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The Great Carve-Up

Libya's Internationalised Conflicts after Tripoli

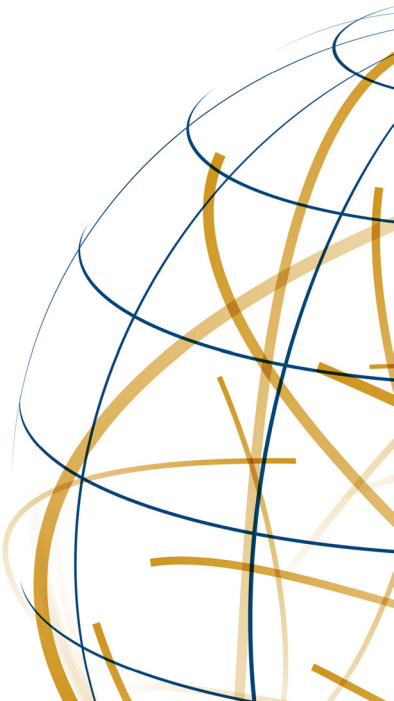
Wolfram Lacher

The yearlong offensive on Tripoli by Khalifa Haftar's forces has suffered fatal setbacks, and Libya's conflicts are changing shape. Russia's and Turkey's attempts at carving out spheres of influence are bound to collide with the interests of other foreign powers and with the fluidity of Libya's political landscape. Haftar could face increasing challenges to his authority over eastern and southern Libya. Rivalries within the anti-Haftar alliance will also return to the fore. Foreign intervention and the deep rifts that the war has inflicted on Libyan society will be the key obstacles to a political settlement. Western states should focus on preserving Libya's unity and countering Russian influence as a matter of priority.

With major support from Turkey, forces aligned with the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) in April and May 2020 inflicted a string of setbacks on Haftar and compelled his forces in Tripoli to retreat south of the city. A key moment came on 23 May with the withdrawal of mercenaries by the Russian private military company Wagner Group. Airstrikes from Turkish-operated drones were suspended as the mercenaries left, suggesting that Haftar's Tripoli offensive ultimately fell victim to a Turkish-Russian understanding. Russia retains mercenaries in central Libya, where it has also recently stationed fighter jets in Haftar's support. Russian military support remains essential to Haftar's survival by deterring GNA advances beyond Tripolitania.

Haftar's serious setbacks in Tripoli show how decisive foreign support has become for both sides since Haftar launched his offensive in April 2019. Military support from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, and Russia as well as political backing from the US and France accorded Haftar a major advantage. Turkey, the GNA's only notable foreign supporter, provided limited assistance in the war's early months, and suspended it during autumn 2019, allowing Haftar's forces to make progress in Tripoli.

Turkey only resumed its support after forcing the GNA into an agreement over maritime rights in November 2019. Contrary to the covert foreign support for Haftar, Turkish intervention was overt, and it rapidly altered the balance of power after the fighting escalated in late March 2020. Covert UAE support in the form of drones and air defence systems proved ineffective in the face of Turkish military action.



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A Shifting Landscape

Haftar's losses in Tripoli have major implications for Libya's conflict landscape. The two warring camps are alliances of convenience, and the failure of Haftar's power bid will reshape them. Armed groups from western Libya that go back to the 2011 war against Qadhafi form the bulk of the forces fighting Haftar. Many had been in rivalry with each other before uniting against Haftar, and although nominally loyal to the GNA, they are often deeply resentful of it.

Haftar, in turn, mobilised a heterogeneous coalition of forces that hoped to sweep to power with him. They include units he built up in recent years in eastern Libya, but also armed groups from western and southern Libya whose loyalty to him is often doubtful. Among them, hardline Salafis and former supporters of the Qadhafi regime form prominent subgroups.

The immediate question for the trajectory of the conflict concerns the fate of Tarhuna, the city that served as the primary base for Haftar's offensive. The militia of the Kani brothers (or "Kaniyat") had established its control over Tarhuna from 2014 onwards by killing hundreds of people. Since joining Haftar's alliance at the beginning of his Tripoli offensive, the Kaniyat have committed more crimes to maintain control. The GNA-aligned forces include hundreds of men from Tarhuna who have lost family members or homes due to the Kaniyat's actions. But many in the anti-Haftar forces regard Tarhuna as collectively supportive of Haftar and the Kaniyat.

A GNA effort to take Tarhuna risks provoking a protracted conflict that would involve retribution both against the Kaniyat and the community as a whole. Since there is widespread fear of indiscriminate violence in Tarhuna, many in the city would be likely to join the fight against the GNA to defend their families and community.

Whether GNA forces can take control of Tarhuna depends on Russia's and the UAE's willingness to continue propping up Haftar's allies in the town. A retreat from Tarhuna would remove the threat Haftar poses to Tripoli. It would also establish Turkey as the dominant foreign power in western Libya, and Russia as the guarantor that GNA forces will not go on the offensive beyond Tripolitania.

Ramifications East, South, West

Turkish and Russian attempts to freeze the conflict are bound to collide with the political ramifications of Haftar's setbacks in Tripoli. A wide-ranging realignment of allegiances and alliances is likely to ensue. The institutions that have served as the interlocutors for Russia and Turkey — the GNA and Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces — will come under pressure and could ultimately crumble.

In western Libya, Haftar's offensive served as a unifying threat. While Haftar's forces were advancing and liable to exploit divisions among his enemies, many held back their anger over corruption in the GNA and kept their political ambitions in check. These frustrations and rivalries will now come to the fore. This is not necessarily only a negative prospect. The impossibility of reforming the GNA without reopening the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement that created it has long allowed unaccountable politicians with no meaningful base to pursue their rent-seeking activities. To become more effective, the government in Tripoli needs to become more accountable to the forces on the ground.

In much of southern Libya, Haftar's influence is tenuous. Politicians and armed groups in the south declared their loyalty to Haftar, expecting him to provide funds and services, and betting that he would prevail in Tripoli. Now that he can deliver neither, many will seek to mend fences with the GNA. This process of realignment is likely to be protracted and prone to trigger conflict, since the region is divided along communal lines and between competing armed groups. Russian and Emirati military support to Haftar could dissuade armed groups in the south from shifting allegiances, or it could lead to conflicts following such shifts.

Haftar's grip is strongest in eastern Libya, where many politicians and militia leaders will see their fortunes as being tied to his fate. Much of eastern Libyan society is wary of the instability that would come with Haftar's demise. But fighters who are returning disillusioned from a lost war in Tripoli could turn against him. Benghazi militia leaders who have long been latently disloyal to him could seize the opportunity to reassert themselves. Political opposition could coalesce around the head of the eastern-based rump parliament, Agilah Saleh, or around a movement for eastern autonomy that Haftar had suppressed for the past few years. The numerous politicians, businessmen, and fighters who fled the Haftar-controlled east in the recent past could ally with Haftar's opponents in order to return. Unless Haftar eventually succeeds in his attempts at illegally selling oil, these struggles will unfold while he faces growing difficulties in raising funds. If Haftar's structure founders, the considerable grievances his violent rise caused could return to the fore. Violent conflicts would follow.

Challenges to a Condominium

Further questions over the sustainability of a Turkish-Russian arrangement in Libya concern their interest in a Libyan political settlement, and the opposition such an arrangement would provoke from other foreign powers.

A Russian-Turkish understanding does not necessarily mean an end to fighting, nor would it be immune to periodic breakdown and renegotiation. But if Haftar's forces withdraw from Tripolitania, mutual deterrence by Russia and Turkey may well put an end to large-scale hostilities. Even in that scenario, however, the prospects for political negotiations are slim. Since Haftar launched his Tripoli offensive, most political actors in western Libya no longer see him as a credible negotiating partner. Moreover, the war has caused a deep rift between western and eastern Libya, where few voices had spoken out against the war. The more the futility of Haftar's offensive has become evident, the more secessionist sentiment has gained ground in the east.

Turkish and Russian intervention also poses obstacles to a political settlement. In negotiations, Libyan parties would demand that their adversaries' backers withdraw foreign elements, including Russian and Syrian mercenaries, Emirati drones, Russian fighter jets, and Turkish military assets. Moreover, an agreement that would re-establish a single government, army command, and a central bank would also dilute Russian and Turkish influence. A unified government might ultimately seek to eject any foreign military presence. Russian and Turkish interests therefore lie in freezing the conflict, rather than resolving it.

Haftar's failure in Tripoli does nothing to alleviate the growing financial pressure on both sides. Since January 2020, Haftar has stopped oil exports in areas under his control. He is thereby preventing revenues from accruing to the Central Bank in Tripoli, which has refused to offer the eastern authorities associated with Haftar greater access to finance. To date, Western states have used UN sanctions on illegal oil exports to block Haftar's recurrent attempts at selling oil independently. Any agreement between the two sides to resume oil exports would have to involve a reform of the Central Bank's executive that reflects an arrangement on revenue distribution.

Absent such a deal, fiscal conditions will worsen for both the Tripoli government and the eastern authorities associated with Haftar. This would also limit their ability to pay for foreign mercenaries and military hardware, as well as to reward their foreign sponsors with opportunities in the energy sector. Russia and Turkey face a dilemma: Negotiating a political settlement would risk curbing their influence, but merely freezing the conflict will undermine the economic viability of their interventions.

Additional challenges emanate from foreign powers. A Turkish-Russian understanding would marginalise Haftar's other foreign backers — the UAE, Egypt, and France — and empower Turkey, whose

regional policies are opposed by all three states. The US is alarmed over Russia's deployment of fighter jets and could bolster Turkey's military posture in order to prevent Russia from establishing permanent bases in Libya. All four powers will try to prevent or undermine a Russian-Turkish arrangement on Libya. This could exacerbate conflicts if different foreign powers back competing local actors. Rivalries between great and middle powers in Libya will also prevent the UN from regaining its role as a credible mediator between conflicting foreign and local interests.

A Marginalised Europe

Europeans stood by and watched as Libya's war raged on and foreign intervention reached unprecedented levels. The primary reasons for their inaction were France's policy of protecting Haftar, the initial tacit backing of the US for Haftar and its subsequent indifference to the war, and Europeans' reluctance to confront the UAE and Egypt over their support for Haftar's offensive. This unwillingness to apply leverage also marked German diplomacy.

The result of this policy was that Turkey and Russia filled the vacuum, while Europeans lost credibility and influence. This will now limit their ability to mediate and to prod the GNA into taking urgently needed steps, such as strengthening its base and accountability, and containing newly empowered armed groups.

Now that the catastrophic consequences of European inaction are evident and Haftar no longer has a chance to seize power, a policy shift is both possible and indispensable. A Russian-Turkish condominium would neither reunify Libya nor serve the EU's interest, even if it was sustainable. But opposing Russia and Turkey at the same time will not work, since this would push both states closer together. Two key goals should guide European policies: First, safeguard Libya's unity; second, counter Russian influence in Libya as a matter of priority. The US shares both goals. But Europeans will only be able to act in unison if the French position shifts away from its relative tolerance for Russia and adversarial stance towards Turkey. Russia's military presence in Libya represents a far greater menace to Europe than Turkish intervention. Reducing the Russian presence would also diminish the GNA's dependence on Turkish protection, thereby addressing the concerns of member states that oppose the GNA due to their dispute with Turkey over maritime rights in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Among the tools Europeans have at their disposal to pursue these goals, hard power does not feature prominently. EU member states no longer have the credibility needed to play a meaningful military role in Libya, and would only add to the confusion of foreign meddlers in the country. The EU maritime operation IRINI does little to prevent arms shipments from reaching Libya. It can, however, be used as a deterrent against illegal oil exports — which is crucial for preventing partition.

Western leverage is strongest in the economy and in the use of sanctions. Western states should continue to use their influence in international financial institutions as well as the global banking, insurance, and energy industries to prevent illegal oil exports and to work towards reforms at the Central Bank, and ultimately its reunification. Paralysis in the UN Security Council raises the need for a more extensive use of EU and US sanctions against companies and individuals involved in violations of the arms embargo and attempts at illegal oil exports. The prosecution of war crimes under universal jurisdiction is essential as a deterrent for armed groups empowered by foreign sponsors.

To curb Russian influence, the EU should wield sanctions to undermine Haftar, on whom Russia depends as a host and partner. In parallel, Western states should finally push their interests in a stable Libya more strongly when engaging with Haftar's other foreign supporters, particularly Egypt and the UAE, to dissuade them from further cooperation with Russia.

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