

## Mediterranean Conflicts and the Geopolitical Context

# Libya: A Failed State in the Middle of the Mediterranean

### Matteo Colombo

Pan-European Fellow  
European Council on Foreign Relations  
Associate Research Fellow  
Italian Institute for International Political Studies  
(ISPI), Milan

### Arturo Varvelli

Head and Senior Policy Fellow  
European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), Rome  
Office

The Turkish intervention in Libya has changed the course of the conflict. The heterogeneous coalition of militias which support the Government of National Accord (GNA) of Fayez al-Sarraj, based in Tripoli and internationally recognized by the United Nations, has recovered almost all of Tripolitania. Thanks to Ankara's support, the GNA pushed back the Libyan National Army (LNA) and its allies from the outskirts of the Libyan capital. These forces, led by General Khalifa Haftar and loyal to the House of Representatives (HoR) of Tobruk in Cyrenaica, have currently resettled on the outskirts of the Libyan city of Sirte. This area is particularly important due to its proximity to the so-called "oil crescent," where around 70-80% of the national oil reserves are located (Wehrey 2018, p. 80). In the case of the GNA, controlling this area would mean an increase in hydrocarbon rents. Unlike the HoR, the Tripoli-based government is allowed to sell oil and gas on the global market and, therefore, can distribute the hydrocarbon rents to militiamen for consolidating support or even convincing rival groups to switch side. The Libyan conflict is, in fact, mostly about benefiting from energy resources rather than centred around ideological divergences. To understand the importance of hydrocarbon rents, it is worth bearing in mind the African

Development Bank's estimations: between 2014 and 2018 around 95% of Libya's total export revenues came from hydrocarbons.

The current development on the ground foreshadows a deadlock in the coming months. Neither of the two contenders has the military capability for an all-out victory. It is therefore unlikely that we will see substantial changes in the front line in the city of Sirte. The reason why the GNA lacks the capacity to control Cyrenaica lies in the heterogeneous composition of its forces, which comprise a plurality of militias. These armed groups rely on local legitimacy to control territories, as citizens in Cyrenaica still depend on Haftar's well-established structure of patronage for social and economic support (Lacher, 2020: p. 146). It follows that they would have a hard time in maintaining control of an area where the population sees the GNA militias as disruptive of the local HoR-LNA political and economic networks. The only factor that would bring about a change in perceptions is an increase of Turkish military presence in eastern Libya. Ankara, however, would most likely be reluctant to be dragged into a long and costly conflict in this area, not to mention the issue of Egypt having Turkish troops at its borders. The same goes for the LNA forces, which cannot advance in Tripolitania without external support. However, the main sponsors of Haftar, namely Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are increasingly exposed to the failure of their political investment, given the General's inability to enter Tripoli. Consequently, they are now reluctant to support the same political and military leader again. Reading between the lines, the statement by Egyptian President al-Sisi about Sirte and al-Jufra being the red lines of the GNA advance means that Cairo has given up any prospect of the LNA taking control of Tripolitania.

Based on the previous analysis, we hypothesize that we are now entering a new phase of the conflict, characterized by three key features. First, the conflict is moving towards localized clashes in specific areas (e.g. *the Sirte region*). Second, external powers are becoming increasingly important for determining the dynamics of the conflict. Third, there seems to be a trend toward external powers using their influence to de-escalate the conflict when necessary through diplomatic initiatives. The described scenario is similar to that of Syria, where, since 2019, hostilities have been mostly limited to a few specific areas (e.g. *Idlib, the northeast*), and fights have erupted due to state-led initiatives and not because of local dynamics (e.g. *Operation Olive Branch*). Finally, key countries involved in the conflict have agreed on de-escalating the violence when necessary to achieve short-term truces (e.g. *the Astana process*).

### **MENA Powers Increasing Their Influence**

The recent change in the Libyan conflict epitomizes the increasing influence of MENA powers *vis-à-vis* global and European ones. As Dacrema (2020, p. 15-36) correctly points out, the current distribution of forces in Libya reflects one of the main geopolitical rifts in the region. Such a rift revolves around the political, economic and symbolic leadership of the Arab Sunni majority states: Turkey and Qatar endorse a model based on an interpretation of political Islam inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood. More specifically, Ankara and Doha support political change for the states of the region through electoral victories of Islamist parties within a republican system. This bottom-up approach is very challenging for most states in the area, as it translates into a change of the status quo for military-led regimes and monarchies alike. On the contrary, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt aim to preserve the current political status-quo and support a more conservative understanding of political Islam. More specifically, they do not see Islam as a force for political change, but as a reference in matters of public morality. Moreover, they advocate for a top-down approach to political Islam in which governments preserve the public morality of their citizens. They thus oppose any political group, including Islamist parties, which calls for a societal change inspired by their own interpretation of

political Islam. In the Libyan context, Turkey and, to a lesser extent Qatar, back the GNA, which is also supported by militias ideologically linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. On the other hand, Egypt, UAE and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia, are among the main sponsors of the HoR-LNA.

Ankara recruited thousands of mercenaries to support the GNA. Perhaps more importantly, Ankara provided weapons, defence systems and unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV) to the GNA. These drones were key in targeting Haftar's bases and supply lines (Megerisi, 2020). Thanks to its NATO membership, Turkey enjoys access to far more advanced technology than that of its rivals in Libya. Ankara's advantage in this regard has been a real game-changer in the conflict. Moreover, Turkish intervention cannot only be explained by its ideological support for Islamist-inspired militias of the GNA, as it also has political and economic incentives. From a political perspective, Turkey perceives itself as an assertive regional power with legitimate ambitions in the eastern Mediterranean region, and it considers Egypt as its main rival. In the short term, Turkey is aiming to consolidate its presence in Libya by strengthening its links with local politicians. Its long-term objectives, however, are much more ambitious: Ankara is seeking to gain access to two military complexes in Libyan territory, namely the airbase of al-Watiya and the naval base of Misrata. The main economic motivation driving Turkey's intervention in Libya can be understood in light of the current rivalry for gas in the eastern Mediterranean. The basin countries (Egypt, Israel and Cyprus), which do not have a positive relationship with Turkey, have instituted the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) and discussed building a gas pipeline (EastMed) from the main extraction fields to Greece and then Italy, excluding Turkey. The agreement between Ankara and the GNA on the delimitation of the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which shortly preceded the Turkish intervention in Libya, should be understood in this specific regional context (Colombo and Dentice, 2020). From Ankara's viewpoint, the agreement gives it the right to conduct gas explorations in a sea area which Greece considers part of its EEZ and, more importantly, it links the borders of the EEZs of the two countries. It follows that any pipeline which brings gas to Europe would have to transit either in the Turkish or the Libyan EEZ. Although Ankara cannot ob-

struct the construction of the EastMed pipeline, it can put up legal pretexts to slow it down, and any construction delay would make such infrastructure less profitable. Another economic motivation behind the Turkish intervention in Libya is wanting to increase its share in the local energy market.

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On the opposite side, Egypt and the UAE have provided strong political and military support to the LNA of General Haftar. These states treated the Tobruk-based chamber as the legitimate representative of Libya and have established strong links with the main political actors of the HoR. Moreover, they have supposedly provided military equipment, including several jets, and might have even carried out operations with their own jets. Recently, some aircraft have targeted the al-Watiya airbase, where GNA and pro-Turkey forces were stationed. Their support was decisive in the military advance of Haftar to Tripoli in 2018-2019, and it is still in place now. Along with the regional and ideological struggle against the Turkish-Qatar front, these two states have several political and economic interests to preserve in Libya. Politically, Cairo sees the establishment of a GNA government with an Islamist component at its border as a threat to its internal security due to its harsh opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt is also aiming to prevent the risk of instability at its border, given its potential to create the conditions for attacks of jihadist groups on its national territory. From an economic point of view, Egypt is concerned for its Libya-based citizens, which came to about 750,000 in 2015, in a population of just over 6.9 million inhabitants. Furthermore, Cairo is considering the opportunity of exploiting Libyan oil in the future,

as its internal production does not cover overall demand, although it is not currently possible for the HoR to sell oil on the international market. Given the UAE's attempts at diversifying its income source, Libya is an investment opportunity for the energy, logistic and transport sectors, as well as a gateway to the Mediterranean region.

### **The Position of European Countries and Global Powers**

Recent developments in the Libyan conflict resulted in a decrease in the influence of the main European countries. On the pro-GNA side, Italy has been the main ally of the Tripoli government until 2019. Rome is still one of the key supporters of Fayed al-Sarraj, but it has also opened a channel for dialogue with General Haftar. At the current stage, this policy has not yet produced a positive outcome. The GNA perceived the Italian stance as ambivalent and has therefore strengthened its relationship with Turkey. Furthermore, al-Sarraj declared that his government asked Italy for weapons, but the Conte government refused to give them. Despite the current setback, Italy remains a key player in the Libyan conflict, as a large number of the local oil and gas fields are operated through ENI: the main Italian Energy Company. In July 2019, the Italian ambassador to Libya, Giuseppe Buccino Grimaldi, estimated that ENI still controls around 45% of Libyan oil and gas production. It follows then that the ENI has a strong economic and political presence in the country. As a consequence, the economic goal of Italy in Libya is to preserve its interest in the energy sector and many others. Moreover, Rome aims to keep its political influence in Tripolitania to preserve its cooperation with local authorities in fighting terrorism, illegal smuggling and, more importantly, illegal migration. Besides Italy, two other states have a potential mediation role in the Libyan crisis thanks to their existing channel of dialogue with both sides: Germany and the US. Germany has been the main promoter of the Berlin conference, which was a diplomatic initiative for a resolution of the Libyan conflict. The US is gradually regaining some interest in the Libyan issue, as its participation in the Berlin conference indicates. Washington might take a more assertive mediation role in the coming years.

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On the pro-HoR-LNA side, France and Russia have had a positive relationship with the ruling powers in the east, including with General Haftar. For Moscow, such support translated into the deployment of the Wagner mercenaries and, according to US sources, that of fighter jets. France has also been accused of providing weapons to General Haftar. The main strategic interest for both countries has been to limit Turkish efforts to increase its influence in the entire Mediterranean region. There are also some political and economic motives which are specific to the two countries. Russia's political goal in the area mostly revolves around increasing its overall political and economic influence in the Mediterranean region, eventually by establishing a naval base in the Cyrenaican city of Tobruk. However, it is worth mentioning that Moscow considers Libya less central than Syria in such a strategy. Furthermore, Russia is interested in having a stake in the energy sector and, eventually, in the reconstruction of the country. For France, the political motivation for supporting HoR-LNA has been mostly associated with its ambition to gain influence in the country at the expense of Italy. The main economic reason reflects the political one, which is to gain a higher share in the local economy, especially in the energy sector. Turkey's current setback puts France in an uneasy position, as it prevents Paris from profiting from its political investment.

### Current Changes in Local Dynamics

The local dynamics within the pro-GNA and the pro-HoR-LNA power bases retrace the fault lines generated by international quarrels. In the first group, the Misrata-based militias have emerged as the most influential political and military force. Traditionally, these armed groups have a strong relationship with

Italy, but some of them are ideologically influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood. It follows that the current increase in Turkey's role in the west might lead more local groups to look to Ankara for political support and legitimation. In this sense, it is worth pointing out that part of the population in the city is made of the so-called "kouloughli," the sons and daughters of Ottoman men and local women. For many Misratans, this might not be a salient aspect of their identity, but for others it might reinforce a feeling of cultural affinity with Turkey. A change in the internal power structure might also be reflected in the emergence of new political actors at the top of the government hierarchy, such as the current Interior Minister Fathi al-Bashagha. Another area of competition between Turkey and Italy in the GNA-controlled territory is Tripoli. In the capital, there are some militias which are ideologically close to Salafi-Mahkdali ideology, such as Rada, while others are less connoted, such as the Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade. In spite of a long-standing tradition of Mahkdalis looking to Saudi Arabia as their ideological reference point, they might now look to Turkey due to its role as the main sponsor of political Islam. The other militias, instead, will look to any foreign states according to what suits them best.

When looking at the pro-HoR-LNA field, Haftar's inability to conclude its advance towards Tripoli has produced a change in the balance of power. As Haftar cannot realistically conquer the capital, where the ministries which distribute the rents are located, he has lost his *raison d'être* in the eyes of his international sponsors. These countries have realized that the only way to preserve their interest, at least partially, is to push the HoR-LNA to mediate with the GNA. In such a scenario, Haftar cannot have a mediating role, since his exclusion from the dialogue is a necessary precondition for the GNA to sit at the negotiating table. HoR leaders, who are less committed to the LNA forces, are, therefore, likely to acquire importance in the future. This is also suggested by the increased participation of the HoR President, Aguila Saleh, in diplomatic meetings, including those with the Foreign Ministers of Russia and Italy. The new international standing of the current HoR President was evident in the press conference in the aftermath of the launch of the Cairo initiative, which featured Saleh together with Haftar on the same stage. In a nutshell, HoR-

LNA supporters will increasingly endorse Saleh in the coming months, as the current military stalemate boosts chances for dialogue between GNA and HoR representatives.

### **Policy Options for the Main European Countries and Institutions:**

The current stalemate opens a window of opportunity for the four main European countries (*Italy, France, UK, Germany*) and the European institutions to play a decisive role in Libya. For the first time, the Big Four all have an interest in promoting a political solution to the current crisis. Italy lost its role as the main sponsor of the GNA due to the Turkish initiative, and it could finally reap the benefits of its efforts to carve out a role as mediator between the two parties in recent months. France missed its chance of increasing its influence in Libya, due to the LNA's withdrawal from Tripolitania. It must now preserve its interests in Cyrenaica and Fezzan through mediation. Germany and the UK are committed to a stable and unified Libya to prevent regional instability and illegal migration. Within this scenario, there are three policy recommendations for the aforementioned European countries, which are:

#### *Engaging and Containing Turkey*

The four main European countries and European Union (EU) institutions should articulate a clear position on Turkey's current activism in Libya and the Mediterranean region. On the one hand, they should take a more cooperative stance to Ankara by recognizing some of its interests as legitimate. On the other, they should hold Turkey accountable for its unacceptable interference in the Mediterranean region. European countries and EU institutions should recognize that Turkey will inevitably be an influential player in defining Libya's future and should accept that, being a NATO ally, it will most likely access an airbase and naval base in the country. This acknowledgment, however, should not come without a cost. Europeans could ask Turkey to renounce any exploration claim over the EEZ of Greece and part of Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean and to halt its support of the ongoing military operation in Sirte. Such a clear stance would help better define the Eu-

ropean position towards Ankara, which has so far been characterized by the ambiguity of treating Turkey sometimes as a partner and at others as a regional rival. By following the line of action suggested above, the main European countries and EU institutions make it clear that they consider Turkey as a partner with legitimate interests, as long as it does not cross certain specific red lines. Given that Ankara's ambitious foreign policy goals are currently being hampered by the economic crisis, it is plausible for Ankara to eventually agree – albeit reluctantly – to the suggested approach.

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#### *Fostering a Ceasefire in Sirte*

The main European countries and EU institutions have an overall positive relationship with the countries currently involved in Libyan affairs. As a result, they do have the political capital for pushing more assertively for a ceasefire. The first step should be achieving a local truce in Sirte. Given the current state of affairs, this is a realistic objective given that none of the contenders has the military strength to accomplish an all-out victory. The second step should be initiating a discussion with Turkey, Egypt and the UAE. Central to this discussion should be establishing the exact location of the armistice line with the inclusion or exclusion of some of the hydrocarbon fields and refineries in the HoR-LNA and GNA-controlled areas. The third step should be applying diplomatic pressure to reopen those fields, whose exploitation would greatly benefit Libyan citizens both in the west and the east. The fourth and final step is providing a platform of discussion between the GNA and the HoR-LNA on the extraction, process and export of hydrocarbons, which would be beneficial for both sides. Such steps would pave the way to a more ambitious plan, namely finding a broader political solution to the Libyan crisis. How-



ever, a larger-scale initiative is far more complex than a local ceasefire and it would require international players to step back from their current involvement in the conflict.

## Europeans should endorse bottom-up deals on three issues that are crucial to the future of the country: reinforcing governance, addressing the economic crisis and supporting humanitarian actions

### *Promoting Local Initiatives to Strengthen Governance and Political Dialogue*

The main European countries and EU institutions should make a long-term commitment to promoting and strengthening local initiatives aimed at tackling specific issues of the Libyan conflict. More specifically, Europeans should endorse bottom-up deals on three issues that are crucial to the future of the country: reinforcing governance, addressing the economic crisis and supporting humanitarian actions. With regard to governance, the key goal is to integrate militias in the security forces so as to bolster the government's capacity to control the territory. To achieve this objective, European countries and institutions should support the current efforts of the Tripoli Interior Minister to promote the security sector reform (SSR) and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). This initiative would facilitate broader efforts to gradually integrate militias into security forces and subordinate them to the state authority. The main European countries can

provide training and eventually financial support to such an effort. With regard to addressing the economic crisis, besides pushing the LNA and its sponsor to reopen the hydrocarbon fields, the most urgent short-term goal should be financially supporting the Libyan stabilization fund and advising the GNA on how to improve the provision of services. Furthermore, European countries and institutions should promote a discussion on the distribution of the hydrocarbon rents at a local level. Lastly, from a humanitarian perspective, Europeans can assist the population in need, which is currently being worn out both by the conflict and by the COVID-19 health crisis. A good example of a humanitarian-oriented initiative in Libya is the Italian army's current project to demine some areas of Tripoli.

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