



The war in Libya from local into international conflict

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July 2020

The 2011 "Arab spring" uprising that toppled longtime ruler Muammar Gaddafi plunged Libya into years of chaos. Since 2014 Libya has been split between two rival administrations: the Tripoli-based "Government of National Accord" (GNA), led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, and the House of Representatives allied to General Haftar and the Libyan National Army (LNA).¹

The conflict in Libya is being fueled by foreign states and becoming a battlefield for a geopolitical contest among regional and global powers. Turkey and Qatar supporting the GNA while Russia, Egypt, UAE and Saudi Arabia supporting the LNA.

The LNA launched an offensive in April 2019, in an attempt to extend Haftar's control into the western coastal areas, and especially the capital Tripoli. But Haftar's rapid advance on Tripoli stalled to a bloody stalemate on the edges of the capital.

In recent months the GNA, with extensive Turkish military backing, pushed LNA forces back from its foothold in southern Tripoli and other parts of the northwest and launched a military operation, "Path of Victory", to capture the city of Sirte.²

Sirte and Jufra are located at the center of Libya in between the political center of the capital Tripoli and the western part of Libya under the GNA control and Benghazi and the eastern part of the country controlled by the LNA. Sirte is the western gateway to the country's "oil crescent," that contains over 60 percent of Libya's oil, its main oil terminals and important military bases. Jufra province directly south of Sirte is home to the strategic al-Jufra air base, one of Libya's largest military bases.³

The Russian military involvement in Libya

UN report said last month that Russian private military contractor "Wagner group" has deployed since October 2018, between 800 and 1,000 fighters in Libya and its members participating in combat operations.⁴ The report identified 122 individuals with the Wagner Group's special sniper unit and attack and reconnaissance contingent.⁵

¹ Haftar forces suffer string of defeats in battle for Tripoli, Al Jazeera, April 14, 2020.

² Libya: Haftar's LNA says pulling back from Tripoli front lines, Al Jazeera, May 21, 2020.

³ Libya conflict: Sirte-Jufra 'red line' set to be next major flashpoint, Al Arabiya, June 22, 2020.

⁴ Wagner, shadowy Russian military group, 'fighting in Libya', BBC News, May 7, 2020.

⁵ Russia is getting more than it bargained for in Libya and Syria, Business insider, May 31, 2020.

The UN report said Wagner operatives have been acting as artillery and air observers, snipers, providing electronic countermeasures expertise and providing technical support for the repair of military vehicles.⁶ Russia has denied any link to the deployments and criticized the UN report.

In recent months, LNA forces aided by the Wagner Group have suffered a series of military setbacks and fled the front lines of Tripoli's suburbs. Hundreds of Russian military contractors fighting for the LNA were reportedly airlifted out of the town of Bani Walid, southwest of Tripoli, into central Libya after retreating from fighting on the capital's front lines.

In a strategic move to save its ally, Russia has deployed fighter jets to Libya in support of Khalifa Haftar's forces. At least 8 multirole MiG-29s and four Sukhoi Su-24 ground attack fighters were sent along with an escort of at least two Su-35 advanced 4.5 generation long-range fighter jets to Libya.⁷ The aircrafts arrived at the Haftar-held Al-Jufra airbase in central Libya from an airbase in Russia after briefly stopping in Khmeimin airbase in Syria, where they were repainted to conceal their Russian origin. The Russian military aircrafts are likely to provide air superiority and close air support to the forces of the LNA.⁸

Moscow has long denied any involvement in Libya's conflict. Russia had used Wagner group to conceal its direct role and to afford Moscow plausible deniability of its actions in Libya.⁹

Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC) said on June 26, 2020 that Russian and other foreign mercenaries in dozens of armored vehicles entered the southwestern Sharara oil field. The Sharara oil field, lies about 900 kilometers south of Tripoli and has the capacity to produce 315,000 barrels per day, approximately one-third of the country's crude oil output. The NOC is the only entity allowed to export Libyan oil, with all revenues going to the Central Bank in Tripoli, where the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) is based.¹⁰

Production in Sharara had only this month resumed after months of closure by forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar. Blocking production at Sharara after a brief period of operation would deal a huge financial blow to the GNA. Entering the oil field by Haftar's allies at this time could be also an attempt to distract the GNA forces now on the front lines of the battle for Sirte.¹¹

⁶ Wagner, shadowy Russian military group, 'fighting in Libya'.

⁷ Libyans parade captured missile system as government accuses Russia of supplying jets to Haftar, the new Arab, May 22, 2020.

⁸ US says Russia sent advanced fighters to aid mercenaries in Libya, Al Jazeera, May 27, 2020.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Russian mercenaries enter Libya's largest oil field as Sirte battle looms, Middle east eye, June 26, 2020.

¹¹ Ibid.

The speaker of the eastern Libyan parliament, Aguila Saleh, arrived to Moscow on July 2, 2020, to discuss the recent developments in Libya with Russian officials. The visit aims at covering economic, diplomatic and military issues including the “Turkish aggression” against related to Libya and peace initiatives, including those of Egypt and the Berlin conference.¹²

The military involvement of Turkey in Libya

Turkey's prime motivations for entering the war in Libya was a maritime border demarcation agreement it signed in November 2019, with the GNA that expanded its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the resource-abundant eastern Mediterranean. EEZs allow countries exclusive rights to exploit natural resources, including mineral wealth.

A report by the International Crisis Group said that Turkey has sent into Libya at least 100 military officers, 2,000 pro-Turkish fighters from Syria and shiploads of weapons.¹³

In December 2019, Turkey sent Turkish-made armed drones, namely the Bayraktar TB2. The Bayraktar was able to engage and destroy the LNA's ground targets, harass its supply lines, and attack forward air bases that were once considered safe.

The latest advance by GNA forces can mainly be attributed to Turkish military support. Turkish drones and air defenses appear to have played a key role in GNA advances in recent weeks, with repeated claims of attacks on LNA supply chains from the east. Ankara's Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said on May 21, 2020, that as a result of Turkish training and advice "the balance in Libya changed significantly".¹⁴

The LNA's air commander, Saqr al-Jaroushi, threatened on May 21, 2020, to wage the largest aerial campaign in Libyan history against the GNA and Turkey.¹⁵

In response, Turkey has warned that attacks on its interests in Libya by the LNA forces will have "grave consequences" and heavy retaliation. Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy said Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) had received warplanes with "foreign support" and that they had vowed to target Turkish positions in Libya with an air campaign.¹⁶

Turkey's defense minister and military chief signed on July 3, 2020, a military agreement with the head of the Government of National Accord Fayeaz al-Sarraj and military officials. The military agreement guarantees protection of Turkey's interests in Libya and allows for Ankara's direct

¹² Libya's eastern parliament speaker arrives in Russia, Ahram online, July 2, 2020.

¹³ Pompeo urges Libya's Turkish-backed GNA to accept ceasefire, end fighting, Al Arabiya, May 23, 2020.

¹⁴ Libya's GNA seizes another town, Asharq Al Awsat, May 21, 2020.

¹⁵ Libyans parade captured missile system as government accuses Russia of supplying jets to Haftar, the new Arab, May 22, 2020.

¹⁶ 'Grave consequences': Turkey warns Libya's Haftar against attacks, Al Jazeera, May 21, 2020.

intervention in the country. The newly signed deal also includes the establishment of a Turkish military force and base in Libya. The agreement provides immunity for Turkish forces in Libya against any prosecution and gives Turkish officers in Libya a diplomatic status to ensure their immunity.¹⁷

The military involvement of Egypt in Libya

Egypt's President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi toured on June 20, 2020, the Matrouh airbase and inaugurated the Gargoub base in Egypt's Western Military Zone near Egypt's 1,200-kilometer-long western border with Libya.

President El-Sisi was accompanied by Egyptian Minister of Defense and General Commander of the Armed Forces Mohamed Zaki, Chief-of-Staff Mohamed Farid, as well as commanders of the main branches of the Egyptian Armed Forces and the heads and elders of Libyan tribes.¹⁸

During the visit President El Sisi said that Egypt will not allow any threat to its western borders and threatened that "Libya's Sirte and Al-Jufra are considered the red line for Egyptian national security."

¹⁹ President El-Sisi warned forces loyal to the Government of National Accord (GNA) not to cross the current front line between them and forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar, whom Cairo backs.²⁰ He also ordered his army to be ready to carry out any mission inside or outside the country to protect its national security.²¹

Libya's internationally recognized government (GNA) has denounced Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's threats of military intervention, saying his comments were akin to "beating the drums of war".²² Egypt's threat prompted Italy, Germany and the United States to push for a ceasefire, fearing an even wider war.

The legitimacy for Egypt's military intervention in Libya

The Egyptian president stressed "any direct interference from Egypt [in Libya] has now acquired international legitimacy, either with the right to self-defense or at the request of the only legitimate elected authority in Libya, which is the House of Representatives [Tobruk]."²³

Libyan parliament speaker, Akeela Saleh, said on June 24, 2020, that the Libyan people will request the military intervention of Egypt whenever needed. He said the Egyptian intervention "would be legitimate under the Libyan people's mandate." He added "We will request the intervention of the

¹⁷ Turkey signs a military agreement with Libya's GNA: Sources, Al Arabiya, July 4, 2020.

¹⁸ Sisi says any Egyptian intervention in Libya now has international legitimacy, Ahrām online, June 20, 2020.

¹⁹ Sisi: Army Can Defend Egypt Security within its Borders and Beyond, Asharq Al Awsat, June 20, 2020.

²⁰ Libyan official: Egypt's president 'beating the drums of war', Al Jazeera, June 21, 2020.

²¹ Sisi says any Egyptian intervention in Libya now has international legitimacy.

²² Libyan official: Egypt's president 'beating the drums of war'.

²³ Ibid.

Egyptian armed forces to support the Libyan army in case of the capture of Sirte by armed militias," Saleh stressed.²⁴

On June 20, 2020, a representative of the Libyan tribes called upon President Sisi to protect Libya, saying, "On behalf of the Libyan tribes, we strongly request that you protect Libya and preserve its sovereignty and wealth for the benefit of the Libyan people."

President Sisi responded to the call and said that Egypt "is ready to support the Libyan brothers upon request," and expressed Egypt's readiness to train and arm the Libyan tribal youth under the supervision of leaders of the Libyan tribes. President Sisi explained that any intervention in Libya by Egyptian forces "would be led by the Libyan tribes," and stressed that "we only aspire for stability in Libya."²⁵

Arab countries including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have backed Egypt's right to defend its national security in neighboring Libya. The three gulf countries also backed Egypt's new peace initiative for Libya as a move towards a ceasefire and political solution.²⁶

The peace initiatives

Since 2015, all significant peace negotiations have occurred outside Libya, under the direction of a foreign government. France, Italy, and the UAE have each hosted two high-level meetings. Additional high-level meetings have taken place in Cairo, Moscow and Berlin in 2019, but all these summits failed to achieve peace.

Two ceasefires have already been agreed this year, but both parties have accused one another of not adhering to such agreements while shelling and fighting continued. A January 2020 truce brokered by Turkey and Russia has been repeatedly violated and a military commission made up of five Haftar delegates and five GNA loyalists held talks in February 2020, but the dialogue was suspended.²⁷

On March 17, 2020, the UN and nine countries called on Libya's warring parties to cease hostilities to allow health authorities to fight against the new coronavirus. Peacemaking efforts became more complicated following the resignation of UN envoy Ghassan Salame in March 2020, while the Security Council has not yet agreed on a successor.²⁸

²⁴ Libyan people will officially request Egyptian military intervention whenever needed: Parliament speaker, Ahram online, June 24, 2020.

²⁵ Sisi: army can defend Egypt security within its borders and beyond, Asharq Al Awsat, June 20, 2020.

²⁶ Arab countries support Egypt's right to protect its security and border with Libya, Ahram online, June 21, 2020.

²⁷ UN Welcomes Libyan Warring Parties' Agreement to Restart Talks, Asharq Al Awsat, June 2, 2020.

²⁸ Haftar forces suffer string of defeats in battle for Tripoli, Al Jazeera, April 14, 2020.

On May 4, 2020, the UN Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) appealed for a week-long truce starting to coincide with the beginning of Ramadan and warned of a new escalation in the conflict and urged pressure on countries backing the warring sides. However, diplomatic efforts to negotiate a political settlement have made little headway.²⁹

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in a phone call to Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj on May 23, 2020, called for an immediate halt to the fighting and return to political dialogue. He also criticized the continued level of weapons and munitions being brought into the country.³⁰

The United Nations' Libya mission (UNSMIL) said on June 2, 2020, the country's warring parties had agreed to the resumption of the Joint Military Commission 5+5 talks, aimed at reaching a lasting ceasefire, after a three-month suspension.³¹

The "Cairo Declaration" ³²

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi, general Haftar, and Libya's parliament speaker Aguila Saleh announced on June 6, 2020, in Cairo a new joint political initiative to resolve the Libyan crisis ("Cairo Declaration"). The new initiative called for a ceasefire that would pave the way for electing a leadership council for Libya. The initiative also called for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Libya. Several countries welcomed the proposal, including the United States, Russia, UAE and Saudi Arabia. After GNA victories against Haftar the ceasefire, backed by Cairo, has been rejected by the GNA and its backer Ankara, which demanded that the LNA withdraw from Sirte.³³

Summary

The GNA and the LNA have remained locked in a conflict that has drawn in several foreign powers. Libya is increasingly becoming a battlefield for a geopolitical contest among regional and international powers. Turkey is a key ally of the GNA and Russia, UAE and Egypt are the main supporters of Haftar and the LNA.

The LNA forces' setbacks underscore the shifting dynamics of the conflict since Turkey intensified its intervention in January 2020, to help the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) to fight off Haftar's assault.³⁴

The capture of the al-Watiya airbase, the Tripoli international airport and the strategic coastal cities is a significant blow to Haftar's year-long campaign to seize the capital Tripoli from the GNA. It also

²⁹ Libya: Haftar's LNA says pulling back from Tripoli front lines, Al Jazeera, May 21, 2020.

³⁰ Pompeo urges Libya's Turkish-backed GNA to accept ceasefire, end fighting, Al Arabiya, May 23, 2020.

³¹ UN Welcomes Libyan Warring Parties' Agreement to Restart Talks, Asharq Al Awsat, June 2, 2020.

³² Sisi says any Egyptian intervention in Libya now has international legitimacy.

³³ Libyan official: Egypt's president 'beating the drums of war'.

³⁴ Libya: Haftar's LNA says pulling back from Tripoli front lines, Al Jazeera, May 21, 2020.

means the GNA has changed its strategy from "defensive to offensive mode" as the Tripoli-based government battles Haftar's forces for the past one year.

The recent deployment of Russian fighter jets raises the question what Moscow will do with its air assets in Libya and raises concerns of a new escalation in the nine-year-long conflict.

Russia is showing its muscles in Libya and Russia's deepening support for the LNA shows the Kremlin views LNA leader Khalifa Haftar as crucial to its greater North African and Mediterranean strategy, and could grant Moscow the upper hand in shaping the war-torn country's political future.

Russia has denied direct involvement in the Libyan conflict, but Wagner forces are often sent to areas in support of Russian interests and they give the Kremlin deniability.

Amid growing tensions in the region Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said on June 21, 2020, that Egypt has been coordinating with international and regional players in Libya, stressing that a military move would be Cairo's "last option to preserve its security." Shoukry explained "We refuse Turkey's attempt to expand in Libya," adding that Ankara's expansion in Syria, Iraq and Libya is in violation of international legitimacy.³⁵

Neither Russia nor Turkey are willing to give up their gains in Libya. But even with Turkish backing to the GNA and limited Russian support to the LNA, neither side seems capable of decisive victory. Direct Egyptian military involvement in the war can be the game changer in favor of the LNA forces.

President El-Sisi had conveyed "clear messages" to the GNA and its allies in Ankara but he has not yet given the go-ahead for any military action and is still giving room for a political settlement.³⁶

³⁵ Egypt says military solution in Libya is 'last option' to preserve security, Ahram online, June 21, 2020.

³⁶ Approaching the tipping point, Aharm online, June 25, 2020.

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