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The Libyan chaos and the possibility of an Italian Intervention

Mariarita Garofalo *

Libya has not still recovered its internal stability, since the fall of Ghaddafi's regime in 2011; while a credible political agreement seems far away from being reached in the short term. Even after the adoption of the UN-backed Libyan Political Agreement and the ousting of forces affiliated with IS (Islamic State) from their strongholds in Libya last year, many different actors are competing with one another to impose their own hegemony on the country. What are the forces still present on the ground? Who is the internal balance of power in favour of? And If an international intervention is needed, is there still a chance for Italy to play a role in the negotiation process?

*Researcher of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies of the University of Peloponnese.

The GNA and the struggle for the survival

Since March 2016, Tripoli has been hosting the Libyan Presidency Council, the executive body of the officially recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) led by the Prime Minister Fayed Mustafa al-Serraj. According to the UN-brokered Libyan National Agreement that led to its establishment, the Libyan Presidency Council, endowed with executive and military powers and composed of nine people representing all factions, should have been recognized by the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) and, subsequently, assisted by a consultative State Council. To date, however, the treaty has not been implemented; the al-Serraj government has not received the official recognition and endorsement by the HoR, loyal to the head of the Libyan National Army (LNA), General Khalifa Haftar, neither by the members of the National Salvation Government led by Khalifa al-Ghawil.¹ Consequently, the political power in Libya has been split in two new main rival centers vying for control over all Libya. On one side, there is the Tripoli-based GNA, represented by al-Serraj, that controls the West of Libya. On the other, there is the leader of the Libyan National Army, General Khalifa Haftar, who dominates the Tobruk-based HoR and the al Baida-based government led by Abdullah al-Thinni and exerts control over the Eastern provinces.

Currently, the GNA does not exert control over the country, nor does it manage the situation in the Western territories and Tripoli.² In the capital city, there is also a second power center represented by the Islamist-leaning National Salvation Government, which is hostile to Serraj: not recognized at all by the international community and targeted by EU sanctions. This entity is still able to jeopardize the GNA, given that it has a firm grab on some Western cities.³ Moreover, a new coalition of militias, led by anti-Serraj ex-Misrata affiliates, has recently arrived to Tripoli is challenging the GNA and the rest of the Misrata militias, former ally of the al-Serraj coordinated military campaign against Isis.

Haftar and the Lybian National Army: towards the “liberation of Tripoli”?

Even though al-Serraj can count on some level of support by Ibrahim Jadhran and their “Petroleum Facilities Guards” in the Eastern territories,⁴ the Cyrenaica province is under the firm control of Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA).

Since early 2016, General Khalifa Haftar has stepped up his efforts to consolidate his power in different directions. He incorporated many former elements of Ghaddafi’s intelligence services, engaged mercenaries⁵ for its operations and appointed military governors to replace elected municipal councils. He took over the important oil export terminals of Zuitina, Brega, Ras Lanuf and Sidra,⁶ coopting local tribal leaders and empowered some Salafi brigades to counter his rivals. This last move helped the General to seed further chaos in Tripoli and other important Western cities. A clear example is the deployment of the Madkhali militias, a powerful Salafi group, against the Misrata militias, the most fearsome Haftar’s rival that are now controlling most of Sirte after the ousting of ISIS. At the same time, on the international level, he has benefited from the UAE and Egypt’s backing, particularly in terms of airpower support and propaganda.

In December, the Libyan National Army(LNA) succeeded in driving IS and Al Qaeda’s affiliates out of Derna and, a month later, managed to gain control of Ganfouda district in Benghazi,⁷ the second largest city in Libya. These important results, together with the acquisition of the Russian support, have emboldened Haftar and his allies to further expand their or his dominion, so that the LNA’s forces start acting more aggressively in the Southern provinces and enhancing its efforts towards Tripoli.

However, it will not be so easy for the General to implement his agenda. Earlier this month, the Benghazi Defence Brigades (BDB) captured the oil export terminals of Sidra, Ras Lanuf, and Ben Jawad, threatening the LNA’s dominion over the “oil crescent”.

This group of militias, which was formed in spring 2016 and composed by anti-Haftar army and

police personnel plus militiamen of various political factions, has been endorsed by Mufti Sheikh Sadeq al-Gheriani, Libya's highest spiritual leader, and accused of having ambiguous links with Islamists. The BDB is cooperating with the Tripoli government against the LNA and its dominion, aiming at achieving its main goals; namely, the ousting of Haftar's forces from Benghazi and the return of Benghazi residents to their homes.⁸ Although the BDB has not succeeded in maintaining its ground, more clashes could take place between the two parts further east and around Benghazi.

In fact, many other actors are participating in the struggle for power in Libya, taking advantage of chaotic situation of the country.

Headquartered in Benghazi, the Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council (BRSC) is the main umbrella of armed Islamist groups created in 2014 in response to General Haftar's "Operation Dignity." Within the coalition, Ansar al-Sharia covers a leading role and represents the most numerous and powerful group: allied with al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Mourabitoun, it organized training camps for foreign fighters and worked hard to gain popular support and drive recruitment. Even though part of Benghazi has been seized by Haftar's forces in January, Ansar al-Sharia and its BRSC are still present in central parts of the city, fighting the LNA through conventional and unconventional attacks.

Concerning IS, the situation now seems deeply changed. Initially installed in Derna during 2015, the Islamist group consolidated its presence in Libya by taking control of Sirte and the surrounding region, while maintaining its alliance with the local Islamic Youth Shura Council. Since 2016, the US-backed military campaign, launched by al-Serraj and the "Operation Dignity" carried out by the LNA, pushed out gradually IS from Sirte, Derna, Tripoli, Sabratha and Benghazi. So, many IS fighters fled to the south, trying to regroup in small encampments but its offensive potential in Libya is now drastically reduced. Recently, the rivalry between the al-Qaeda affiliate groups and IS seems to have softened. Although initially there were several clashes between IS and al-Qaeda affiliate groups, due to the former's attempt to further co-opt existing networks, Haftar's threat in Benghazi turned the tables, forcing these groups to cooperate and fight together against the common enemy. Undoubtedly, the current military weakness of IS in Libya prevents the occurrence of further possible clashes in other parts of the country.

In general, foreseeing the evolution of the Jihadist groups in Libya seems almost impossible. At this stage we cannot entirely disregard the fact that the networks and infrastructures of existing jihadist groups could possibly facilitate new alliances between them and new mutations.

The Italian position towards an international intervention

The situation in Libya represents a growing challenge for the international community. The officially recognized GNA is crumbling and is gradually losing its domestic support, since it is incapable of exerting control over the country and provide basic needs to the population.

Italy has always given an absolute priority to the solution of the Libyan crisis, since the stability in the country is considered necessary for the protection of Rome's numerous economic, social and security interests. The close energy relations between Tripoli and Rome were confirmed by the 2014 US Energy Information Administration's report, which recognized Italy as one of the leading importers of Libyan crude oil and as the only importer of gas: even after the Liquefaction Plant damage to Marsa al-Brega pipeline; Rome is currently the only beneficiary of the Libyan gas thanks to the Greenstream pipeline linking Mellitah to Gela in Sicily.⁹ Libya was also one of the most important Italian trade partners, but the outbreak of the crisis has adversely affected the exchanges between the two countries; during the five years of conflict, Italy has lost €1.5 billion in terms of manufacturing export outlet.¹⁰ These worrying economic data are combined with two main emergencies: the current migratory crisis and the possible proliferation of terrorist groups in a country so close to the Italian coasts.

Paolo Gentiloni, former Foreign Minister of Renzi's government and current Italian Prime Minister has repeatedly pointed out that Rome is always ready to actively contribute to the Libyan crisis' solution. In order to consolidate its role on the negotiation table, Italy has supported the United Nations Support Mission and proceeded to officially recognize the Government of National Accord after the achievement of the Libyan National Agreement in December 2015. The Italian government has strongly supported Serraj and worked for his appointment, working also behind the scenes to guarantee his arrival to Tripoli. In April 2016, Paolo Gentiloni was the first high representative of a foreign government to visit Libya after the new UN-backed administration took office, and the first Western official to visit Tripoli since 2014. In a view to curb the migration departures, in January 2017 the government of Rome announced the re-opening of its embassy in Tripoli and, a month later, signed a "Memorandum" aimed at "closing" the Libya-Italy migration route.

However, while the diplomacy of the major European countries is lobbying on the regional allies of Tobruk and Haftar to favor the negotiations, the Italian closeness to Serraj may be now more harmful than useful¹¹ given the GNA's failure to ensure stability in Libya. The Italian government could easily lose a privileged place at the negotiation table as a result of the void left by the UN and the US; a void that has helped Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and recently Russia to propose themselves as major mediators in the Libyan crisis. Currently, the absenteeism of the Trump administration and the recent involvement of Russia, together with the lack of a concerted position of the Europeans, renders further improbable a military intervention that, for Italy, has always been bound to specific political and legal requirements, one among them being a UN endorsement.

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