

# The Goal Must Be A Unified Post-Conflict Libya: What To Do Next?



The cards in Libya have been reshuffled after General Haftar suffered a string of military defeats, with his forces ousted from the Tripoli region, thanks to Turkish support on the ground. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said Haftar had accepted a ceasefire but there is still skepticism over whether this (apparently aimed at gaining time) will hold.

While there are many other actors active in Libya, Russia and Turkey figure more prominently than others as the players most engaged on the side of their respective allies. One possible compromise between Ankara and Moscow on Libya could possibly be part of their bigger picture bargaining, encompassing the Syrian conflict, Black Sea troubles and bilateral agenda of energy, defence,

tourism and trade expansion. However, both sides seem to agree to disagree due to the sharp divergence of strategic interests.

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Clearly, it is in nobody's interest to keep Libya divided as favoured by some of the regional neighbours which desire to have a geopolitical clout in their immediate neighbourhood. The common interest is to achieve a lasting political settlement and economic reconstruction in Libya -without further delay by halting the painful 9-year old civil war- which is at the economic and strategic crossroads of three continents.

In light of Russia's strategic gains in Syria, the US feels the strong urge to engage more actively in Libya to deny Moscow another military stronghold in the Mediterranean.

External actors have indeed exacerbated Libya's problems by funneling money, mercenaries and weapons to proxies that have put their own interests above those of the Libyan people. UN efforts to broker peace have failed and been overshadowed by competing peace conferences from Moscow to Berlin sponsored by various foreign governments. There is need for an all-embracing and creative fresh initiative.

The Libyan conflict is clearly viewed as part of strategic moves to control the country's rich oil and gas resources as well as to redefine the maritime borders of some Mediterranean countries. It involves the projection of political and military power, with most spending on the Mediterranean energy projects (not so attractive in the current international energy realities on the ground) seen as protecting maritime borders and investing in future national defence.

It is only through the constructive intervention of a major power or willing

coalition of powers including those in Libya's neighbourhood that the peace efforts can be realistically revived for practical "win-win" outcomes.

## **Why Libya is so important**

The future of Libya is important for all players, regionally and globally, viewed from their own narrow strategic interests, but more importantly than anything else for the Libyan people itself. Below are some reasons why Libya matters greatly:

*First*, its unique geography. Libya is a country in the Maghreb region, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the north, Egypt to the east, Sudan to the southeast, Chad to the south, Niger to the southwest, Algeria to the west, and Tunisia to the northwest. It is of strategic importance as a gateway to Africa, the Middle East and Europe.

*Second*, facing Malta and Italy in its proximity and France, Greece and Turkey, Libya is critical for ensuring European security. It can also play a crucial role in containing the growth of terrorism. The possibility of Russia gaining strategic stronghold in Libya is a cold shower to the Europeans and Americans who saw what happened in Syria where Russia enjoys privileged access to a naval base and an airbase in the strategic locations.

*Third*, Libya serves as a bulwark against the tide of migrants and refugees from Africa and North Africa. There are about 650,000 migrants and refugees in Libya, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa. Armed groups, including extremists such as ISIS, have proliferated and the country has also become a principal transit point for people from across Africa who want to reach Europe.

*Fourth*, Libyan energy resources, particularly oil, arouse the appetite of many outsiders. ENI currently controls almost half of oil and gas production fields. Total

wants to enter. So do a number of other players given that oil reserves in Libya are among the largest in Africa and ranking the tenth largest globally with 46.4 billion barrels giving Libya 77 years of reserves at current production rates. It also provides gas to Italy via a pipeline under the Mediterranean.

*Fifth*, Libya was a very lucrative market in the pre-civil war era; many countries and companies are now vying for a larger share of the reconstruction opportunities that will arise in the post-conflict Libya.

## **Who wants what?**

As things stand, Libya is not only divided between the internationally recognised government, the General Haftar forces and some autonomous tribal groups. There is also a sharp polarisation of global and regional powers involved in the ongoing conflict.

In recent years, Libya's conflict has turned into a proxy war, with a number of foreign powers joining in to defend ideological and economic interests. Al-Sarraj's administration is backed by the UN and Western powers including the US, but mainly relies on Turkey, Qatar and Italy. Haftar enjoys the support of Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Russia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and France.

The challenge is how to bring together these external and domestic contenders towards achieving a peaceful, secure and prosperous Libya. It is also critical to avoid further division which will create security risks to European, African and Mediterranean nations while damaging prospects for post-conflict energy development and commercial interests.

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There are critical geopolitical, commercial, and maritime issues involved in Turkey's supporting the only UN recognised government in Tripoli. **Turkey** is the only NATO ally which holds the ground in Libya and does not allow Russia and other non-regional actors to have a free-ride. Co-operation between Ankara and Tripoli has shifted the balance of power in the Libyan Civil War, in the words of Ahmed Maiteeq, the Libyan deputy prime minister. Turkish military commanders and intelligence officers appear to have a decisive say in the operation center at the Mitiga military academy near Tripoli at present.

Without Turkish engagement Libya could have fallen into Russian sphere of influence, thus giving rise to a Russian belt in the Mediterranean Sea facing Europe, North Africa and Africa. Fortunately, Erdogan and Putin have developed personal rapport to manage serious divergence of interests as seen in Syria. General Haftar had been winning the war to take control of Tripoli until Turkey forcefully intervened with fresh deployments of advanced drones, anti-aircraft batteries and intelligence support, slowly turning the tide of the battle. Ankara is therefore a critical actor in any Libyan settlement to reckon with.

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**Kremlin's** strategic goals as a wise chessboard player remain an open secret if you judge what Moscow has been trying to achieve in a vast geography from Southeast Europe, Ukraine, Georgia and the Caspian to Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. Chiefly, there are two main goals that drive Russia's policy in Libya: First, expanding its presence in the Mediterranean Sea as a top priority for Russia's regional strategy since the days of the Russian Tsar, and secondly, monitoring NATO and jihadism, as well as safeguarding its military, economic and energy interests.

The Russians are determined to fill in the strategic vacuum left by the US and the Europe. Look at Russian actions in this divided country which are no different from what we have been witnessing in Syria. Russia has created a strong military footprint in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean and wants to continue

the same path in Libya.

For too long, Russia has denied the full extent of its involvement in the ongoing Libyan conflict. The accusations by the US come at a pivotal point in Libya. The Soviet Union maintained a constant navy vigil in the Mediterranean during the Cold War but Russia's presence in the region withered in the years after the 1991 Soviet collapse amid economic woes and military funding shortages. The Head of the Russian contact group on intra-Libyan settlement, Lev Dengov, revealed that Haftar asked Russia to build a military base in the country's east.

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The **US** warned European nations growing increasingly friendly with the Kremlin that a Russian presence in Libya could pose a long-term security challenge by potentially giving it the ability to curtail military actions by other countries in north Africa. If Russia manages to obtain air or naval base rights on Libya's coast, it will create very real security concerns on Europe's southern flank.

While the US State Department and the Pentagon have vocally supported the UN-backed government in Tripoli, the White House has repeatedly if half-heartedly sided with General Haftar in the conflict until recently. However, following Haftar's latest defeats and rapprochement with Moscow, even the White House appears to be distancing itself from him.

The US released surveillance imagery purporting to show Russian aircraft operating in Libya to support mercenaries of the Wagner Group. Washington has accused Russia of deploying a dozen of MiG-29 Mikoyan and Sukhoi Su-24 fighter jets in eastern Libyan bases used by Wagner to provide air support to tip the scales in the north African country's civil war in favour of Haftar.

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The **UAE-Turkish** rivalry — rooted in a battle for dominance of global Muslim religious soft power; geopolitical competition across the Muslim world, including the Middle East and the Horn of Africa; and fundamentally opposed attitudes towards political Islam - has escalated military confrontations and complicated, if not disrupted, efforts to resolve conflicts in Libya and Syria. Yet, it is unrealistic to see Turkey, a regional powerhouse, and the UAE on the same scale.

There is no clear understanding of the UAE rationale to punch above its weight in Libya. The UAE has significantly aided Haftar with air support and advanced weapons. Saudi Arabia has reportedly supported Haftar with generous funds, and Egypt has provided his forces with weapons and support through its porous border with Libya.

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Whether we like or not, neighbours must be part and parcel of any Libyan settlement by virtue of their common borders. Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria as other neighbours are careful to remain neutral in Libyan, thinking of the risks of heavy involvement in the affairs of a neighbour without knowing in which direction the winds might blow down the road.

Libya turned into a failed state following the fall of Muammer Gaddafi, whose overthrow in 2011 was aided by a *NATO*-led bombing campaign. Weapons proliferated in the rebellion's aftermath despite an embargo. Recently, *NATO* expressed readiness to give its support to the government of Tripoli, also known as the Government of National Accord.

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The **European Union** has been split, with France despite repeated protestations of neutrality seen as preferring Haftar and former colonial power Italy the GNA,

with the EU largely watching from the sidelines. The EU has struggled to find a unified approach to the crisis in Libya, despite the country's proximity to its shores. Its inaction has increasingly left Turkey and Russia to call the shots in Libya – though their attempt to broker a long-term cease-fire has not achieved any result.

*Italy*, the former colonial power in Libya, sees stabilising the country and control over its hydrocarbon resources as a matter of national security. It bet on the al-Sarraj government to secure its interests. Migration is another concern; Rome last year renewed a controversial migration agreement with the GNA.

The *French* are worried about the terrorist infiltration from the southern borders of Libya into Chad and Niger where its forces are vulnerable to attacks. France is widely thought to provide Haftar with military assistance; French missiles were found at an LNA base last year, but the government has denied supplying Haftar with weapons.

## **Messages**

- What's happening in Libya is a reflection of the tectonic changes in world geopolitics where the power is shifting and there are attempts to re-engineer the regional balance of power.
- There are signals that we may be nearing towards a settlement on Libya. All efforts in this direction should be geared towards ending domestic hostilities and preparing Libya for the post-war political settlement and economic reconstruction. There is a need to achieve cessation of hostilities between Sarraj and Hafter while at the same time keeping external forces in check.
- Reviving Libyan hydrocarbon industry, even at this time of production



cuts and low prices, is a priority given that the country needs revenues for paying salaries, infrastructure and debts.

- Libyan oil and gas are worth their weight in diamonds. Current level of oil production is at 91,108 barrels a day whereas it stood at 1.7 mbd before the shut-down. The Sarraj government has announced that a political solution can help Libya regain this level within only a few weeks.
- Not only politicians, diplomats, generals, international mediators and intelligence officers should seize the opportunity in Libya but also business groups must be fully engaged in conflict resolution efforts so that the country will be ready for much-needed post-conflict reconstruction.
- There is recent talk of Russia and Turkey, which back opposing sides in Libya's wrenching war, finding a deal over the Libyan conflict that would leave the West as bystanders. Such a scenario would be a replay of Russia and Turkey's alliance on Syria, where despite being on opposing sides of the conflict they have worked closely together to find a solution to the civil war, causing unease in the West.
- The US, the EU and Libya's neighbours are other prime players to be on board for supporting an end to the Libyan crisis, but Washington can and must take the lead in mobilising its NATO and regional allies (UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and hopefully NATO ally France currently supporting Haftar) for a definitive solution in the country so that Libya should not be another Syria in the waiting.
- Last, but not least, the future of Libya must be decided by the Libyan people, no matter how divided they may be and not the external powers which promote the proxies to gain political and commercial stakes.

\*This op-ed has benefited from an Atlantic Council online panel, which I spoke on alongside Ahmed Maitiq, Libya's deputy Prime Minister, Ambassador John E. Herbst, Director of the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center, Kirsten Fontenrose, Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative Director, and Dr. Karim Mezran, Hariri Center Senior Fellow.

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