



NATO Foundation
Defense College

Maghreb February 2017

Sarraj requests NATO support

On 16 th February NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that he received a formal request of support by the Prime Minister of the Government of National Accord (GNA) Fayeze al-Sarraj. Sarraj asked for help to reform Libya's security and defence institutions, including the development of a Libyan defence ministry with a chief of staff and intelligence-gathering capabilities.

Stoltenberg added that the Atlantic organisation would have soon discussed how to respond to Sarraj's requests, showing confidence about a positive outcome of the enquiry. NATO already showed its willingness to help Libya overcome the current security crisis. Sarraj and Stoltenberg already met on 1 February at NATO's headquarters in Brussels.

On that occasion the Prime Minister of the GNA said that NATO or EU vessels could be allowed to operate in Libyan territorial waters alongside the national navy to fight against illegal immigration in the Mediterranean Sea. In exchange, Sarraj asked NATO to help modernize the country's fleet. Furthermore, at the last NATO summit (held in Warsaw on 8-9 July 2016) the organisation agreed to provide help to Libya, but only after receiving a formal request by Libyan institutions.

On that occasion NATO revealed its commitment to the Libyan dossier, broadening the objectives of the previous Operation Active Endeavour in the Straits of Gibraltar. The new mission (dubbed Operation Sea Guardian) has a particular focus on Libya, given the presence of the Islamic State terrorist organisation in Sirte.

Despite the end of the battle for Sirte in December 2016 and the defeat of the Daesh in the city, the political crisis in the country seems worsening, thus affecting the security context. Since its arrival in the country in March 2016, the GNA was unable to establish solid institutions and still lacks legitimacy and the monopoly of the use of force.

The GNA's project to establish a Presidential Guard to protect its offices and buildings, as well as the embassies in the capital, did not materialize. After the appointment of Col. Najmi Ramadan Khair al-Nakua as head of this new body in August 2016, the recruitment started in December 2016. The delay confirmed the slowness of the GNA, which appears vulnerable on the ground even in Tripoli.

Indeed, the situation is particularly worrisome in the capital, where in October 2016 government rival to the GNA made its unexpected comeback. On 14 th October militias affiliated with the Government of National Salvation (GNS) seized the Rixos hotel and the Hospitality Palaces, ejecting the High Council of State (an advisory body established by the Libyan Political Agreement) from the buildings and allowing the return of the Prime Minister of the GNS Khalifa al-Ghwell.

The presence of two rival governments in Tripoli has increased tensions. The turf wars between armed groups have intensified, leading to frequent clashes and civilian casualties. Outbreaks of violence are frequent, confirming that the capital is hostage to different militias and armed groups that threaten even the GNA. As an example, on 20 th February a convoy transporting Sarraj, Nakua and the head of the High Council of State Abdul Rahman al-Swehli came under heavy fire in the Abu Salim district of Tripoli.

Two guards were injured, while sources close to the High Council of State blamed armed groups affiliated to the GNS for the attempted attack. Given the current situation, it is highly unlikely that the establishment of the Presidential Guard will be a decisive factor to turn the tide in the GNA's favour.

Even the UN envoy to Libya Martin Kobler shared this opinion: in his report to the UN Security Council, Kobler welcomed the establishment of the new body, but also said that it represents only a transitional measure that has to be integrated into an effective Libyan army. In this context, Sarraj's letter to Stoltenberg does not suggest a request for NATO to help in composing and training the Presidential Guard, possibly arming it, as suggested by the final statement of the Vienna ministerial meeting on Libya of May 2016.

On the contrary, it seems a diplomatic move to counter the increasing convergence between General Khalifa Haftar of the Libyan National Army (LNA) and Russia, whose exchanges have intensified in the recent months.

Umberto Profazio - *Holds a PhD in History of International Relations from the University of Rome Sapienza. He is Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Geopolitics and Security in Realism Studies (CGSRS) in London and a Security Analyst for a consultancy firm based in the United Kingdom*