governance reforms and a rebalancing of power away from elite interests and towards popular accountability.

6.2. Militia-state relations

⁵² Sami Zaptia, 'Calm Returns after Overnight Tripoli Militia Clashes – Defence Ministry Says It Has Enforced Control, Warns of Readiness to', *Libya Herald* (blog), 9 June 2025, <https://libyaherald.com/2025/06/calm-returns-after-overnight-tripoli-militia-clashes-defence-ministry-says-it-has-enforced-control-warns-of-readiness-to-take-measures-to-ensure-security/>.

⁵³ United Nations Support Mission in Libya, "Libyan Youth Call for Political Stability, Accountability and Economic Reforms." *UNSMIL*, 11 March, 2025, <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/libyan-youth-call-political-stability-accountability-and-economic-reforms>.

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Libya's protest movement has also exposed the dangerous entanglement between state institutions and non-state armed groups. At the core of the unrest is the militia-state nexus: many armed factions, while aligned with the government, have increasingly operated autonomously or even in open defiance of central authority. This arrangement reflects a broader pattern of elite-militia bargaining, where political actors rely on armed groups to secure territorial control or advance negotiations.

Such relationships prioritize short-term power-sharing over long-term institutional development, ultimately weakening the state. Militia leaders, transformed from revolutionary actors into political stakeholders, now operate within and beyond formal institutions. This duality has become a structural feature of Libyan politics. The power vacuum following the fall of Gaddafi allowed thousands of militias to embed themselves into the security and administrative apparatus, a condition worsened by foreign backing, with Turkey and Russia being involved in between rivaling factions. Despite several reconciliation attempts, Libya remains divided between opposing governments, each supported by their own armed coalitions. The GNU's reliance on these groups for security not only undermines state authority but also reinforces public perceptions that governance is hostage to militia agendas.

Furthermore, despite calls for ceasefire, the escalation of violence is imminent due to rival factions having various incentives for renewed outbreaks of violence. Many Tripoli-based militias perceive a ceasefire as a win for Dbeibah's claims of restoring order, which would undermine their leverage in the existing power balance. If protests calling for Dbeibah to step down remain dismissed, militia groups may take advantage of public discontent to escalate violence and consequentially regain influence, thereby causing further instability in both Libya and the wider region.⁵⁴

This is a pertinent matter, as no political reform, election, or peace agreement can succeed without first disentangling governance from militia dominance. The unchecked power of armed groups distorts political outcomes, undermines public welfare, and perpetuates conflict. Addressing this dynamic is crucial to stabilising Libya's political order and rebuilding functional state institutions.

6.3. Political legitimacy

The 2025 protests also laid bare Libya's deep legitimacy crisis. Legitimacy - defined here as the public's belief in a government's right to rule - depends not only on formal processes like elections but also on effective governance, transparency, and responsiveness to public needs. By these measures, the GNU has faltered on all fronts.

Since 2021, Dbeibah's government has repeatedly delayed elections, failed to provide basic services, and tolerated militia infighting that endangered civilians. The 2023 Derna floods and ongoing clashes highlighted how political fragmentation hinders both crisis response and long-term governance. Public

⁵⁴ Badi and Lacher, 'A Power Grab Backfires in Tripoli'.

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resentment reached a boiling point in the events of May 2025, as citizens accused the GNU of obstructing the democratic process and perpetuating rule by personal and factional interests.

The legitimacy crisis was further exacerbated by ministerial resignations and accusations of corruption. Rival institutions, notably the Haftar-aligned government in the east, capitalized on GNU weaknesses to assert their own claims to authority. This competition, rooted in Libya's post-2011 institutional breakdown, has left the country with multiple competing power centres and no unifying framework for rule.

This breakdown in legitimacy is not new but cumulative, shaped by a decade of unmet expectations and power-sharing deals that exclude the public and delay real reform. The 2025 protests are a public rejection of this model and a call for a new one. Without legitimacy, any government will struggle to govern effectively. Political legitimacy is not just a theoretical concern; it directly affects the state's ability to implement reforms, manage crises, and represent its citizens. The ongoing crisis underscores the need for a renewed social contract in Libya - one rooted in accountability, equity, and genuine representation.

7. Policy implications

Governance breakdown and legitimacy crisis

- The GNU's weakening legitimacy highlights a deepening crisis of public trust and rising demands for political accountability.
- High-level resignations reflect growing divisions among Libya's political elite, exacerbating institutional paralysis and weakening governmental authority.
- Ongoing protests demonstrate widespread frustration with governance failures such as corruption, insufficient basic services, and economic instability, potentially destabilizing the government further.

Security sector reform

- Persistent violent clashes among militias indicate severe fragmentation within Libya's security sector, complicating the government's ability to assert control.
- The militias' control of state institutions undermines governmental legitimacy, which creates significant challenges for unified security sector reform.
- The autonomy of militias creates conditions for ongoing violence, which could lead to increased instability and conflict across Tripoli and beyond.

Libya's electoral future

- Delays and uncertainty surrounding electoral processes are intensifying public discontent and decreasing prospects for a legitimate democratic transition.

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- Libya faces an extended political deadlock and rising factional conflicts because of the lack of credible and timely elections.
- Persistent obstruction of electoral processes by entrenched political and militia interests threatens long-term governance stability and national unity.

Militia empowerment through political bargaining

- The GNU's approach of managing militias through elite bargains rather than structural reform has reinforced the power of armed actors, triggering wider violence and retaliation.

Regional and international mediation vacuum

- The lack of sustained, coordinated mediation efforts has allowed political polarization to deepen and rival factions to pursue unilateral agendas.

8. Recommendations

Establish an African Union-led multilateral mediation framework

Libya's move towards a stable government and elections should be backed by a coordinated effort that uses current diplomatic methods and revives the halted UN-led process. This approach requires a time-bound African Union-led initiative, co-endorsed by the League of Arab States, and supported by the European Union. This framework should be negotiated within the Security Working Group, which already includes relevant stakeholders and the leverage to design a unified roadmap.⁵⁵

While establishing such a hybrid mechanism will require extensive negotiations, it offers the most viable path to reverse escalation and facilitate inclusive dialogue. The United Nations and UNSMIL must remain central to this process as the guarantors of international legitimacy, ensuring that regional efforts serve as a bridge to a reinvigorated UN-led political track, not a replacement.

Disband and integrate militias into state security forces

Libya's transition cannot succeed without addressing the entrenched power of armed groups and their fragile alliances, particularly in Tripoli. To stabilise the country, the government must dissolve non-state armed militia groups and restore a unified chain of command under the national army.

A structured disarmament and reintegration process should be launched supported by international technical assistance and coordinated through the Ministry of Defence. Former militia fighters may be absorbed into a unified national army or security forces through a formalised and transparent vetting process. Militia leaders and factions must not retain influence over state institutions. Instead, all personnel must operate under a clear hierarchy, with robust vetting, retraining, and legal oversight. A civilian-led oversight body should also be established to investigate abuses and monitor progress. This

⁵⁵ Karim Mezran and Roberta Maggi, 'Beyond Ceasefires: Reimagining Stability and Engagement in Libya', *Atlantic Council* (blog), 27 May 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/beyond-ceasefires-reimagining-stability-and-engagement-in-libya/>.

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approach would consolidate military power under the state while helping rebuild public trust in Libya's security institutions.

Dismantle dysfunctional political institutions

Libya's political deadlock cannot move forward without confronting the growing public rejection of its existing political institutions. The House of Representatives, the High Council of State, the Presidency Council, and the Government of National Unity have all lost credibility and must be dissolved or fundamentally restructured to enable the creation of a legitimate government. These institutions have lost public confidence and proven incapable of delivering effective governance and should not be preserved out of political expediency but replaced or reformed to make way for a broadly representative, and elected authority with a clear and limited mandate.

Without such a comprehensive institutional reset, Libya's political failures will persist, deepening the legitimacy crisis and obstructing any path to lasting stability and effective governance.

9. Conclusion

The events of May-June 2025 highlight the unsteady context of Libya's political transition and exposes a fundamental breakdown in the legitimacy of the GNU. What began as a violent episode of militia rivalry evolved into a broader expression of societal rejection of the current political order. The widespread protests, high-level resignations, and persistent instability indicate that Libya's governance model, characterised by elite bargains, militia integration, and institutional paralysis, has reached an unsustainable threshold.

The crisis fundamentally exposes three interconnected dynamics: the breakdown of public trust, the unstable impact of militia-state entanglements, and the deterioration of political legitimacy, resulting from ten years of postponed reform and postponed elections. The GNU's reliance on armed actors to maintain control has not only undermined its authority but also allowed non-state forces to dictate political outcomes. Meanwhile, the failure to deliver basic services and electoral accountability has further alienated a public eager for genuine democratic representation.

Without a comprehensive institutional reset and meaningful security sector reform, Libya's political trajectory will remain one of stagnation, fragmentation, and potential relapse into conflict. The report highlights the urgent need for a new political system grounded in inclusivity, transparency, and civilian control. International actors must also play a more consistent and coordinated role, supporting Libyan-led processes while resisting short-term stability pacts that entrench the status quo, as is currently the case.

Libya currently finds itself at a pivotal juncture: either the demands articulated in Martyrs' Square and reverberated throughout the country initiate a genuine shift towards responsible governance, or the current state of affairs will exacerbate the country's spiral into militarised factionalism. The moment

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calls for bold leadership—both domestic and international—to prioritise legitimacy, restore public trust, and lay the groundwork for sustainable peace.

9.1. Anticipated Contributions

This report will contribute to a nuanced understanding of Libya’s post-revolution governance crisis. It will assess how public pressure, militia dynamics, and institutional weakness intersect to block meaningful democratic progress, and suggest policy considerations for future mediation or reform processes.

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