

## General Haftar and the Risks of Authoritarian “Stability” in Libya

by Mattia Giampaolo

On 8 January 2020, Turkey and Russia sought to broker a cease-fire between warring factions in Libya, calling on both sides to resume negotiations and end this new phase of the conflict raging since April 2019. While the cease-fire remained a dead letter, with talks moving to the international conference in Berlin, the effort underscored Moscow’s and Ankara’s growing influence in the country, with each actively supporting opposing sides in Libya.

Turkey, backed by Qatar, is supporting the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, while Russia, and even more so Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, are supporting the eastern Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA).

Haftar’s April 2019 offensive on Tripoli was meant to herald the last phase of an incremental military campaign aimed at gradually gaining control of

the entire country. Since 2014, Haftar has been building his quasi-state in a not too subtle attempt to emerge as the undisputed leader of the country, a kind of new Gaddafi whose authority stems from his military background and promise to bring stability to the war-torn country.<sup>1</sup>

To consolidate his authority, Haftar has sought to emulate the example of Egypt’s military ruler, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The latter came to power in 2013 via a military coup backed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia against Egypt’s first democratically elected government led by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) affiliate Mohamed Morsi. While al-Sisi’s Egypt provides Haftar with a model and inspiration, the UAE is the general’s true sponsor, supporting Haftar’s campaign with financial and military aid.

<sup>1</sup> “Khalifa Haftar: The Libyan General with Big Ambitions”, in *BBC News*, 8 April 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27492354>.

*Mattia Giampaolo is research fellow at the Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI), Rome.*

One feature of this process of *Egyptianisation* is given by the army’s penetration of key sectors of the economy, politics and society in those territories controlled by Haftar, mirroring similar processes in Egypt, where the military is estimated to control about 50 per cent of the national economy.<sup>2</sup>

A second example is the tendency by military authorities in Eastern Libya, and Egypt (as well as the Emirates and Saudi Arabia), to indiscriminately label any Islamist organisation, particularly if affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, as terrorists or enemies of the state. Both features are further complemented by harsh repression and a constant monitoring of dissent.

In so doing, Haftar has created a securitised regime that displays many similarities to Egypt. Yet, Haftar’s promise of militarised and authoritarian-guaranteed stability cannot represent a sustainable solution for Libya, just as it cannot for Egypt.

Haftar’s profile embodies the old model of Arab authoritarian rule, in which watchwords such as security and stability have emerged as the cornerstones of legitimacy. He mirrors the powerful centralised state and one-man military rule, which are precisely those features which popular protests were seeking to overcome in the context of the 2011 Arab uprisings.

<sup>2</sup> “From War Room to Boardroom. Military Firms Flourish in Sisi’s Egypt”, in *Reuters Special Reports*, 16 May 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/egypt-economy-military>.

Mirroring similar trends across the region, Haftar has woven a narrative that depicts himself as the “saviour of the nation”, the only bulwark against Islamist terrorism and instability.<sup>3</sup> Such narratives are directed at both domestic and international audiences and have succeeded in attracting important support from various quarters.

Haftar’s rise to prominence traces its roots back to 2014 with the launch of Operation Dignity against the presence of the Islamic State group around the city of Benghazi. The success of this operation helped Haftar promote his narrative and increase his external support, which he subsequently used to launch his all-out offensive on Tripoli.

The vastness of the territory he gradually acquired strained his finances, however, slowing his advance towards Tripoli. While Haftar succeeded in attracting support from tribes via money and promises of quick victory, the ensuing military stalemate weakened the appeal of Haftar’s narrative.

As a result, and to support its campaign, the LNA – Haftar’s self-styled army, largely formed by agreements among militias, Salafi groups and foreign fighters from Sudan and Chad – began developing a *predatory economy*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Emadeddin Badi, “Libya’s Hifter and the False Narrative of Authoritarian Stability”, in *MEI Policy Analysis*, 3 September 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/node/80368>.

<sup>4</sup> Borzou Daragahi, “Prime Seaside Real Estate, Oil and Scrap Metal: Inside the Billion Dollar Fund Financing a Libyan Warlord”, in *The Independent*, 7 September 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/libya-khalifa-haftar-warlord-national-army-tripoli-military-a9084966.html>.

The LNA thus began dispossessing public and private properties while demanding “protection” payments from local businesses. Furthermore, the creation of the Military Investment and Public Works Committee gave the army full control of the economy in Haftar controlled territory. The army, through the Committee and the co-opted Parliament, the Eastern based House of Representatives (HoR), “legally” monopolised public infrastructure and other economic sectors.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, the Military Committee has gained control of the production sector through the misappropriation of three important projects: the al-Sarir Production Project, the al-Kufra Agriculture Project and the al-Kufra Settlement Project.<sup>6</sup> The LNA has also engaged in economic activities such as waste management, scrap metal and waste export, agricultural megaprojects and the registration of migrant labour workers.<sup>7</sup> Haftar’s recent blockading of oil terminals represents a further escalation in the economic conflict, as the LNA seeks to deprive the GNA of this revenue which is channelled through the Libyan Central Bank headquartered in Tripoli and has fuelled corruption and a thriving black market trade.

<sup>5</sup> Noria Research, *Predatory Economies in Eastern Libya. The Dominant Role of the Libyan National Army*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, June 2019, <https://wp.me/pagYoN-7po>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Tim Eaton and Mohamed Eljarh, “Will Economic Instability Undermine Khalifa Haftar’s Offensive in Libya?”, in *Chatham House Expert Comments*, 16 April 2019, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/38900>.

If military control over the economy is one of aspect of the Egyptianisation of Haftar’s quasi-state, the general has also played the card of legitimate defender of Libyan borders from the terrorist threat. The labelling of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation – as occurred in Egypt – represented a tactical move aimed at discrediting Haftar’s Western counterpart: the GNA, which is supported by some militias linked to the MB.

The recent Turkish decision to deploy Syrian mercenaries in support for the GNA in Tripoli has fostered Haftar’s narrative on stability and the “war on terror”, also triggering reactions among his regional backers – Egypt and UAE – which view Turkey’s support for the MB as a threat to their legitimacy and domestic stability.<sup>8</sup>

This enmity for political Islam has helped portray Haftar – as it has for Al-Sisi in Egypt and Bashar al-Assad in Syria – as a secular figure, a defender of minorities and security. The employment of Salafi groups (Madkhalists)<sup>9</sup> within Haftar’s army, however, casts a shadow over such portrayals. Indeed, in much of the same fashion of Al-Sisi in Egypt,<sup>10</sup> Haftar

<sup>8</sup> For popular protests, see: Abdur Rahman Alfa Shaban, “Pro, Anti-Turkey Protests Rock Libya Over Troop Deployment Plans”, in *AfricaNews*, 3 January 2020, <https://www.africanews.com/2020/01/03/pro-anti-turkey-protests-rock-libya-over-troop-deployment-plans>.

<sup>9</sup> For more, see: Ahmed Salah Ali, “Haftar and Salafism: A Dangerous Game”, in *MENASource*, 6 June 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=104353>.

<sup>10</sup> On the relationship between the Egyptian Salafi groups and the regime: Amr Emam, “Why are Egypt’s Salafists Backing Sisi?”, in *The Arab Weekly*, 28 January 2018, <https://theArabweekly.com>.

is essentially exploiting divisions within the Islamist movement and Arab regional order to consolidate his legitimacy and counter any hint of possible opposition.

Opposition to political Islam has therefore been used to legitimise security crackdowns. For example, 56-year-old parliamentarian Seham Sergewa was one of the many victims of Haftar’s securitarian regime. Sergewa, who was democratically elected in the 2014 Libyan parliamentary elections, was kidnapped by security forces due to her opposition to the offensive on Tripoli.<sup>11</sup>

Many journalists have also been arrested due to their critical articles on Haftar’s Operation Dignity, especially those linked to Islamist movements and to the 17th February revolution.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, all activists and political figures are under the watchful eye of the National Security directorate, which monitors their online activities. Indeed, Haftar has established a Chamber of Information for the Fight against Electronic Terrorism, to track “terrorist threat” on the web.<sup>13</sup>

com/node/38360.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Lister and Nada Bashir, “She’s One of the Most Prominent Female Politicians in Her Country. A Few Days Ago She Was Abducted from Her House”, in *CNN*, 20 July 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/07/20/africa/libya-sergewa-intl/index.html>.

<sup>12</sup> “Worsening Freedom of Opinion and Expression in the East Affects Journalists, Activists and Citizens...” (in Arabic), in *Libya Al-Akhabar*, 27 September 2017, <http://www.libyaalkhabar.com/?p=20767>.

<sup>13</sup> Lorenzo Marinone, *Information Warfare in Libya. The Online Advance of Khalifa Haftar*, Rome, Centro Studi Internazionali (CESI), May 2019, <https://www.cesi-italia.org/en/articoli/976/>

Haftar’s embryonic state is reflective of what Libya would likely look like under his control. International actors, should not be fooled by Haftar’s promise of stability. His power and influence are not as solid as may appear and European states – particularly France – should realise that promoting stability through authoritarian rule is a short-term solution at best.

Indeed, despite the illusory stability of Egypt, protests in September 2019, and the following mass arrests of activists and opposition figures, demonstrated the Al-Sisi regime’s limits and internal weaknesses.<sup>14</sup> With regards to Libya, the LNA cannot compare to Egypt’s army, as it not similarly entrenched as Cairo’s military-state. The lack of a formal and united army and of strong state institutions also deprive Haftar of the institutional protection enjoyed by Al-Sisi. Finally, Haftar is 75 years old, and not in good health, casting some uncertainty as to what may befall the territory he controls should he no longer be on the scene.

Recent popular protests in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq are a reminder that the wave of Arab revolutions that began in 2011 are by no means over.

The lack of social and human rights in these countries and the high level of repression has not improved. Much the opposite. In this respect, a new phase

information-warfare-in-libya-the-online-advance-of-khalifa-haftar.

<sup>14</sup> Ayman Nour, “Egypt’s Choice Is Clear: Democracy - Or Chaos Under Sisi”, in *Middle East Eye*, 23 January 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/156576>.

of uprisings in those “restored” regimes like Haftar’s Libya and or Al-Sisi’s Egypt cannot be ruled out.

International actors, and particularly European member states, would do well to heed this warning and not repeat the old mistake of investing in the myth of authoritarian stability.

*31 January 2020*

## Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

## Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì ([a.dessi@iai.it](mailto:a.dessi@iai.it))

- 20 | 04 Mattia Giampaolo, *General Haftar and the Risks of Authoritarian “Stability” in Libya*
- 20 | 03 Federica Gasbarro, *Climate Activism and the Fridays for Future Movement: From Campaigning in Italy to the UN General Assembly*
- 20 | 02 Luca Barana, *A Geopolitical Commission in Africa: Streamlining Strategic Thinking on Trade and Cooperation*
- 20 | 01 Luca Bergamaschi, *There Is No Green Deal without a Just Transition*
- 19 | 69 Nicolò Sartori and Margherita Bianchi, *Fostering Positive Private Sector Engagement in the Med Energy Landscape*
- 19 | 68 Nicola Casarini, *How Europe Should Approach China*
- 19 | 67 Nicoletta Pirozzi and Francesco Musi, *Civilian Crisis Management: Assessing the Readiness of EU Member States and Institutions*
- 19 | 66 Tamirace Fakhoury, *The Unmaking of Lebanon’s Sectarian Order? The October Uprising and its Drivers*
- 19 | 65 Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, *The Future of the European Union: Scenarios for the Start of the New Legislature*
- 19 | 64 Stefania Benaglia, *Indian Foreign Policy in an Increasingly Connected Eurasia*