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The Libyan Conundrum

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Abstract:
The article describes the developments in Libya since the revolts of 2011 and the killing of Mu'ammar Qaddafi, the long-lasting dictator of this North African country. The discussion focuses on the struggle of the various components of society and analyzes the current difficulties in maintaining the course toward the realization of a democratic country. The fact that two elections were held and yet failed to bring stability deserves more attention. In Libya rather than resolve the situation they crystallized it and functioned as an incentive to the interference of the various militias further entrenching them. The support given by international and regional actors to the various factions is also highlighted as it is one of the causes of the current crisis. The article is relevant to understand the reasons of the late attack by Haftar's troops against the city of Tripoli and the potentially fatal repercussions of such an action. The fact is that most, if not all, the grievances accumulated in forty years of dictatorship have not been resolved and they are now being compounded by those emerging from the struggles of the post-2011 situation.

Keywords: Libya, Haftar, security, elections, international intervention

Introduction

Libya is plunging into a crisis that, if not tackled successfully within the next few months, will rapidly reach a point of no return. The UN-led mediation is proceeding with difficulty. Actors on the ground who benefit from the lack of governance are stalling, if not completely derailing, UN-led and domestically-supported efforts. The lack of

coordination among security forces is allowing the Islamic State (IS) to reemerge in central Libya and conduct attacks in populated areas and against politically significant sites such as the headquarters of the elections committee and of the National Oil Corporation, as well as the Foreign Ministry building. Reportedly nominally aligned forces fight over lucrative infrastructure in the northwest. Human traffickers detain African migrants by the thousands in unspeakable conditions. The continuous energy cuts, rapid increase of prices, economic drought, and lack of security are the vulnerable conditions under which Libyans live every day. The attack against the city of Tripoli launched by General Khalifa Haftar's army has been countered by the militias of Tripoli and their allies from Zintan and Misrata. This action by the strongman of the eastern province, even though it seems already stalled if not entirely blocked, is causing a very deep crisis. The consequences, if not tackled rapidly by the Libyan leadership and the international community, will become intractable and potentially fatal for the political development of the country.

It is a far cry from the enthusiasm with which Libyans undertook the immediate post-Qaddafi period. Libya is today divided nationally into two fronts on opposite sides of the country. The House of Representatives (HoR) was elected in 2014 and has been moved to the eastern city of Tobruk under the protection of General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). In the western part of the country, the bloc around the Presidency Council (PC) led by Fayez al-Sarraj emerged from the internationally supported UN-led negotiations. Neither of the two blocs is homogeneous and cohesive; to the contrary, within each one there are rivalries and divisions that cause increasing political turmoil. There are no signs of the situation resolving in such a way that a consensus government is reached. The difficulty is compounded by an international community only apparently united behind the UN mediation. In reality, many - if not most - of the international actors support one faction or another, thwarting any real possibility of conciliation. The situation for the population in general will continue to deteriorate and the insecurity throughout the country and its effects on country - and region[1] - will remain pervasive.[2] Before discussing the causes of this crisis, it is necessary to delineate the pre-2011 roots as well as the mistakes in the post-Qaddafi period that have led to such a dire situation.

How did Libya get to this point

At the end of 2010, Mu'ammar Qaddafi's regime was apparently stable and quiet (Pargeter 2012). The three pillars upon which the regime based its resilience showed no signs of cracking (Martinez 2007).[3] The economy was doing well with 3.7% growth (Cammett *et al.* 2015: 4). The regime could count on vast oil revenues to appease the population and buy consensus. The tribal world was quiet and content with the patronage system with which they had collaborated for more than forty years. The coercive apparatus was solidly in place and did not detect any particular threat arising either internally or externally. Mu'ammar Qaddafi had been readmitted in the

international circles and invited in many European capitals. Libya's relations with Italy, the former colonial power and major customer of Libya's oil, were stronger than ever. The stable dynamic in Libya, therefore, did not predict the revolts that occurred in Benghazi and spread rapidly throughout the country.

In hindsight, however, the impetuses behind the revolt are more evident. When Libyans demonstrated in early 2011 they were reacting to the increasingly corrupted elite plundering the resources of the country as well as defending their dignity that had been crushed by the arrogance of the regime (Mezran 2015). Libyans were also reacting to more nuanced economic woes overshadowed by overall modest growth. The state's failure to distribute oil wealth evenly, decades of political and economic marginalization of the eastern Cyrenaica region, and a lack of real opportunities beside working for the public sectors could be counted as some reasons for the revolt. The ripple effect of uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt - whose populations were protesting their respective dictators - also played a role in driving thousands to revolt against Qaddafi in Libya.

a) The National Transitional Council

Libyans took to the streets on 15 February 2011 in multiple towns and cities. The revolt took place in the city of Benghazi first, then spread throughout the eastern region. The protests soon turned into a mass movement to overthrow Qaddafi, who had ruled the country under tight political repression since 1969. On 27 February 2011 multiple municipalities came together to form the National Transitional Council (NTC), which would go on to be the main ruling body in Libya from the time of the uprisings until elections for the General National Congress (GNC) in the summer of 2012 (Cole, McQuinn 2015; Wehrey 2018).

The intent of the NTC was to form an internationally sovereign, recognized, and legitimate body to represent Libya through the uprisings. In practice, however, the NTC did not serve as a unifier because it was not seen as one in the same as the revolt itself. From the beginning there was a lack of trust. Among the problems was the non-transparent process by which membership to the NTC was negotiated (Mezran 2013: 324). People were not directly involved in appointing representatives from their cities; rather, political elite, militia leaders, and elders controlled the process. High-ranking members of the Qaddafi regime helped found and fill up the membership of the NTC (Mezran 2016: 75). Therefore, from the moment it was formed, there was a rift between the general population and the body reportedly representing it. The rebel forces could not rely on the NTC and instead counted on international air support to hold territory in the battles against Qaddafi's forces (Mezran 2016: 75; Chivvis 2014). Locals saw militias playing leadership roles in the revolutionary efforts rather than the NTC. Local municipalities broadcast their opposition to Qaddafi at uncoordinated times and did so in the framework of pre-existing groups based on religion, identity, tribe, and locality, instead of under the NTC as a united revolutionary organ. In hindsight, the NTC was a

decoration for international onlookers and Qaddafi's defectors, and only served as the façade of the revolution (Pack 2013).[4]

The international community welcomed the rebels and sided with them. In particular, France and Qatar were adamant in their support of the revolt and pushed other powers to intervene militarily in defense of the peaceful population who was risking being massacred by forces still loyal to Qaddafi. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who entertained a cordial friendship with Qaddafi, may have been ready to go to Tripoli to convince Qaddafi to accept a mediation and negotiate with the insurgents. French President Nicolas Sarkozy blocked Berlusconi's move. A barrage of fabricated stories claiming Qaddafi ordered his forces to massacre rebels gave Sarkozy the opportunity to defer Qaddafi to the International Criminal Court (ICC). With this move, Berlusconi was forbidden to carry out his diplomatic mission with Qaddafi in Tripoli, therefore limiting the possible outcomes of the revolution in Libya. The original military objective of the NATO intervention to protect the threatened population of Benghazi was then remodeled into a *de facto* regime change mission: Qaddafi, his family, and his main collaborators became the target of many bombardments by the NATO airplanes (Chivvis 2014).

b) Victory of the Revolution

Militants from Misrata killed Qaddafi on 20 October 2011 in his hometown of Sirte, northern Libya, where he had fled. The revolution was declared a victory three days later and the NTC established control of Tripoli (Mezran 2013: 316), concluding the revolutionary phase.

The NTC, now the supreme authority in the country, took the task of leading the post-revolutionary period. The first order of action was to disarm the militias who conducted the war against Qaddafi and to build national security forces. The NTC failed in this undertaking and violence in Libya accelerated. The NTC still needed to achieve a minimum level of security in some fashion to begin the governmental transition process. Desperate, it took the route of appeasing militias. The NTC announced that the government would pay a salary to all those who fought in the revolt, therefore *de facto* coopting the militias into the formal state security sector. The army's payroll rose from fewer than 30,000 to a staggering 200,000 fighters, thus making the army the most expensive body in the national budget. Moreover, the NTC distributed ministerial positions according to the city (and militia) of origin of the candidates rather than on merit. Therefore, it awarded the Ministry of Defense to Misrata and the Ministry of Interior to Zintan.[5] In other words, the two largest cities with the largest militias in the west that also operated in highly populated areas were awarded the most consequential ministries.[6]

These responsibilities came with subsidies, transfer payments, and political leverage at the center.[7] The Libya Shield Force became Libya's army; the Preventative Security

Apparatus became Libya's counterintelligence force; and the Supreme Security Committee, under the Ministry of Interior, became Libya's police force. The neatly contrived structure for an organized security apparatus in Libya failed in practice.[8] Rather than forming a cohesive security system, militias ultimately had more incentive to perpetuate chaos rather than amend it in order to continue to play a relevant role in the new political structure. Individual militias were empowered both politically and economically to pursue their own interests and a united army never gelled (Mezran 2013: 81-82; Wehrey 2018).

c) The 2012 elections and the General National Congress

The NTC drafted and implemented a Temporary Constitutional Declaration (TCD) on 3 August 2011. The TCD mandated elections to be held within 240 days of the liberation from Qaddafi. The TCD was amended multiple times to appeal to a small but vocal eastern faction, which envisioned a federalist government and claimed that any other framework would punish the historically marginalized eastern Cyrenaica region.[9] Originally, a newly elected parliament, the General National Congress (GNC), was designed and presented as a constituent assembly. The GNC was to take over the governing responsibilities from the NTC, elect a President and a Prime Minister, and appoint and supervise a committee in charge of drafting the new constitution. Instead, the amendments - which passed two days before GNC elections - shifted the mechanism to one in which the people elect directly a constitutional assembly of sixty members, twenty members from each main region in Libya.[10] This turned the GNC's tasks from those of a 'constituent assembly' into those of a full-fledged parliament without an appropriate legal framework within which to conduct its daily operations (Volpi, Geha 2016).[11]

The change to the makeup of the GNC remains consequential to this day. Among the repercussions is the fact that every politician rushed to ensure protection for themselves or for their group, transforming the GNC into only the political expression of the various armed groups present in the country and rendering it void of the original purpose. Despite these issues, the 2012 elections were hailed by everyone - including the international community - as a success after they drew out 2.7 million Libyan voters (Mezran 2016: 74). The National Front Alliance (NFA) party with Mahmoud Jibril as the head won, gaining 39 seats, followed by the Islamist Justice and Development Party (JCP), which walked away in second place with 17 seats (Mezran 2016: 74).

Optimism soon faded when it became clear the GNC was equally as ineffective as the NTC in disarming militias, absorbing revolutionary forces, and beginning the process of rebuilding Libya. The inability of the GNC to maintain security in Libya was exposed through dozens of kidnappings and assassinations of high officials, including that of US Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens.[12]

d) Zidan, the Islamists, Political Isolation Law

Mustafa Abushagur became Libya's first elected Prime Minister but failed twice to construct an impartial coalition government that the GNC considered fair to all Libyans. Abushagur's own inexperience, along with the eagerness of certain blocs in the GNC's for power, caused the congress to dismiss him in October 2012 and endorse Ali Zidan along with his cabinet. For different reasons than Abushagur, Zidan was also ineffective in his role. Zidan exhibited weak leadership during his time as Prime Minister until March 2014.

The GNC progressively displayed rifts between its various components and this was due in large part to the implications of Zidan's paralyzed leadership. In particular, the abundant and diverse anti-Qaddafi bloc within the GNC split into pro-Islamist/hard-liner and anti-Islamist/moderate factions. The Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafists, Misrata, the Islamists, and Eastern Federalists comprised the 'hard-liner' revolutionaries who wanted to ban all former Qaddafi-regime officials from participating in the new government. Politicians and bureaucrats of the NTC as well as certain tribal brigades only saw the need to exclude existent Qaddafi loyalists from the new Libya, placing those groups in the 'moderate' group.[13] Moderates, therefore, had two enemies on the ground: hard-liners and loyalists. The disagreement over the participation of former regime officials culminated in a May 2013 Political Isolation Law (PIL), which banned all former officials of the dictatorship from politics, conducive to the hard-liners' preferences.[14]

Libya started to see the political polarization playing out on the ground. Each governmental faction manipulated and persuaded militias to propel their respective agendas. The inevitable leftover animosity from former regime ills and the need to gain legitimacy as an infant government motivated the militias but also served as unnecessary distractions. This was the end of another phase in the post-revolutionary era that impeded the formation of a united Libyan security sector and deepened the divide that remains today.

One of the most relevant crises that emerged as a consequence of government incapacity and the entrenchment of militias is the takeover of the main oil terminals in the Gulf of Sidra by the forces that were supposed to defend them: the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG). In the summer of 2013, the then-leader of the PFG, Ibrahim Jadhran, decided to confront the government by *de facto* shutting down the Marsa al-Hariga and Zueitina oil fields in eastern Libya. Jadhran's demands were greater revenue sharing with the eastern region, government transparency, and federalism in exchange for reopening oil production. The Zidan government failed to resolve this crisis, causing the GNC to vote Zidan out of office and replace him with the existent Defense Minister Abdullah al-Thinni. Oil facilities partially reopened in July 2014 after al-Thinni offered amnesty for Jadhran and paychecks for his men.[15]

e) General Khalifa Haftar & Operation Dignity

General Khalifa Haftar was part of Mu'ammar Qaddafi's coup to overthrow King Idris in 1969. Later he was appointed commander of the Libyan Army in the undeclared war against Chad. Haftar was defeated and captured by the Chadian forces in 1987. For his own regional strategic interests, Qaddafi betrayed Haftar by disowning him and denying Libyan troops had been in Chad.[16] Haftar left for the United States where he stayed until the beginning of the 2011 revolution. He returned to Libya hoping to lead the rebel army in the east to topple Qaddafi. The NTC rejected Haftar in favor of Qaddafi's former Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Younis, who was among the first to defect to the rebels.

From the time of Qaddafi's overthrow until mid-2014, Haftar stayed presumably in Libya but out of the public eye. His resurfacing on the Libyan stage was surprising and brought with it an escalation of tension and violence in the country's post-revolutionary turmoil. Haftar launched Operation Dignity in May 2014 to eradicate terrorism in Libya - with a focus on and beginning with fighting Islamist activity in Benghazi - whom he held responsible for various assassinations and attacks across the country. On 18 May 2014 an LNA-aligned militia stormed the GNC building in Libya's capital Tripoli, marking an escalation in the level of violence in Libya's civil conflict.[17] Haftar gained wide support with this operation, emerging as a much-desired hero.[18]

f) Operation Libya-Dawn

Haftar's initiative against Islamists did not weaken but rather strengthened their recruiting and operations, however. Operation Libya Dawn was a direct retaliatory response to Haftar's anti-Islamist Operation Dignity. A Government of National Salvation was formed with Prime Minister Khalifa Ghwell at the top and supported by GNC Speaker Nouri Abusahmain. Islamist and non-Islamist militias from western and eastern cities comprised Libya Dawn's forces.[19] Libya Dawn launched attacks in Benghazi as well as in western Libya (Mezran 2016: 75). They took over Tripoli in August 2014, pushing out the House of Representatives (HoR) and destroying the city's main airport in the process. However, the attack cemented the HoR vs. GNC split we see until today.

g) The 2014 Elections

Violence peaked in 2014 marking an inflection in Libya's civil war. All Western embassies evacuated Tripoli and transported diplomatic operations to neighboring Tunisia. Until the time of this writing, most embassies have not returned. Against the backdrop of growing violence, Libya held hasty and directionless parliamentary elections on 25 June 2014 to fill a new House of Representatives (HoR) to replace the GNC. Among the many issues involving the holding of elections in that moment was not only the fact that they were carried out *per se*, but also the manner with which they were conducted. There was no effective campaigning, no presentation of political platforms or programs,

and individuals were simply listed on the ballot rather than paired with their political parties.[20]

Yet, Libyans marched on, some believing that holding elections would somehow become historic and heal all wounds. Instead, the turnout was low and the results were ruinous. The elections crystallized divisions that would have better been addressed with national reconciliation meetings. The divisions from the election results produced animosity underscored by the assassinations of many Libyan political activists, among whom was the prominent lawyer and human rights defender Salwa Bugaighis, killed one day after elections.[21]

The HoR was unable to settle in the originally-desired locations of Tripoli or Benghazi due to security concerns and instead moved to Tobruk, in the far east near the Egyptian border.[22] From the first inaugural meeting on 4 August 2014, the HoR was fractured. Thirty members of the HoR boycotted the meeting. GNC members claimed there was no proper transfer of power from the GNC to the HoR and therefore the HoR was an illegitimate body.[23] Certain HoR and GNC members submitted claims to the Libyan Supreme Court to declare the HoR's first session as well as all subsequent sessions void. The Supreme Court made a ruling in November 2014 that the HoR was an invalid body, but the HoR rejected the ruling.[24] The international community also saw the HoR as a legitimate body. The Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) for Libya, Bernadino Leon, declared the HoR an internationally recognized, legitimate body while briefing the United Nations in September 2014.[25] It remains today that some members of the HoR do not see its existence to be valid, while certain Libyan actors as well as international actors consider the HoR as the sole legislative body in the country.

International intervention and the UN mediation

In Libya, the interference of international powers and regional actors contributed to dividing the country and made it more difficult to undertake a true process of national reconciliation.[26]

a) The United Nations and the Libyan Political Agreement

The United Nations (UN) has been consistently involved in Libya since the beginning of the revolt in 2011. The NATO military intervention approved by the UN decisively contributed to the fall of the Qaddafi regime. The UN sustained the creation of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) as the primary international body to seek reconciliation between the various factions. Due to the elevated polarization and violence in Libya in 2014, the UN led a mediation effort conducted by SRSG Leon, a Spanish diplomate and politician.

The historic Libya Political Agreement (LPA) was reached by various factions and signed in the Moroccan city of Skhirat on 17 December 2015 (hence its second name: the Skhirat Agreement). The HoR endorsed the agreement with some exceptions relating

to certain articles, in particular Article 8, which states that the command of the armed forces is subject to civilian authority. This has been contested by Haftar who pressured his allies within the HoR to vote against it. Also within the LPA, the Presidential Council (PC) proposed a cabinet to comprise a Government of National Accord (GNA) that would act as the executive branch of government. Due to internal politics and various political rifts, the HoR never ratified the new body created out of the agreement. This created a *de facto* split between the eastern part of the country, run by the HoR and controlled by Haftar, and the western part, nominally under the control of the PC led by Fayez al-Sarraj (Wehrey 2018).

The PC made many attempts in 2017 to negotiate with Haftar on the condition that he accept a role within the UN-backed government and limit his ambitions of hegemonic rule over Libya. Despite meetings in Abu Dhabi, Paris as well as Rome and Cairo, the two parties have reached no real agreement. The most recent attempt was a summit organized under Italian auspices in the Sicilian city of Palermo in November 2018. Despite declarations of success by the Italians after the summit, the dynamics between the Libyan delegations during the meetings did not elicit optimism of a real rapprochement. At the time of this writing, the situation remains that of a divided country where, despite the proclamation by every actor that a military solution is not viable, it seems most are actively preparing for a military confrontation. [27]

Nevertheless, the vast majority of the population seems to prefer the opposite path. It is only out of necessity that the majority of Libyans turned to the city- and even neighborhood-based militias for daily security. The evidence for this positive note has emerged from a series of meetings conducted under UN auspices by the Geneva-based NGO, The Center for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), in Libya throughout 2018. Initially, this process was supposed to replace a National Conference but then the final report published by the organization constituted the basis for the organization of a National Conference to be held in Libya at the end of January 2019, afterwards indefinitely postponed because of the ongoing escalation of the conflict. The results of the series of meetings evinces adhesion of most of the participants to the values of Libya's unity and national sovereignty, rational and effective democratic governance, and transparency and inclusivity in the political process.[28] The difficulty will be for the UN to capitalize on this popular sentiment in order to convince the various militia leaders to sit down at the negotiating table and endorse the UN mediation towards a peaceful resolution of the various grievances and demands.

b) International and regional actors

International and regional powers have played a part in Libya's divisions (Mezran, Varvelli 2017). It took four years to arrive to the UN's Libyan Political Agreement. However, two years after all parties signed the agreement, Libya remains divided. International and regional actors saw an opportunity to secure their own interests

and thus repeatedly supported one Libyan contender or another. As a result, the UN initiative was hindered and the conditions on the ground in Libya came to mirror the divisions at the international and regional level. These actors may be grouped according to their common interests.

The first group constitutes Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Russia. These countries have supported the HoR in the eastern city of Tobruk and General Haftar's troops in particular. They have provided Haftar's self-declared Libyan National Army (LNA) with weapons and air power to help him defeat his enemies in Benghazi and throughout the eastern part of Libya. Egypt's interests are clear. Cairo has an interest in exercising some form of influence in Cyrenaica, not only because it is the most oil rich region in Libya, but also in order to create a buffer zone against ISIS and other Jihadist group that could threaten security and stability in Egypt. The UAE supports Haftar because they see him as the only prospect for defeating Islamist groups and preventing the ascent to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya.

As for Russia, the Kremlin has a dual interest in Libya.[29] From an economic point of view, they want to recuperate the privileged position they had with Qaddafi where contracts for more than 10 billion dollars were signed in arms sales as well as construction projects. From a strategic point of view, Russia is eyeing the possibility to extend widely its influence in the Mediterranean region and occupy a position of influence on the southern border of NATO. Egypt, the UAE and Russia maintain an ambiguous position. On the one hand, they publicly proclaimed their support for the UN-led negotiations and for the al-Sarraj's GNA; on the other hand, they quietly supported Haftar. The three countries' actions created an imbalance in favor of Haftar, which undermined successful negotiations, while setting themselves up to benefit no matter the outcome of the crisis in Libya.

The second group consists of countries like Turkey, Qatar and, to a certain extent, Sudan that have supported the rump Tripoli government, the Government of National Salvation of Khalifa Ghwell. Since the early phases of the revolt, these actors decided to throw their weight behind the "revolutionary forces" in Libya, many of them possessing Islamist-leaning political agendas. This transformed the pro-Islamist militias into one of the stronger military forces on the ground. With newfound strength, pro-Islamist militias became entrenched in their interests. In the incessant jockeying for power that characterizes post-2011 Libya, narrowly pursuing their interests led to polarization on the ground. Therefore, by supporting pro-Islamist groups, the Turkey-Qatar camp contributed to the today crisis by fueling polarization.

A third group includes Libya's western neighbors, Algeria and Tunisia, who have not negatively impacted the Libyan conflict. Both countries for different reasons were reluctant to intervene in the Libyan crisis. Tunisian and Algerian action has yet to surpass extending diplomatic operations to all sides of the Libyan crisis in an attempt to help the UN mediation. To this end, they have opened the doors of their capitals for

bilateral meetings with important Libyan actors as well as fostered a reconciliation process. Insofar as the Libyan conflict does not escalate, their positions are likely to remain constant.[30]

Finally, a fourth group consists of Western countries, in particular the United States, France, and Italy. The United States has limited its role in Libya to efforts of counterterrorism. US air force was pivotal in defeating ISIS in 2016 and weakening other jihadi groups.[31] Predicting the US's future engagement in Libya is trickier, however. Libya rests close to America's greatest allies: Europe. Therefore, the US has an incentive to ensure an outcome in Libya that would maintain a certain level of stability that does not threaten Europe. Washington's warm welcoming of PC-head al-Sarraj in December 2017 and signs of increased State Department activity throughout 2018 involving Libya may suggest American diplomatic efforts in the divided country are increasing.

France's position on Libya is more ambiguous, apparently supporting the international mediation but in reality placing its bets behind Haftar's position. This became clear following the killing of three French military advisors in July 2016 during a pro-Haftar military operation. French President Emmanuel Macron hosted Fayez al-Sarraj and General Haftar in Paris in July 2017 and again in May 2018 to broker an agreement between the two leaders. These summits that fell outside of the official UN process were clear signals to other actors that France intended to play a leading role in the Libyan theater.

Italy has been highly active on the Libyan scene by hosting summits, remaining heavily engaged diplomatically, and trying to bypass the conflict between Tripoli and Tobruk by directly addressing municipal representatives, members of civil society, local actors, and tribal authorities. Rome justified its active intervention with the extended political, economic, commercial, and energy interests. Rome has built a closer relationship with the forces more representative of western Libya, where most of Italy's interests lay. A rift emerged by France's diplomatic activism and the Italian government's efforts to play a leading role in Libya. In order to regain the upper hand, the new Italian government, led by Giuseppe Conte, reached out to General Haftar in order to coopt him into their mediation efforts. The Palermo meeting was organized with the precise intent to hijack from Paris the initiative on Libya. It is unclear whether this attempt has succeeded. In fact, Haftar did not officially participate in the summit but went under the pretense of holding simple bilateral meetings with allied countries. Despite the appearance of failure of the Italian initiative, in truth this has helped in narrowing the divisions between Italy and France who appeared more in sync immediately after the holding of the summit in Italy.

In the more recent period, the UK absorbed by the issue of Brexit, has played a less consequential role, limiting its actions to diplomatic support of UN-backed al-Sarraj while still advocating that Haftar should be given a greater role. International actors

have directly changed the course of the conflict in many ways, starting with the NATO intervention at the beginning of the revolution and until today as the UN continues heavy efforts to unite the east and west. The Libyan crisis is not playing out in a vacuum where tribes, factions, and cities dispute; instead, it must be inserted into the wider regional and international framework.

Causes of the Libyan Crisis

The reasons for the failure of Libya's new political class to build new state institutions and to ensure a smooth transition to an open and pluralistic system are many. Some of the causes are rooted in Libya's peculiar history of never being ruled as a unitary country with a clear sense of national identity (Vandewalle 2012; Baldinetti 2010; Ahmida 2011). Regionalism has been a defining feature of Libya's development as a nation. Since the early Ottoman conquest, Libya was ruled as two different governorates or *wilayat*: Cyrenaica centered in the east and Tripolitania in the west. The Ottoman governors faced strong resistance from tribal confederations in the interior of Tripolitania and were thus prevented from exerting any kind of influence in the southern part, later called Fezzan. The Sufi sect of the Sanusiyya also exhibited resistance against the Ottoman leaders in the east (Evans-Pritchard 1954). It was only for a period of six short years that Libya was governed as a unitary entity under Italian colonization from 1934 to 1940, when the British forces pushed the axis troops out of North Africa (Del Boca 1993, 1994; Cresti 2011).

Despite a surge in political activism in the period leading to Libya's Declaration of Independence in 1951, the three regions expressed different interests and aspirations (Khadduri 1963). In Cyrenaica, the British, in order to guarantee itself unlimited influence over the country, supported their ally and leader of the Sanusiyya, Idris, to become the King of Libya. The nationalists in Tripolitania wanted the establishment of a Republic, thus propelling the country into the modern world in which popular participation played a dominant role. In the end, the superpowers' interests and rivalries produced a curious outcome: a federal monarchy under the leadership of Idris al-Sanusi. Thus, the modern Libyan nation was not borne out of a crucial struggle for unification, independence, or self-determination but rather came out of a combination of regional interests and international pressures (Baldinetti 2012).

King Idris was a reluctant monarch who was not interested in forming a Libyan sense of identity because he preferred to foster that of religion and Sufism (Ben Halim 1998). He relied on an inner circle of loyalists and relatives to rule the country (Wright 2012). The King did little to expand his support base beyond the loyal region of Cyrenaica and governed mostly through its relationship with the various tribes in the east. The ruling system became cumbersome and unreliable. The desire for a more effective system and the discovery of oil in 1959 prompted the modification of the constitution and the

abolition of federalism. A unitary monarchy took the place of the original federalist system. Nevertheless, under both the federal and the unitary systems, "the monarchy's patronage system favored the development [...] of sub-national affiliations at the expense of a Libyan identity" (Mezran, Cizza 2016: 78; see also Mercuri 2017: 28-30).
The revolutionary regime that toppled the monarchy in 1969 further compounded these divisions. Colonel Mu'ammar al-Qaddafi, who emerged as the leader of the revolutionary officers, emphasized pan-Arabism as one of the leading values of the revolution (El Khawas 1986; Davis 1987; Cricco, Cresti 2011). Beside the establishment of a sophisticated patronage system based on family-clan-tribe structure, Qaddafi successfully employed a model of divide and rule, which guaranteed his power over the country for over forty years. Later in his tenure in power, Qaddafi switched from Pan-Arabism to Pan-Africanism, emphasizing the African component of the Libyan identity, albeit with very little, if any, success among the Libyan population (El Kikhia 1997; Vandewalle 1998; Djaziri 1996).
Although Libya's historical social structures, weak national institutions, and Qaddafi-era policies may lie at the root of the current crisis (Toaldo 2015), the country's post-revolutionary elites committed some crucial mistakes that exacerbated pre-existing factors and weaknesses. Two 'original sins' of the NTC carried particular weight. The first was the failure of the NTC to recognize that the 'revolution' was not an apparent struggle of a population against a dictator and his mercenaries. In fact, Qaddafi enjoyed some consensus within the population, thus meaning the insurrection was more a civil war than a revolution (Mezran, Cizza 2016).[32] The political class rushed to elections in 2012 with this shortsightedness rather than indulging in a very important national reconciliation process. By this omission, the new authorities alienated almost a quarter of the population that either fled to neighboring countries or turned into anti-state militants.
The second original sin came when the new elites minimized the importance of NATO's intervention in ensuring the success of the revolt. Eager to reinforce the public perception that Libya had freed itself of the Qaddafi's regime on its own, the authorities too readily dismissed Western assistance in managing the transition and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR).[33] After a few months from the successful overthrow of the regime, political infighting among the militias over power positions escalated to a point of no return; any attempt to manage security was futile (Chivvis 2014; Wehrey 2018: 37-65).
Thus, failure on the part of Libya's new authorities to initiate a national reconciliation process and to solicit foreign support for DDR efforts are two important sources for the contemporary crisis. There have been also many mistakes made by the successive post-revolt governments, principal among them has been the policy of appeasement of the militias. This policy created an environment hostile to national-institutions, which led instead to political polarization and a fractured security sector.

Conclusion

In light of Haftar's recent attack against Tripoli, it is easy to point out that the international mediation led by current SRSG Ghassan Salamé is again facing possibly fatal obstacles. It seems increasingly difficult, despite the many official declarations to the contrary, that the mediation will succeed in obtaining the cooperation of the HoR and the High State Council (HSC) to revise the LPA and move to a National Conference where they are supposed to pledge the respect for the rule of law, the principle of peaceful resolution of controversies, and the progressive abandonment of all weapons. According to the UNSMIL plan of action, only after these first steps are concluded could the country go to presidential and parliamentary elections. The failure in realizing the first steps of the plan has led Salamé and many Libyan personalities to call for immediate elections, to which the international community - save for France - has responded tepidly. Many have raised issues from the lack of a constitution that could bind in a clear legal framework of the newly elected authorities, to the dismal security situation in many parts of the country that could hinder participation, and many other valid objections. Nevertheless, it is also clear that in order to recuperate the collaboration of the population in the building of new institutions and maintenance of the process of democratization of the country, there is no alternative to elections.

The debate on whether elections should be held immediately or postponed to a later period has dominated the discussions both within Libya and among the major international actors. The French vision introduced in Paris in May 2018 of holding elections as early as December 2018 sanctioned the approach that sees elections as being the main path to obtain stability. This position was contrasted by the Italian one that sees the need to establish a minimum of stability and security in order to carry out meaningful elections, whose results would see the consensus of a large part of the population. In his report to the UN Security Council on 8 November 2018 Ghassan Salamé, while still maintaining the high importance of holding elections, accepted the Italian concerns and determined that elections would be held in the late Spring of 2019 after the holding of a National Conference and possibly the realization of a national referendum on the new constitution. Apparently this determination of the UN representative has contributed to reconcile the positions of the main EU actors.

Libyans today face the same dilemma as in 2012: simultaneously rebuilding institutions essential to the economy and society while uniting militias under state institutions (Mezran 2013: 325).[34] The difficulty of reaching these results has been compounded by the fact that, until and through today, all actors that play a spoiling role have been able to pursue their interests with no consequences and to the detriment of the entire country and its future, especially thanks to the support of foreign actors. It is important that this state of affairs changes. Foreign countries must cease playing a divisive role by supporting competing factions and instead coalesce behind the international mediation conducted by the United Nations representative. The withdrawal of this opportunistic

involvement of foreign powers will force the various Libyan factions to change attitudes and policy and seriously work on reaching a constructive agreement to bring stability and peace to the country.[35]

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NOTES:

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3 - For a slightly different opinion see: Chorin (2012).

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