

# Importing Instability? How External Influences Nurture the War in Libya

by Karim Mezran

Conventional wisdom suggests that the almost decade-long conflict in Libya has created the conditions for a wider destabilization of the North African region. While this might have been the case in the early years of the conflict, with Libyan instability spilling over into Mali, Algeria and Tunisia, trends have changed over the past few years, with Libya importing more instability than it exported.

External players have significantly contributed to the exacerbation of domestic instability and the Libyan conflict, particularly since the launch of Khalifa Haftar's military operation to enter Tripoli. In the absence of effective action by international actors to end the fighting, dangerous spillovers from Libya may well return to spread instability in an already fragile region.

This April marked one year since the beginning of Haftar's offensive. In this time, Haftar's forces have failed to seize the capital but succeeded in dashing

hopes of a peaceful political transition via a National Conference of Libyan actors while creating a humanitarian crisis in the country.

As of 31 March 2020, the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) documented at least 685 civilian casualties, with 149,000 people in and around Tripoli displaced and nearly 345,000 civilians remaining trapped in frontline areas.<sup>1</sup> Around 893,000 people need humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, the conflict has damaged or destroyed numerous homes, hospitals, schools, detention facilities and other public infrastructure.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the situation. Despite calls by the UN, international organizations and Libyans themselves to cease all

<sup>1</sup> UNSMIL, *One Year of Destructive War in Libya, UNSMIL Renews Calls for Immediate Cessation of Hostilities and Unity to Combat COVID-19*, 4 April 2020, <https://unsmil.unmissions.org/node/100042520>.

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military operations to allow authorities to respond to the threat of COVID-19, Haftar's forces resumed their offensive on 24 March after only a brief pause, bombarding Tripoli with heavy shelling that killed at least five civilians on the first night.<sup>2</sup> In recent weeks, Haftar's forces have increased their use of inaccurate Grad rockets and artillery shells in Tripoli's densely populated neighbourhoods, placing civilians at grave risk. Haftar has made it clear that he is not interested in a national unity government and even in the face of pandemic will prioritize military victory over all else.

In response, the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) has stepped up efforts to fend off Haftar's attack with military support from Turkey, including drone strikes. As a result, clashes have intensified, with more and more civilian casualties,<sup>3</sup> facilitated by the heavy influx of military, financial and political support from foreign backers to both sides which violate the UN arms embargo and agreements made by world leaders at the Berlin Conference in January.<sup>4</sup>

The conference participants included the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Russia and Turkey, all of whom have been implicated in recent violations of

the embargo.<sup>5</sup> Hours after the Berlin Conference, the forces led by Khalifa Haftar renewed their attack on Tripoli.

In Berlin, international actors agreed on a series of principles and points to be followed to guarantee a truce and return to a political process. However, it soon became clear that some participants did not mean a word of what they were proclaiming. The repetition of the mantra "there is no military solution, only a political one" did not resonate with any of the sides. It should be clear by now that a "political solution" can only occur after a military one has taken place.

Only the defeat or collapse of one of the two sides will create the conditions for a real truce to take place and thereby negotiations for the establishment of a national unity government and the adoption of all the other points expressed in the Berlin Declaration.

This obvious recognition of the facts on the ground should have suggested a different course of action for international actors. Rather than finding common refuge with one another to avoid doing anything meaningful, the Europeans and the US should have been clear from the beginning in condemning Haftar's aggression against the civilian population of Tripoli.<sup>6</sup> Everything possible should have been done to protect the city's

<sup>2</sup> "Several Killed in Tripoli Mortar Attacks by Haftar's Forces: GNA", in *Al Jazeera*, 24 March 2020, <https://aje.io/v2av2>.

<sup>3</sup> "Libya's East-Based Forces Hit Tripoli Civilian Area, 4 Dead", in *AP News*, 17 April 2020, <https://apnews.com/8a6735ddf1e1dbc9c1b86a6c51a77e40>.

<sup>4</sup> "Berlin Summit on Libya Conflict: What Did World Powers Agree?", in *Al Jazeera*, 20 January 2020, <https://aje.io/p69bd>.

<sup>5</sup> John Irish and Sabine Siebold, "U.N. Says Libya Arms Embargo a 'Joke', Demands Accountability", in *Reuters*, 16 February 2020, <https://reut.rs/39HByMf>.

<sup>6</sup> "UN Says LNA Strikes near Tripoli Target Civilians", in *Africa Times*, 29 December 2019, <https://wp.me/p6tE4G-7TH>.

population and defend the right of the internationally recognized government to exercise its functions.

By acting in this more determined and forceful way, Western powers would have strengthened the position of the GNA and created conditions that could have led to what William Zartman defined as a “mutually hurting stalemate” needed for serious negotiations to take place.<sup>7</sup>

Instead they did the opposite. France sided with Haftar.<sup>8</sup> Italy, historically closer to the GNA government led by Fayeze al-Sarraj, gradually orbited towards Haftar, as did many others in Europe. The United States also flirted with Haftar, via a phone call by President Donald Trump just days after the beginnings of his offensive on Tripoli.<sup>9</sup> As such, we see that not only are military forces on the ground in a difficult situation – stuck in a continuously increasing level of violence and destruction – but also the international community is stuck because some states are doing the opposite of what they promise.

The inability of international actors to meaningfully address the Libyan crisis seems to condemn Libya to a

Somalia-like scenario of permanent chaos and strife. This is evidenced by the enormous increase in number and power of the criminal organizations that have taken control of the growing post-revolution illegal trades. These organizations have by now established their roots in Libyan territory and dominate not only the very lucrative human trafficking trade from Africa to Europe but also, with the complicity of international gangs, came to control the smuggling of weapons, drugs and alcohol.

Libya has thus become a sanctuary for criminal organizations, allowing them to prosper and grow thanks to the destabilization of the state. The power of these organizations prospers when the state is weak or non-existent. It is very possible that the increase in their power may propel them to try to undermine other governments in neighbouring states especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, where they do not have the same level of freedom they have come to enjoy in a destabilized Libya.

It is evident that instability in Libya is the cause of many problems that have come to affect its neighbours. The anarchy that developed in Libya’s eastern provinces since the beginning of the revolution and the threat to its internal security and stability caused the intervention of the Egyptian army, both directly and through Haftar. Egyptian interference has grown from the original, limited intervention to ensure order on the shared border to a military operation aimed at establishing a new rule over the whole of Libya.

<sup>7</sup> I. William Zartman, “The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments”, in *Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (September 2001), p. 8-18.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Taylor, “France’s Double Game in Libya”, in *Politico*, 17 April 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/frances-double-game-in-libya-nato-un-khalifa-haftar>.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Holland, “White House Says Trump Spoke to Libyan Commander Haftar on Monday”, in *Reuters*, 19 April 2019, <https://reut.rs/2Iw8YDL>.

This effort was not balanced by any other actor until the recent Turkish intervention. It is probable though that even this action will not resolve the crisis. Things could get worse as we have seen an increasing risk of disorder and instability which may spillover into neighbouring Algeria and Tunisia.

While Tunisia is too small to be a major actor in resolving the crisis, it can play a role precisely because of its vulnerability and because many outside states view it as a leading example of democratic development in the Middle East and North Africa. Being the only Arab Spring country that has maintained its direction toward a pluralistic and transparent political system, Tunisia carries important symbolic power.

The instability and lawlessness of its Libyan neighbour has caused tensions in the country, especially in the restive southern province. The possible collapse of the Tunisian model because of spillovers from Libya would raise much concern across Europe and the United States and especially in its larger neighbour, Algeria.

This powerful Maghrebi country, could be the missing part to help solve the puzzle. Algeria is in a more fragile state today than at the beginning of the decade, but is still the strongest military actor in the area. The domestic situation, with continuous demonstrations protesting the corruption of elites in power, has weakened the resolve of its leadership to intervene effectively in the Libyan situation.

Recently, however, the new leadership has taken a much harder stance regarding foreign meddling in the internal affairs of Libya. The veiled target of the tough words recently used by Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune to describe the escalating conflict in Tripoli was the Egyptian role in Libya. Tebboune expressly defined the borders of the city as a "red line" for Algeria,<sup>10</sup> meaning that Algeria would take all steps necessary to prevent Haftar from taking over the capital. An active policy in defending its interests in the Maghreb would definitely put Algeria on the side of the GNA, thus enhancing Sarraj's position and balancing the situation on the ground.

Algeria could be the factor that blocks Haftar's offensive and triggers the start of real and meaningful negotiations between the two sides of the conflict. The recent trip of the Algerian Minister for Foreign Affairs Sabri Boukadoum to Benghazi to meet with Haftar should not be viewed as an attempt to push Algeria closer to him, but instead as the delivery of a message that Algeria is back and wants to re-establish its position in the neighbourhood.

The key to a solution of the Libyan crisis consists in convincing Cairo's and Abu Dhabi's leadership that their insistence in supporting Haftar will only lead to an expensive and ultimately disastrous outcome. Without this realization, Libya's descent into chaos and further bloodshed will only continue, and the

<sup>10</sup> "Algerian President Warns Libya's Tripoli Is a 'Red Line', as Haftar Offensive Rolls-On", in *The New Arab*, 7 January 2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/1/7/algerian-president-warns-libyas-tripoli-is-a-red-line>.

spillovers into neighbouring countries that had recently receded, will turn into a gushing overflow.

*29 April 2020*

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