

## Challenges to Internationally Mediated Peace in Libya

by Libya Desk

Since Turkey escalated its military intervention in Libya in early 2020, the coalition of armed groups fighting on behalf of the Tripoli-based and UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) have made considerable gains against Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). Turkey's support for the GNA has proven significant, helping to halt and more recently push back the LNA's advance, after Haftar – backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Russia – had acquired large expanses of territory across much of eastern and southern Libya before launching an all-out assault on Tripoli and the GNA in April 2019.

Despite recapturing a number of strategic towns across the Western Coastal road between Tripoli and the Tunisian border – including Surman and Sabratha – in April 2020, the GNA fell short of repelling the LNA from western Libya. This is significant because many saw this as the end goal of

Turkey's intervention, in order to better position the GNA for a resumption of peace talks in lieu of a military victory over the LNA.

However, the GNA's recent capture of Al Watiya airbase could very well be a prelude to further escalation and foreign intervention rather than an opportunity to bring both sides to the negotiating table. Unless sober steps are taken, the LNA and its allies may escalate in an attempt to regain lost territories; likewise, Turkey may increase its military presence in order to preserve and perhaps even expand GNA victories. Such developments would open the door to a new and even more dangerous chapter in the conflict.

Against this backdrop, international actors are starting to come to terms with the need to reignite a serious political process in Libya. This comes as the Berlin conference – the most recent international attempt to broker a political solution – is dangerously

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close to joining the annals of failed international conferences on Libya.

One of the major risks facing any progress is the fact that Turkey, Egypt and the UAE, as well as Russia, want to launch peace talks from a position of strength. Indeed, this has been a trend in Libya – each time there is a political effort, a military escalation follows, as foreign backers attempt to gain the upper hand before the start of negotiations.

We should thus expect added Russian and UAE support to the LNA, manifestations of which can already be seen in the appearance of Russian-made air defence systems captured from Al Watiya airbase or the LNA's announced air campaign named "Tuyur al-Ababil".<sup>1</sup> For Russia, Libya represents a geopolitical chip to negotiate with the west and Turkey, while at the same time preserving its strategic interests in the region and cultivating important relations with Egypt and Gulf states, particularly the UAE.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, Turkey has proven that it is willing to go to extreme lengths to secure its interests in the Mediterranean, as evidenced by two controversial Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) signed with the GNA in December 2019.<sup>3</sup> In one fell swoop, the MoUs

justified Turkey's arms sales to the GNA, set the stage for a preliminary 2.7 billion US dollar compensation deal for work carried out in Libya by Turkish companies before the 2011 revolution and redrew the maritime borders between the two countries.<sup>4</sup>

Another risk is inherent to both Haftar's worldview and, to an extent, the UAE's role in the conflict. Haftar is unlikely to succumb to international pressure so long as it only comes from Russia. Unlike the GNA, which would very likely pursue political dialogue under Turkish pressure, the LNA commander has demonstrated that he has no problem standing up to Russia.

Haftar knows that he can continue to rely on the UAE and Egypt for military support. All of these factors combine to create an odd and imperfect equilibrium in which, while Russia is keen on opening political negotiations, it must also make sure that Haftar is not excessively weakened. Consequently, Russia will intervene to aid Haftar when needed – something that Haftar is well aware of. Meanwhile, the LNA commander will have no problem playing the long game: he will continue to try, fail and try again until he achieves his goal of a military victory over the GNA, however unlikely this may appear.

Calculations in the west are slightly different. Most EU states and the US,

<sup>1</sup> The Ababil were mythological birds of miracle that protected the Kaaba in Mecca from the Aksumite elephant army of general Abraha al-Ashram by dropping stones on the advancing forces.

<sup>2</sup> "How Russia Has Navigated Libya's Civil War", in *Libya Desk Articles*, 13 November 2019, <https://www.libyadesk.com/articles/how-russia-has-navigated-libyas-civil-war>.

<sup>3</sup> "Libya's GNA Activates Security MoU Agreed

with Turkey - Statement", in *Reuters*, 19 December 2019, <https://reut.rs/2PGh7It>.

<sup>4</sup> Ceyda Caglayan, "Turkey Aims to Sign Deal With Libya Over Gaddafi-Era Compensation", in *Reuters*, 10 January 2020, <https://reut.rs/307VZOz>.

while no doubt divided on the course of action in Libya, are not as reliant on either side to win in order to preserve their interests. These actors currently find themselves with no obvious winner to support. The GNA is weak and internally divided, and the potential for smaller conflicts in western Libya as armed groups within its coalition engage in struggles for power are likely going forward.

Glimpses of this can already be seen in recent developments. Al-Rada forces, nominally loyal to GNA Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha, recently attacked a Tripoli Revolutionary Brigade (TRB) command post in order to arrest its leadership. The operation saw both forces using heavy weaponry in central Tripoli. Similarly, the revenge crimes committed in Surman and Sabratha following their capture speaks to the dangers of human rights abuses and retributions by GNA forces in areas they acquire, mirroring similar actions by the LNA in other locations.<sup>5</sup>

The unsavoury truth for the GNA is that the strength of its coalition is directly proportional to how imminent the threat posed by Haftar is – a factor that has allowed former enemies to coalesce in the fight against the LNA. The GNA has not developed its alliances in a manner that ensures it can maintain control as it expands territorially. This was evidenced by what recently transpired in Surman and Sabratha, as well as in July 2019 when the GNA's leadership initially struggled to assert

its control in Gharyan.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, the GNA is unprepared for territorial expansion and cannot compensate for its lack of influence by leveraging social and tribal alliances as the LNA tends to do.<sup>7</sup> Its current expansion is a result of Turkish support and risks being premature, which in turn reintroduces the risk of armed groups acting unilaterally in pursuit of their own interests.

Furthermore, a LNA defeat in western Libya would have its repercussions in eastern and southern Libya as the power vacuum created would likely lead to fragmentation, thus threatening key interests for international actors, particularly with regards to oil and migration. In sum, the combination of Turkish influence over the Tripoli-based government and the GNA's internal weakness makes certain states in the west, including France and the US, nervous about the prospect of a LNA defeat in western Libya.

On the flip side, supporting the LNA comes with its own set of problems. The west simply does not know what Haftar's political agenda is. Will Haftar try to become the next Gaddafi or another al-Sisi? Will Haftar allow elections to take place and agree to civilian oversight? The Field Marshal recently declared the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), or

<sup>5</sup> "U.N. Concerned by Alleged Abuses, Prison Break in West Libyan Towns", in *Reuters*, 15 April 2020, <https://reut.rs/2KbOwa0>.

<sup>6</sup> "Libya Crisis: UN-Backed Government 'Retakes' Key Town of Gharyan", in *BBC News*, 27 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48781183>.

<sup>7</sup> "The Future of Eastern Libya: Understanding the Recent Power Struggle in the Region", in *Libya Desk Articles*, 5 May 2020, <https://www.libyadesk.com/articles/north-africa-libya-what-happened-between-haftar-and-saleh>.

Skhirat agreement, and the institutions it created – including the GNA – to be null and void.

We have discussed elsewhere the specific context in which this statement occurred and why it represents a potential turning point for the political future of eastern Libya.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, these issues remain a discomfiting topic for international actors. Indeed, it is for these reasons that Russia itself does not view Haftar as an ideal ally. The Russians fear that Haftar is merely using them as bait in order to court Washington. Washington, on the other hand, feels that Haftar is too close to the Russians and cannot be trusted.<sup>9</sup>

The LNA will likely continue to pursue a military solution unless pressure is amassed from all sides.<sup>10</sup> Although this would make it possible to initiate political dialogue, it is difficult to comprehend what a successful political solution to the Libyan conflict would look like.

Simply put, Libya is suffering from a lack of leaders and representatives that hold real influence in their respective communities. Bringing individuals to sit down and negotiate the future of Libya when they are incapable of enforcing outcomes will no longer work. Efforts should instead focus on

reaching a comprehensive political solution that includes Libya's most influential figures – not another Geneva or Skhirat style process that features unknown names who have no real influence at home.

This also means including supporters of the former regime, who have been completely excluded from the political process since 2011, and prominent political actors that were side-lined in the Skhirat agreement. Such measures should extend well beyond the figures that presently dominate the headlines. Indeed, engaging other local actors may well help to counteract efforts to unilaterally consolidate authority on either side.

The first step is to work outside the confines of the UN-brokered Skhirat agreement, which has proven to be a bureaucratic hurdle for mediators and has formalised a dichotomy between Tripoli and Tobruk which does not necessarily reflect the full spectrum of local influential actors in the country.

In the present conflict alone, we have seen the impact of influential domestic figures in resolving deep-seated issues in areas across Libya. For instance, the LNA has utilised Major General Belgasim al-Abaj, a military officer from the Gaddafi era, to mediate grievances in Libya's south – achieving more tangible results in a matter of months than the international community has in over eight years. Due to the nature of the Libyan conflict and the erratic media landscape that surrounds it, coverage on such developments is subpar. However, Al-Abaj is a well-respected figure in southern Libya who

<sup>8</sup> "The Future of Eastern Libya: Understanding the Recent Power Struggle in the Region", cit.

<sup>9</sup> Samer Al-Atrush, "Libya Asks U.S. to Set Up Military Base to Counter Russia", in *Bloomberg*, 22 February 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-02-22/libya-wants-the-u-s-to-set-up-a-military-base-to-counter-russia>.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group, "Interpreting Haftar's Gambit in Libya", in *Crisis Group Commentaries*, 4 May 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/13917>.

has been at the centre of local mediation efforts for some time.<sup>11</sup>

The international community needs to come to terms with its failures in Libya. Rather than focus on bringing both sides to the negotiating table, efforts should seek to bring together enough influential actors from across Libya, including those the LNA and GNA rely on in their respective alliances. In doing so, unlike in Geneva, we would see a gathering of influential characters from across Libya's political and geographic lines that would make both parties think twice before withholding their participation.

As things stand, the UN will find it difficult to identify such individuals as it has demonstrated a lack of understanding of social dynamics in Libya. It will find it even more difficult to convince the majority of these figures to participate in any form of national reconciliation efforts due to the lack of trust there is towards the institution. Mediators will truly have to work outside the current paradigm to make any progress. Repeating photo-op meetings and reaching agreements that cannot be enforced represent mere band-aid solutions that will eventually lead Libya back to where it is today. More conflict, more fragmentation and more foreign intervention.

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<sup>11</sup> Jamal Adel, "Kufra Tribes Gather for Peace and Vow Support to LNA", in *Libya Herald*, 2 May 2018, <https://www.libyaherald.com/?p=116065>.

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