



Domestic and Regional Developments leading to the Geneva Deal on Libya

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The tribal and local leaders, as the key parameters of Libya's social structure, came to the fore in the power struggle for the country. Apart from the west-east divide the preferences of the tribes and their shifting allegiances as well the role of regional powers, such as Algeria and Egypt in particular, must also be taken into account. Recent developments are not particularly promising in terms of ensuring lasting peace and tranquility in a war-torn country. All parties seem determined to maintain their positions as they are still wary of trusting each other and feel underrepresented.

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In the last months, Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA) strengthened the front lines in the central and southern regions of Libya. In this vein, the LNA recruited troops from both local forces and foreign fighters from neighboring countries, especially in the south. Both the LNA and the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) accused each other of violating the ceasefire agreement. The GNA stated that the Haftar forces launched an attack in December to capture the military base in the desert-covered area, Ubari, in southern Libya. Tribal representatives in Ubari, which have no alliance with either side, stated that this was incorrect. While Tripoli continues to make this claim, the eastern-based administration rejects the allegations of mobilizing in the south of the country as well as the claims that the GNA has transferred heavy military supplies to the Sirte-Jufra line.¹

The turning point emerged from the United Nations-backed Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) in Geneva on February 4th. Seventy-four delegates, from different warring factions in the war-torn country, elected eastern-backed Mohammad Younes Menfi as head of the three-person Presidential Council. Each of the three members that formed the council represents the eastern, western and southern regions of the country (Tripolitania, Kyrenaika and Fezzan, respectively). The western-backed Abdulhamid Mohammed Dbeibah, a prominent businessman, was elected as interim prime minister.

The process aimed at balancing the different regions political and economic interests, in order to keep the fragile peace until elections and to maintain the functioning of state institutions. Interim Prime Minister Dbeibah is expected to form a government so as to fully support the cease-fire and initiate a comprehensive national reconciliation process. Aquila Saleh, the president of the Libyan House of Representatives (HoR) of the oil-rich country's eastern parliament, and Fathi Bashagha, the powerful interior minister of the Tripoli-based GNA have failed to secure the positions of either the President or the Prime Minister. However, since Haftar and the tribes in the east do not think that they are sufficiently represented, a possible east-west conflict may open the way to the division of the country.²

Political divisions and dilemmas continued to surface more clearly in the GNA camp. No concrete results came from the negotiating table held by the Libyan parties under the LPDF at the end of last year. It was a positive development for al-Sarraj, who wanted to remain in the prime minister's seat until the end of 2021. Al-Sarraj's withdrawal was undoubtedly not welcomed by his rival the Minister of the Interior, Fathi Bashagha.

Al-Sarraj supported the return of former Tripoli Revolutionary Brigade (TRB) head Haitham al-Tajouri to Libya in order to strengthen Tripoli's influence against Bashagha's hometown, Misrata. Al-Sarraj went further against Bashagha and made a regulation ordering the Special Deterrence Force (SDF), which was under the authority of the Interior Ministry, to report directly to the Presidential Council. Bashagha, in response, released the supporters of Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, called "Greens". Aiming to get the support of this group with the release of notables like Mansour Daw and Saadi Gaddafi, Bashagha also tried to establish cooperation between Misrata and Sirte (the stronghold of the Gaddafi tribe). Such cooperation, however difficult it may be, could give Bashagha a significant advantage and offer Saif al-Islam Gaddafi and his group serious leverage. Sirte could be the center for the emergence of a third power especially comprising Sirte, Beni Walid, and central Libya.

Tribes and local actors play a significant role in Libya's internal dynamics. The south of Libya especially is strongly influenced by tribal traditions. Libya's south is divided into tribal spheres of influence. While the Tuareg dominate the westernmost part of the south, the Tebu is the strongest group between Murzuq in the south of Sebha and Rabiana near Kufra. Both the Tebu and the Tuareg have ethnic, linguistic, and cultural characteristics that set them apart from their Arab neighbors. The northeastern part of Fezzan consists of a large number of ethnic Arab tribes. Wadi al-Shati is largely under the control of Magadha, while Awlad Suleiman has become the most influential tribe in Sebha since 2011. Kufra in the southeast is under the influence of the Zway tribe, while the Ahali, a non-tribal population group, live in Fezzan and central Libya.³

The Tebu and the Tuareg ethnic groups have ties to the Sahel region. These two groups are seen

in the eyes of the Arabs in the country as destabilizing factors by bringing the armed groups from Sahel to Libya.⁴ The Tebu, an ethnic group, also present in Niger and Chad, live in Southern Libya as a self-governed community. The Tebu are known for people-smuggling on the Niger-Tummo-Qatrun-Sebha migrant route into Libya. With the help of the Tebu, migrants cross from Niger to Libya. Payments by immigrants to Niger government officials at the border have become an important income of Niger's regional economy. Very few Tebu join extremist groups in southern Libya, since the majority of them tend to oppose all radical groups. Most of the Libyan Tuareg are affiliated with Ali Kanna, the commander of the GNA's Southern Military Region, with expectation to secure funds from the GNA Tripoli headquarters. The Hassuna, one of the largest Arab tribes in Fezzan-in the south, are known as an important neutral tribe. They played an important role as a negotiator in ending the disputes between the Tuareg and the Tebu in Ubari. Hassuna, like the Tuareg, are involved in people and arm smuggling on the Niger-Ghat-Sebha and Libya route.⁵

Tribes and local powers shift sides very easily. For example, leaders of the southern region, including Sebha and Ubari, which are controlled by the LNA, met recently with the GNA's Deputy Prime Minister, Ahmed Maiteeg, to get subsidies. While de facto under LNA control, southern groups traditionally do not refrain from pledging allegiance to both camps in order to gain tribute from both sides.

In the context of regional powers, Egypt, a staunch supporter of the east-based LNA, sent delegates to Tripoli in late December for the first time after its embassy was raided and diplomats were abducted in 2014. Libya's other neighbors started talking to all sides and Egypt had to move on the same line. Egypt also saw that giving full support to Haftar has rapidly increased GNA's cooperation with Turkey.⁶

Libya is very important and indispensable to Egypt for a number of reasons: firstly, family and tribal connections between Egypt and eastern Libya; secondly, the importance of a 'friendly to Cairo' political structure that ensures internal stability in Libya; and thirdly, serious threats to Egypt's domestic security, such as the foreign fighters' infiltration and arms smuggling from Libya.⁷

A few months ago, at a meeting with representatives of the tribes from the east of Libya, the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi stated that the line extending between Sirte and Jufra is a red line for Cairo. An electoral victory for Islamists in the forthcoming Libyan elections can touch another sensitive chord of the Egyptian regime. Democratically elected Islamists can pose an existential threat to both Egypt and other authoritarian regimes in the region.⁸ Therefore, Egypt has been making great efforts recently to strengthen its relations and increase its influence not only won the east of Libya but also won the GNA in the west of the country by following a pragmatist policy.

With a border of approximately 900 km in the east, Libya is of great importance to Algeria's national security. The borderline, which runs through the vast Saharan desert and rugged mountains, could offer easy passage to foreign fighters, illegal immigrants, radical militants and weapons between the two countries and has facilitated smuggling business that has been ongoing for many years.

Algeria has a keen interest to restore regional stability and to maintain the balance of power in the region. The domestic conflicts in Libya had an indirect impact not only on Algeria, but also on Niger and Mali, which cover almost the entire southern border of Algeria. For Algeria, which faced a series of bomb attacks originating from organizations located in Libya and Mali in recent years, the domestic situation and balance of power in Libya have become a main issue for its national security.⁹ The instability in Libya threatens the Algerian borders as it strengthens extremist organizations in North Africa such as al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) and Daesh. National security threats give Algeria enough reasons to support an end to the war in Libya. Regarding regional balance, Algeria does not wish to see Libya under strong Egyptian influence.¹⁰ Algeria traditionally avoids military interventions and has been following a non-interventionist policy since 2011, supporting diplomacy and UN-led negotiations between all parties in Libya. But Algiers has recently taken different steps. The Constitutional Council's approval of the amendment that would allow a military intervention in Libya was the 'flagship project' of Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, differentiating his policy from that of his predecessor, Abdelaziz Bouteflika.¹¹

Libya's stabilization is also vital for Tunisia which has a 454 km borderline with its eastern neighbour. Therefore, Tunisia fears a migration wave from Libya and regards the flow of arms from Libya as major threat for national security. The conflicts in Libya also devastated Tunisia economically. Following the restriction on the GNA's oil and on natural gas exports, the Tunisian economy was severely damaged more so since around 3 million Tunisians depend on trade or labour across the border. As Tunis' security considerations coincide with those of Algiers, Tunisia welcomes a more influential role of the latter in Libya.

What is more, the integrity, peace and security of Libya depend heavily on the management of tribal politics and on the strategy of regional powers.

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