

The war in Libya at crossroad

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Libya has been engulfed in chaos since 2011 when longtime leader Muammar Gaddafi was killed in the "Arab Spring" uprising. Libya has been split since 2014 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 LNA forces control eastern Libya, where a rival administration to the GNA rules in Benghazi and much of the country's south. However, Libya's main institutions, including the oil company and central bank, are based in Tripoli.²

The LNA launched an offensive dubbed "Operation dignity" in April 2019, in an attempt to extend Haftar's control from the main eastern cities of Tobruk and Benghazi into the western coastal areas, and especially the capital Tripoli.

Libya's internationally recognized government (GNA) has launched in April 2020 a counter attack dubbed operation Burkan Al-Ghadab (Volcano of Rage), despite repeated international calls for a humanitarian truce in Libya to focus on the fight against the coronavirus.³

The GNA captured in May 2020, nine towns along the western coast (Sabratha, Surman, al-Ajaylat, Regdalin, al-Jumayl, Zelten, al-Essa and Bader and Tiji near the Tunisian border) and the al-Watiya airbase south

of Tripoli.⁴ The GNA said that it would continue to advance on towns and cities held by Haftar.⁵

The LNA announced on May 20, 2020, it was withdrawing 2-3km to ease conditions for Tripoli residents at the end of Ramadan, but the move followed the loss of Watiya airbase.⁶

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.

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.⁷ On May 21, 2020, the GNA has accused Russia of transferring eight jet fighters to Haftar. Both the GNA and LNA say that six MiG-29 fighters and two Su-24 jets arrived at the Haftar-held Al-Jufra airbase in central Libya.⁸

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".⁹

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

The battles along the western coast

The GNA said on May 4, 2020, its troops had seized control of three strategic coastal cities - Sabratha, Surman, al-Ajaylat - located between Tripoli and the Tunisian border. Sabratha and Surman lie 60km and 70km

west of Tripoli, respectively, nearly halfway to the Tunisian border. The clashes killed nine soldiers from the GNA and more than 30 fighters loyal to Haftar, including a number of Sudanese and Chadian fighters.

On May 4, 2020, the GNA's air defenses intercepted planes belonging to Haftar in the Abu Grain area and shot down two Chinese-made Wing Loong UAVs and one Russian made Mi-35 helicopter.¹²

Haftar's forces fired rockets on Tripoli after suffering a string of defeats. The rockets and missiles caused fear and panic among the civilian population and the GNA accused the LNA of taking revenge against Tripoli's civilian population following their losses.¹³

Libya's internationally recognized government is focused on trying to push the LNA forces out of artillery range of Tripoli after making advances in the main western battle fronts.¹⁴

On May 18, 2020, forces allied with Libya's internationally-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) said they have recaptured the towns of Bader and Tiji near the Tunisian border from the LNA forces.¹⁵

On May 21, 2020, GNA forces captured another Haftar stronghold, the town of al-Asabaa, about 50 kilometers south of Tripoli. Al-Asabaa is located on a key road that links Haftar's forces besieging Tripoli to Tarhouna, their main western stronghold and supply line southeast of the capital.¹⁶

The capture of al-Watiya airbase

Al – Watiya, south of the capital Tripoli, is the largest and most important military base in western Libya. It spans 10 square kilometers and boasts massive military infrastructure that can accommodate 7,000 troops. The base had been under Haftar's control since 2014. On May 18, 2020, forces allied to the GNA retook the strategic al-Watiya airbase after weeks of attempts.

For the first time in the conflict, Turkish warship, aligned with the GNA, took part in the battle. The vessel has been anchored off the coast of Zuwara since the militias had started amassing their forces to attack al - Watiya.¹⁷

GNA forces captured in al - Watiya a Pantsir-S1 air defense system, believed to have been supplied by the UAE, a key supporter of the LNA.

The defense system was captured after a Turkish drone reportedly struck an LNA missile vehicle as it drove the missile system into an aircraft shelter. The shelter was also then hit by a missile.¹⁸

The loss of the al-Watiya airbase for Haftar's forces has changed the balance of power also in other front lines and the GNA forces can use al-Watiya for future operations.¹⁹

The challenge of Tarhouna

Tarhouna, 65 km southeast of the capital Tripoli, surrounded by hills, has been the LNA's main strategic center in west Libya.

On May 21, 2020, GNA military spokesman, Mohamed Gnuu, said the GNA forces continued to target several LNA positions in western Libya, including the city of Tarhouna, Haftar's last stronghold near the capital.²⁰

GNA Interior Minister, Fathi Bashagha, said capturing Tarhouna would end Haftar's campaign to seize Tripoli, but that the fighting in the capital was the first priority.²¹

The UN peace initiative

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.

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.²²

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.²³

The Russian Foreign Ministry said on May 21, 2020, that Sergei Lavrov had a call with his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavudoglu, and that they underlined the need for an immediate ceasefire in Libya and the

resumption of a political process based on decisions made at a conference in Berlin earlier this year.²⁴

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.²⁵

The humanitarian and corona virus crisis

The United Nations said hundreds of people have been killed and more than 200,000 displaced since Haftar launched his campaign to capture Tripoli in April 2019. The United Nations Libya mission said in May 2020 that at least 3,100 people had been displaced from their homes in Tarhouna and the nearby GNA-held town of Qarabouli, as the fighting escalated.²⁶

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.²⁷

The capture of the al-Watiya airbase 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 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.

But even with Turkish backing to the GNA and Russian, UAE and Egyptian support to the LNA, neither side seems capable of decisive victory, and with little prospect of a peaceful reconciliation, a de facto partition is the main possibility.

Notes:

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

² Libya's GNA focused on Tripoli battle, interior minister says, Reuters, April 22, 2020.

³ Libya: GNA recaptures towns near Tunisia border from Haftar, Al Jazeera, May 19, 2020.

⁴ Haftar forces suffer string of defeats in battle for Tripoli, Al Jazeera, April 14, 2020.

⁵ Libyans parade captured missile system as government accuses Russia of supplying jets to Haftar, the new Arab, May 22, 2020.

⁶ Libya: Haftar's LNA says pulling back from Tripoli front lines, Al Jazeera, May 21, 2020.

⁷ Pompeo urges Libya's Turkish-backed GNA to accept ceasefire, end fighting, Al Arabiya, May 23, 2020.

⁸ Libyans parade captured missile system as government accuses Russia of supplying jets to Haftar, the new Arab, May 22, 2020.

⁹ Libya's GNA Seizes Another Town, Asharq Al Awsat, May 21, 2020.

¹⁰ Libyans parade captured missile system as government accuses Russia of supplying jets to Haftar, the new Arab, May 22, 2020.

¹¹ 'Grave consequences': Turkey warns Libya's Haftar against attacks, Al Jazeera, May 21, 2020.

¹² Haftar forces suffer string of defeats in battle for Tripoli, Al Jazeera, April 14, 2020.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Libya's GNA focused on Tripoli battle, interior minister says, Reuters, April 22, 2020.

¹⁵ Libya: GNA recaptures towns near Tunisia border from Haftar, Al Jazeera, May 19, 2020.

¹⁶ Libya's GNA Seizes Another Town, Asharq Al Awsat, May 21, 2020.

¹⁷ Libya's GNA Captures Strategic Watiya Base, Asharq Al Awsat, May 19, 2020.

¹⁸ Libya captures Russian-made missile system 'given to Haftar forces by UAE', the new Arab, May 19, 2020.

¹⁹ Libya: GNA recaptures towns near Tunisia border from Haftar, Al Jazeera, May 19, 2020.

²⁰ 'Grave consequences': Turkey warns Libya's Haftar against attacks, Al Jazeera, May 21, 2020.

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

²² Haftar forces suffer string of defeats in battle for Tripoli, Al Jazeera, April 14, 2020.

²³ Libya: Haftar's LNA says pulling back from Tripoli front lines, Al Jazeera, May 21, 2020.

²⁴ Libya's GNA Seizes Another Town, Asharq Al Awsat, May 21, 2020.

²⁵ Pompeo urges Libya's Turkish-backed GNA to accept ceasefire, end fighting, Al Arabiya, May 23, 2020.

²⁶ Libya's GNA focused on Tripoli battle, interior minister says, Reuters, April 22, 2020.

²⁷ Libya: Haftar's LNA says pulling back from Tripoli front lines, Al Jazeera, May 21, 2020.