

# Libya's proxy war







#### MODERN CONFLICTS

*After nine years of vicious civil strife, Libya faces a worsening humanitarian crisis. The recent call for a ceasefire will determine if the nation descends further into chaos or moves towards a peaceful future. OLGA YOLDI writes.*

Libya has been plunged into turmoil since 2011, when its Arab Spring uprising, backed by NATO and the US, overthrew dictator Colonel Muammar Qaddafi who had ruled the country for 42 years.

At the time, it seemed Libya had a lot going for it: a country with the largest oil reserves in Africa, a small population of six million, a relative high standard of living and an ancient culture. There was hope that Libyans would transition easily into democracy and go about nation-building, aided by their vast wealth. The reality could not have been further from that hope.

As soon as Qaddafi was gone, regime loyalists and opposition revolutionaries began fighting. At the same time longstanding enmities between tribes and towns repressed by his regime resurfaced causing unrest. While revolutionaries were united in their fight to overthrow the dictator, they failed to unite or share power after Qaddafi.

They had no unified leadership or consensus on the nature of the new Libya they wanted to create.

To make matters worse, Qaddafi had destroyed vital state institutions. Fearful that the military might challenge his authority, he had dissolved the national army and replaced it with brigades led by his sons and cohorts. Without the core institutions and political structures of a civil society, there was no base on which to build a new democracy.

In the absence of a neutral stabilising force, Libyans were left at the mercy of the revolutionaries, who soon split into militias and turned on each other, holding the country hostage. “Terrorist groups and armed militias exploited the turmoil and used ungoverned areas as a basis for radicalisation and organised crime, contributing to the country’s fragmentation and posing threats to its neighbours,” wrote defence analyst Amir Asmar in *Foreign Affairs*.

Elections took place soon after the revolution – but without a constitution, legal framework or adequate preparation, they only increased the unrest. “When elections did happen in July 2012 they took place amid acts of armed coercion by federalists, tribal fighting in towns in the west and south and rising extremist violence in the east,” Libya expert Frederick Wehrey wrote in *The Washington Post*.

According to Wehrey, the newly elected government, the General National Congress (GNC) was unable to tackle the growing lawlessness and insecurity. Instead, it became dependent on militias, entrenching and solidifying factionalism. As militias strengthened their bases the legitimacy and authority of the central government weakened and by 2014 Libya was immersed in civil war. The revolution had failed to deliver the democracy that revolutionaries had dreamed of.

Former US president Barack Obama told Fox News in April 2016 that the worst mistake of his presidency was the failure to prepare for the aftermath of Qaddafi’s overthrow. He partly blamed then British prime minister David Cameron for “the mess”, saying he had not done enough to support the North African nation. By the time it became clear Libya had become a lawless state, it was too late to intervene effectively.

**T**oday Libya is devastated by civil war. The country is split between east and west and divided between two rival governments, both fuelled by a coalition of militias backed by foreign powers that have stepped into the security and political vacuum. All exploit the country’s dysfunctional war economy and compete for power, territorial control and the spoils of the state.

On one side of the conflict is the internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. GNA is linked to the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood and controls Tripoli and parts of the northwest. It was formed in 2015 by the UN to unify two rival administrations that came out of the 2014 elections.

On the opposing side is the House of Representatives (HOR), which initially agreed to become part of the GNA but refused to do so when Islamist militias that overran Tripoli reinstated the former GNC, the government the HOR was to replace.

HOR speaker Aguila Saleh, who heads the rival government from the eastern city of Tobruk, does not recognise the GNA and nor does an HOR ally, renegade warlord Khalifa Haftar – a former general who helped Qaddafi seize power in 1969, but after breaking with him in an alleged coup went into exile. When he came back after Qaddafi’s ouster he built a coalition of powerful militias from among Libya’s various eastern and central tribes called the Libyan National Army (LNA).

In May 2014 in an effort to liberate the country from Islamists who had established bases in Libya, Haftar’s LNA launched an offensive and evicted militias linked to al-Qaeda from the cities of Benghazi and Derna, with extensive military support from foreign backers, who see him as the best candidate to stabilise Libya and contain the Islamist threat. Haftar gradually extended his grip to the country’s east and south.

Bolstered by these successes, in April 2019 he launched an attack on Tripoli determined to unseat Sarraj’s GNA and make himself Libya’s sole military ruler. But rival militias allied to Sarraj from across western Libya came together to repel Haftar who suffered setbacks. Haftar’s LNA militias shelled Tripoli airport and blocked oil terminals, using cluster munitions and landmines. Hundreds of civilians were killed and wounded, creating a humanitarian crisis.

Then 2000 mercenaries belonging to the Russia-based Wagner group, which has links with the Kremlin, suddenly arrived to fight alongside Haftar’s LNA. Haftar appeared to be poised to win the battle for Tripoli when Turkey sent air defences and 2000 Syrian mercenaries to support Sarraj’s militias, causing Haftar a series of defeats.

“Instead of a quick, decisive victory establishing Haftar as Libya’s undisputed leader, the offensive resulted in a stalemate,” writes political analyst Jalel Harchaoui in the *Clingendael Spectator*. Haftar spent the next 14 months trying to seize Tripoli, but ultimately failed.

Since last year Russia and Turkey have increased their opposing engagement in Libya. Analysts say both seek a presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and secure oil and construction deals. Not only Russia and Turkey are



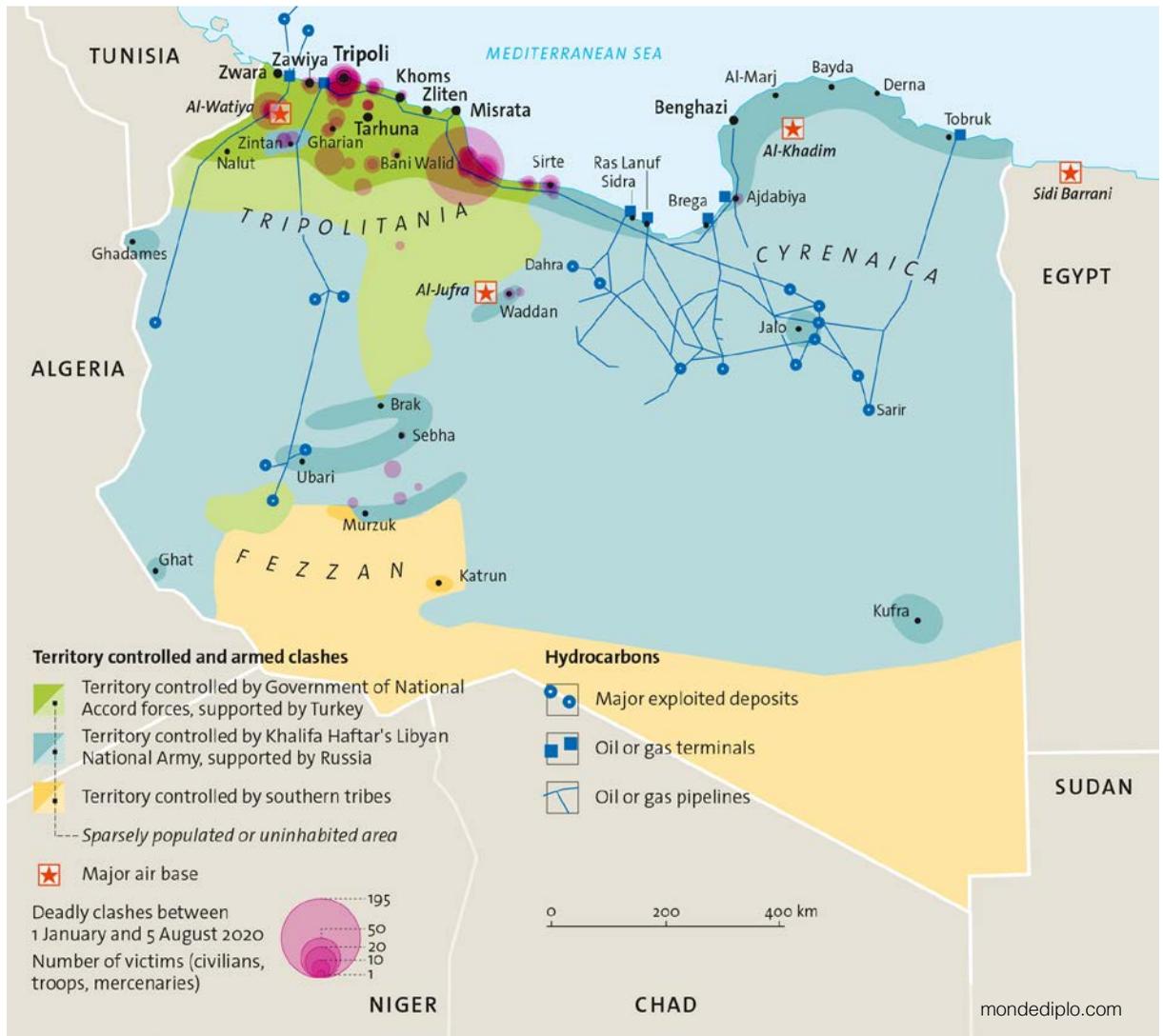
Commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA) Khalifa Haftar (C, front) leaves the Greek ministry building after a meeting with Greek Foreign Minister Dendias in Athens

meddling in Libya: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Jordan and even France are providing financial, diplomatic and military aid to Haftar, turning the conflict into a dangerous proxy war. On the other side, Turkey, Qatar and Italy are supporting al Serraj's GNA militias.

“All foreign powers are getting their hands dirty,” writes researcher and political analyst Emadeddin Badi of the Middle East Institute in Foreign Affairs. “All are pursuing their own geostrategic and economic interests in Libya. All have assisted the two sides in violation of the UN arms embargo.”

Egypt, which shares a border with Libya, conducted military operations in Libya in 2015. Last August President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi threatened military action if GNA militias took the city of Sirte, the gateway to Libya's Oil Crescent. While al-Sisi supports Haftar, he recently joined forces with some of Libya's powerful tribes and has the support of the HOR. Apart from security concerns and economic interests, media reports say al-Sisi fears the

*“Drones are cheap and, like the deployment of mercenaries, they are a hallmark of foreign military interventions in the Libyan war...” Wolfram Larcher*



increasing influence of Turkey in Libya.

The UAE, on the other hand does not share a border nor has tangible interests in Libya, yet it has been a key driver behind Libya's civil war. The UAE has supplied Haftar with drones, fighter jets and advanced weapons. While it does not admit to have a presence in Libya, in 2017 it set up military bases in the east to gain a foothold in the country and enable Haftar's territorial expansion. Press reports indicate that the UAE has also sent mercenaries from Sudan to fight alongside the LNA.

"One of the primary motivations of the UAE's support for the LNA leader Haftar is its obsession with Islamism," Badi wrote. "Abu Dhabi wants to establish an authoritarian dictatorship in Libya that will stamp out any and all forms of political Islam, putting it at odds with Qatar and Turkey, both of which would prefer to see Islamists hold at least some power in Libya."

It is harder to understand France's involvement in Libya. While their official policy supports the GNA, France discreetly supports Haftar's war effort. President Emmanuel

Macron recognises him as an essential part of any solution to the Libyan crisis. This puts France at odds with Turkey, which it blames for the current situation in Libya. "We are supporting a legitimate government while the French government is supporting an illegitimate warlord, jeopardising NATO security, Mediterranean security, North African security and Libya's political instability," said Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalim. According to Badi, Paris' support of the authoritarian Haftar doesn't sit easily with its liberal democratic values, but it is in line with its efforts to develop military alliances with authoritarian leaders in other parts of Africa to secure the Sahel, the transitional zone between the Sahara and Sudan.

Neither the European Union nor the US has a clearly defined policy on Libya. America's main concern in the region has been counterterrorism: officially it supports the GNA, but President Trump has also supported Haftar. The European Union is divided over Libya, its main concern being migration flows.

There is no doubt that the level of foreign interference

in the Libyan conflict is unprecedented. This is a proxy war fought by multiple nations using armed drones and other advanced weapons. No wonder Libya has become the largest drone war theatre in the world according to Ghassan Salame, former head of the UN mission in Libya. Observers say that since April 2019 there have been more than 1000 drone attacks. Drones not only provide valuable information about enemy positions, but many can also attack such targets immediately and with high precision.

“Drones are cheap and, like the deployment of mercenaries, they are a hallmark of foreign military interventions in the Libyan war ... drones minimise the risks and costs of intervening powers, thereby encouraging them to meddle in conflicts where no vital interests are at stake,” writes Libya expert, Wolfram Lacher a scholar at the German Institute for International Security, in the *Texas National Security Review*. “With minimal investment and little or no official footprint, foreign powers have reduced risks to their regular forces and avoided blame for their actions.”

LNA and GNA have both openly blamed foreign forces for major attacks on Libya. The targeting of civilian infrastructure has caused much horror and suffering, particularly the airstrike on a migrant detention centre in July last year that killed at least 53 civilians. It was the work of UAE aircraft, the GNA insists.

“When a bomb falls from Libya’s skies, the guessing game of who dropped it begins,” Lacher writes. “Any of at least five foreign states might be responsible, in addition to two rival air forces that are associated with two competing governments and militia coalitions. Many strikes go unclaimed; when a particularly deadly bombing triggers an outcry, the culprits can go to great length to blame it on their enemy.”

Indeed, the lack of accountability and impunity for such acts of violence against civilians and infrastructure is of great concern, as is the indifference and acceptance of the West. These assaults, UN officials and human rights activists say, constitute war crimes. It is estimated that 19,000 lives have been lost since 2014, with another 300,000 driven out of their homes and 1.3 million in need of humanitarian assistance.

“In Benghazi and Tripoli, I saw first-hand how civilians are suffering because of the catastrophic consequences of this conflict,” said Peter Maurer, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, recently. “Neighbourhoods on the former front lines in Tripoli are badly scarred and families have little if anything to return to. People are also at risk of being killed or injured by dangerous unexploded munitions. Infrastructure is falling apart. People have little electricity, drinking water, sanitation or medical care in the middle of a growing

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— *Emmadeddin Badi*



A Libyan rebel scans the frontline as a facility burns on the frontline

pandemic.” The conflict has largely destroyed Libya’s health system. Hospitals and clinics have been damaged and other facilities are falling apart.

The Human Rights Watch 2020 report on Libya covers the many abuses perpetrated by militias, including war crimes. Militias have carried out executions, abducted and tortured civilians, detained thousands of people indefinitely without judicial process, while torture and ill-treatment are widespread in prisons. Militias have abducted and attacked politicians, journalists and human rights activists. Eight mass graves are reported to have been discovered by GNA forces after they retook Tarhouna, an area previously under Haftar’s control.

The conflict has also affected the economy, which is in ruins. In Libya everybody depends on oil revenues and prior to the revolution more than 95 percent of state revenues came from oil and gas. When the UN Security Council declared only the Libyan government (GNA) could lawfully export oil, it didn’t specify who could control Libya’s fields and refineries. Haftar seized control of Libya’s oil fields, but was not able to sell it because of the UN sanctions, so both sides decided to cooperate and signed an exports revenue-sharing agreement.

Last January Haftar shut down the country’s oil infrastructure to demand a larger share of oil revenues, he blockaded oil ports and terminals to cut GNA’s revenue flow, triggering a collapse in outputs from 1.2 million barrels per day to 90,000, costing Libya more than \$US9.8 billion in lost revenue, according to the National Oil Corporation. This led to the Central Bank calling for austerity measures and the devaluation of Libya’s reserves. Apart from exacerbating electricity and fuel shortages, the blockade is having a devastating impact on civilian living standards as the Central Bank cannot pay salaries or subsidies.

At the same time a shadow economy has emerged, costing Libya billions in lost revenue. Chatham House, a London based think tank that focuses on Libya, estimates that 30 per cent of oil is diverted from the supply chain and smuggled into Tunisia and Malta, meaning a yearly tax loss of \$1.8 billion. “The smugglers use the chaos of the ongoing conflict to hijack fuel transport which they then resell at higher prices or export abroad. Both conflict parties partly profit from refined smuggling,” writes Marius Zeevaert in *E International Relations*.

**L**ast June Sarraj’s GNA finally regained control of Tripoli and recaptured most of north-western Libya. Haftar retreated, but there was no conclusive GNA victory. Press reports say the GNA is building momentum to advance on Sirte and central Libya. While there is an uneasy standoff around Sirte,

lately the front lines have remained relatively quiet.

So far, all attempts at reaching a comprehensive peace agreement have failed. In January German Chancellor Angela Merkel led an attempt at mediating a ceasefire. Leaders from Turkey, Russia, UAE, Algeria, Egypt, France, Qatar, Algeria, Britain, US, Italy and China attended the Berlin Conference. Unfortunately, none of the militias who are the real power players in the conflict were invited, nor were the heads of Libya’s economic institutions.

All the nations, including those called out for meddling in Libya, agreed to refrain from interference in the armed conflict or the internal affairs of Libya. Merkel called for leaders to respect the UN arms embargo and to agree to a ceasefire, but she failed to bring Haftar and Sarraj to the negotiating table.

“Peace initiatives suffer from an inherent problem: few of the major players are serious about reaching a settlement,” Badi writes. “Neither Haftar nor the UAE were ever genuinely interested in an inclusive Libya in which Haftar would share power with the GNA.”

In the months after the Berlin conference all countries meddling in Libya violated the commitments made in Berlin. Both GNA and LNA continued to receive weapons.

In January Russia and Turkey called for a ceasefire, and around that time European officials also tried to forge a ceasefire, but observers say it was more an attempt by Mr Putin and Mr Erdogan to set the terms of any future peace talks by excluding their European rivals. “What we are seeing is competition over who defines the international framework for any negotiations to end the conflict” said Wolfram Lacher. “Putin and Erdogan are mounting a challenge to the European claim to leadership on Libya.”

A ceasefire cannot be enforced without an effective arms embargo and the disarming and demobilisation of militias. The UN Security Council placed an embargo on Libya in February 2011. Analysts say that from the start there were challenges because of the lack of a global enforcer willing to sanction the violators. Reports by a panel of UN experts continually reveal the extent to which weapons continue to reach Libya in total disregard of international law. The worst violators are those countries meddling in Libya, but militias and smugglers also import and sell arms illegally.

As a result, Libya is now awash in weapons. Much has come from Qaddafi’s 1000 depots. A prolific arms buyer, Qaddafi spent billions and left behind unsecured warehouses that were looted during the civil war, but many weapons have been shipped to the militias, many of whom are also engaged in arms smuggling.

So far efforts to control the weapons traffic have gone nowhere. “Arms supplied to one faction often end up in the hands of its enemies, making embargo and targeted



Children look out as they sit in a car boot in Benghazi, Libya. AAP

*New elections may not resolve Libya's problems, as they have mainly caused violence and divisions in the past.*

weapons transfers nearly impossible,” political analyst John Feffer writes in the *New Observer*. He notes international and national institutions are too weak to force combatants to lay down their weapons and too weak to provide peacekeepers to enforce a ceasefire”.

“The problem is young Libyans in militias have no incentive to hand over their weapons which are their only source of security and the only bargaining power vis-à-vis the new political order,” writes Abdul Rahman Alageli, an associate fellow of Chatham House’s Middle East and North Africa Programme. “If they disarm, they would effectively surrender power to another force they distrust without guarantees of reform.”

About 200,000 militiamen claim authority over different territories and all are paid by the state – but some are also involved in the criminal underworld in human trafficking and fuel, weapons and drugs smuggling.

Dismantling the war economy might prove one of the most difficult challenges because those profiting from it



Libyan rebels soldiers embrace as they grieve at Martyr Square formerly known as Green Square, for the Eid Al-Fitr prayer

have a vested interest in perpetuating the current state of lawlessness and corruption. “All say they want peace, but are reluctant because many are benefiting from the status quo,” Ghassan Salame says. “We lack the political will, nationally and internationally.”

Analysts say that only profound international and national support for economic reforms can break this vicious cycle. “Peacemaking efforts, international conferences or even direct elections are doomed to failure if they do not address the root causes of Libya’s malaise: bad economic incentives and flawed institutions,” writes scholar Jason Pack of the Middle East Institute. “The way forward requires a deep understanding of the structures of the Libya economy and their origins. Without transparency, no high-level diplomacy or bottom-up national dialogue can fix Libya. The root causes of this ongoing civil war are not political or military. They are economic.”

Observers say comprehensive economic reforms are needed, including diversifying the economy through the expansion of the private sector, increasing investment, developing service and tourism industries, expanding education and training to give young Libyans skills and, most importantly, developing a modern and transparent financial system by combating the rampant corruption which affects almost all elements of the state.

None of it will happen while the chaos and uncertainty persist. But with the Libyan economy at its worst and a pandemic expanding rapidly, the situation has become critical.

Libyans are tired of the chaos, violence, insecurity and angry over power cuts, lack of services and deteriorating living conditions. In September residents of Benghazi and Tripoli took to the streets, calling for an end to corruption and the opening of the oil plants closed by Haftar. They set fire to a government building. Militias fired on the protesters, killing one and wounding many.

*In* September GNA leader Sarraj announced his intention to step down. Both he and HOR spokesperson Aguila Saleh called for a ceasefire in an effort to enter the political process. While the announcement brought a glimmer of hope, the only problem is that neither Sarraj nor Saleh have the power, legitimacy or the authority to enforce it.

Currently several peace talks are taking place. Apart from the UN-led talks, there are the talks between Turkey and Russia, plus talks in Morocco between the rival Libyan parliaments aimed at replacing the GNA and developing a roadmap for elections.

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Absent from these talks is General Haftar. While he still has considerable military and financial power and controls large areas, he has lost support from international backers. Press reports say his political career may be over. However, LNA militias are still stationed in Sirte and at oil terminals, and he has enough weapons, militias and mercenaries to thwart peace plans as he has done before. Haftar has agreed to lift the oil blockade and reopen key oil fields and terminals, but only for one month. According to media reports, France is still pushing for him to have a political role and there is no sign of UAE withdrawing its support.

“Haftar is not happy,” said Mohamed Eljarh, a political commentator and researcher at the Centre for the Middle East. “This is why I think there is the possibility of him trying to do what he does best – sabotage these attempts at political talks through military action.”

It remains unclear how the proposed ceasefire would be enforced or how long it would be in effect. “This is but one step in what will be an arduous process especially since local parties distrust not only one another but also the international parties involved,” Emadeddin Badi said.

New elections may not resolve Libya’s problems. They have only caused violence and division in the past. A new government would face extraordinary economic, political and security challenges in exerting its authority over the entire nation.

To get Libya to the path of peace and stability a new kind of peace partnership is needed that involves engagement and support from the international community and the United Nations Support Mission in Libya. A renewed compromise with all parties to restore the rule of law, build institutions; promote economic reforms and economic development and allow the re-emergence of civil society.

Most importantly, such a compromise must put a stop to external meddling in Libyan politics. It would also require galvanising Libya’s factions into cooperation to enter a political process through an inclusive dialogue so that eventually all parties can find a place in Libya’s future. R