



## Libya: an unending civil war

Minas Stravopodis \*

*The civil war in Libya has been in progress for more than eight years and the recent conferences in Berlin and Moscow seemed unable to provide a reliable solution. Both efforts aimed at putting an end to the civil war and agreeing on a ceasefire. Consequently, both conferences were deemed ineffective, especially since the one side of the Libyan civil war, General Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army (LNA), refuses to compromise with the officially recognized government of Libya, the General National Accord (GNA), which, as the civil war rages on, gradually loses domestic legitimacy and weakens.<sup>1</sup>*

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

A reference to the internal situation is necessary before starting to analyze the geopolitical role and the way external factors have influenced domestic affairs in Libya. The Libyan civil war consists of two national players who fight for political power and a number of local actors who want to distance themselves from the ongoing conflict in Libya and establish a new regime.

The GNA, as the UN-recognized government, consists of the Presidential Council (PC), which selects the GNA members, who are then approved by the House of Representatives (HoR). However, the situation is not as clear cut as it might seem at first glance, as the PC is not unanimously considered a cohesive institution. For instance, Ahmed-Maiteep, a member of the PC and the representative of Misrata, supports the GNA despite some opposition from his city-state. Moreover, another PC member, Abdessalam Kajwan, is a member of the Justice & Construction party and represents Muslim Brotherhood ideology in Libya. Furthermore, while PC member Mohammed Ammari supports the GNA, he also represents the interests of the General National Congress (GNC), the former government of Libya. The above personalities represent different interests, and, at times, conflicting political and military groups; yet, they are aligned with the GNA as their ideology and their interests are closer than with those of the other side.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, the LNA consists of a number of former military personalities from Gaddafi's regime, some members of the PC along with support from the HoR in Tobruk – for instance, Al Qatrani who allegedly boycotts PC meetings in order to render it dysfunctional and ineffective – a few Misrata members and various tribes from Eastern Libya. More specifically, the Libyan National Army, as it currently stands, consists of the few thousand men controlled by Haftar and local militias organized in tribal and regional lines, which are aligned with the elected government of Eastern Libya based in Baydeh. It was this government, led by Abdullah al-Thinni, which appointed Haftar as the army chief of the LNA. Moreover, due to popular pressure and political influence within the HoR in Tobruk, Haftar was able to gain its support. Haftar's coalition is even broader in Eastern Libya as it consists of several influential tribe leaders and the Cyrenaica Political Bureau. Regarding Western Libya, Haftar can only count on a few allies. They mainly consist of the tribal militias of Zintan and Warshafara. The factor which unites all these actors under the umbrella of the LNA is directly related to the fight against any Islamic element in Libya, either represented by political Islam ideology or by radicalized Islamist ideologies expressed by extremist groups, such as ISIS and sub-groups of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.<sup>3</sup>

The GNA and the LNA are the most important actors at the moment as they seem to be more cohesive than the other actors operating in Libya. Nevertheless, there are some other actors as well, such as the former regime group, which consists of Gaddafi's son, some personalities of the former regime, tribal elements and armed groups which are located in Fezzan. Fezzan plays a crucial role in order for peace to be achieved in Libya. Fezzan is neither aligned with the LNA nor with the GNA. The local groups operating in the region have differentiated themselves from the two main tendencies in Libya. Fezzan constitutes the home of radical elements of Islam and a mix of tribes including ethnic Arabs (or "Ahali"), Tuareg, Tebu, Gadhafda, and Awlad Suleiman. In addition, Fezzan is interlinked with the neighboring countries in the South, where they have long-connected trade routes. Therefore, illegal trade and informal economy grow. In other words, it is an uncontrollable region which constitutes a severe international security problem.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, ISIS was an important player in Libya until the Misrata attack and the US air strikes in Sirte. ISIS is considered to have been largely defeated during 2016-17. Nonetheless, it is trying to recover and regroup in the Sahara Desert (in the Southern part of Libya) by exploiting the chaos and the instability existing in Libya currently. Other less important actors which are close to ISIS are Ansar al-Sharia and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).<sup>5</sup>

Geopolitically, the Libyan civil war has turned into a proxy war similar to the ones raging in Syria and Yemen. In breach of the weapons embargo imposed in Libya, states such as Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) support the LNA and the GNA with military equipment such as drones and weapons. On the one hand, the UAE, along with Egypt and Russia, support Haftar's LNA, while, on the

other hand, Turkey supports Sarraj's GNA. Within this co-operative framework, Sarraj and Turkish President Erdogan have signed two memoranda regarding weapons and sea zones. Due to the UAE aid, Khalifa Haftar is able to control the Libyan skies along with 85-90% of the Libyan territory, where more than 90% of Libyan oil is produced. The above means that the LNA controls nearly the totality of oil production which is the most important asset in order for the Libyan economy to grow and develop.<sup>6</sup>

Besides Haftar's dominance over air traffic and in oil production, Misrata's support seems to be of vital importance for the survival of the GNA in Tripoli, ensuring that Haftar's ground forces are yet unable to seize the capital.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, Misrata, along with the Libyan coastguards, also play an important role regarding migration flows. In Libya, there is a continuous migration flow which consists of people both from sub-Saharan Africa – for instance from Chad and Nigeria – and from the Maghreb, consisting especially of Libyan people. The GNA, Misrata and the coastguards are unable to control these flows since some of their sub-groups seem to be involved in the human trafficking themselves. As a result, many of the immigrants and refugees become victims of slave trade as they are often tortured and imprisoned by local tribes or local armed groups. These local armed groups operate mostly in Southern Libya and crave for secession. The Libyan migration route along with the one from Turkey and the Aegean Sea are currently the main pathways for immigrants and refugees to get to Europe. Consequently, the migration crisis has changed into an international security issue since the previous years.<sup>8</sup>

The USA, taking into consideration Haftar's hold in Libya and anti-Islamist stance, seem to be cautiously in his favor, even though they try to keep their distance from both sides.<sup>9</sup>

Another important factor is the role of neighboring countries such as Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt, which have permanent interests in Libya. Tunisia is the only neighboring country which supports the GNA. The main reason why can be found in their similar ideology. On the one hand, the Tunisian government sympathizes with political Islam which is the GNA's core ideology. On the other hand, Tunisia stands against Arab Nationalism which is represented in Libya by the LNA. Contrariwise, both Egypt and Algeria would be in favor of a Libya in tune with Arab Nationalism rather than with political Islam. As a result, both Algeria and Egypt are in favor of the LNA. In addition, comparisons between Haftar and Egyptian President al-Sisi are in vogue, juxtaposing them as leaders who took or can take the power from political Islam, as represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, and establish a military regime rooted in Arab Nationalism. Apart from the element of ideology, the above countries have a number of economic interests in Libya. Until 2011, Libya was the success story of the Maghreb regarding economy. Hence, many companies from Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria invested in Libya and worked with Gaddafi's government. Moreover, there were many people from these countries who were migrating to Libya in order to find a better job and a higher income, a situation which changed after the Arab Spring uprisings.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the role of the European countries regarding the situation in Libya should be noted. While Russian-bound mercenaries were sent to help the LNA fight against the government of Tripoli, France seems in favor of Haftar as he presents the LNA as the most reliable and sustainable solution in Libya at the moment. Italy seemed to be on the GNA's side but adopted a more diplomatic position by keeping a neutral distance from both sides. Finally, Germany is positioned as a new player in Libya which seeks for a beneficial solution regarding its economic interests and the limitation of migration flows.<sup>11</sup>

The current situation in Libya is far from a reliable and sustainable solution in the long run. While the GNA and the LNA fight for control, the extremists in the South remain an important and lasting issue, and the migration flows make the disordered environment in Libya even more complex and chaotic. Moreover, the proxy war aspects of the Libyan civil war are currently omnipresent, involving many different players with very different and conflicting interests. What is more, via oil production control and external aid, Haftar seems to have the upper hand and could potentially take power in Libya. It goes without saying that energy remains a very useful tool for Haftar in order to apply pressure on both domestic adversaries and foreign interlocutors, as exemplified by his stance at the Berlin conference and his refusal to compromise with Sarraj's GNA.<sup>12</sup>

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