



MAGHREB March 2018

A window of opportunity closing fast for Libya

On 18th March Libyan delegations met in Cairo as part of the Egyptian effort to mediate between rival factions in the neighbouring country. The meeting, in which both the acting Chief of Staff of the Government of National Accord (GNA) Maj.-Gen. Abdulrahman al-Tawil and his counterpart from the Libyan National Army (LNA) Maj.-Gen. Abdul Razzaq al-Nazhuri took part, discussed the reunification of the Libyan military that dissolved after the 2011 revolution that toppled Muammar Gadhafi and caused the end of the Jamahiriya.

The fact that the meeting was held in Cairo is indicative of Egypt's pivotal role in the Libyan crisis. Egypt has been particularly supportive of the LNA, which, despite its name, is one of the main armed groups active in the neighbouring country. Led by General Khalifa Haftar, the LNA relies on the support of regional actors in the terms of military supplies and coordinated airstrikes against conflicting parties in Libya. Evidence of this support, which results in the clear violation of the arms embargo established in 2011, have been offered on several occasion by the UN Panel of Experts on Libya, most recently in March 2018 [Mohamed Elbardicy, *Libya embargo violations: UN panel to report findings to UNSC*, al-Jazeera, 1 March 2018].

However, since the meeting in Paris in July 2017 between Haftar and the GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, Egypt adopted a more cautious approach. On that occasion Sarraj and Haftar agreed on a ceasefire and pledged to hold parliamentary and presidential elections in Libya as soon as possible. The Egyptian government changed its policy in Libya accordingly. As suggested by Egyptian press sources [*Libyan army factions to meet in Cairo Sunday*, Egypt Today, 18 March 2018] the first meeting to discuss the reunification of the Libyan military was held in July 2017. Considering the concurrent appointment of the new envoy to Libya Ghassan Salamé, who was particularly receptive of the indications emerged from the Paris meeting, developments since July suggest a strict coordination between Egypt and France on the Libyan crisis, both keen on giving negotiations a chance.

A new meeting to discuss the issue was held once again in Cairo from 29th October to 2nd November. On that occasion it was agreed to merge to Ministry of Defence and the General Command; to establish an army general command council with a Commander in Chief and a Chief of staff; and to set up a National Defence and Security Council that would have acted as a supreme commanding body led by the Head of State [*Military official says united Libyan army a possibility*, al-Arabiya, 4 March 2017].

After a new round of talks from 6th to 9th December, the spokesperson for the LNA Ahmed al-Mismari reported an ‘excellent understanding’. Mismari also announced that a draft agreement would have been signed soon, after a new meeting in February. However, Mismari also indicated the main obstacle that prevented a final agreement to be reached: the appointment of the supreme commander of the Libyan military [George Mikhail, *Can Cairo talks succeed in uniting Libya’s divided armed forces?*, al-Monitor, 15 February 2018].

In the latest round of talks in March, reports said that parties agreed on appointing Haftar as commander in chief of the Libyan army under a new Presidency Council and with the appointment of a new chief of staff from western Libya [Abdulkader Assad, *al-Sirraj, Haftar’s military delegates meet in Cairo amid rejection of various Libyan parties*, Libya Observer, 19 March 2018]. However, the final push put at risk the entire reconciliation process. While talks were ongoing, deep rifts emerged in Tripoli. The spokesperson for the GNA Ministry of Defence Mohammed al-Ghasri said that the Cairo talks were not serious and would not succeed, because they did not have a transparent agenda. Sarraj immediately fired Ghasri, as GNA sources kept saying that army reunification talks in Cairo were progressing well and positively [Sami Zaptia, *PC Ministry of Defence spokesperson sacked after discrediting Cairo army unification talks*, Libya Herald, 20 March 2018]. The sacking of Ghasri, produced serious reverberations. Indeed, the *Operation Solid Structure* (*Bunyan Marsous*, a coalition of militias mainly from Misrata that ousted the Islamic State terrorist group from Sirte in 2016) reportedly threatened to launch an offensive against Tripoli if Hafatr was appointed supreme commander of the Libyan military. As a result, the Cairo meeting ended without an agreement and the parties only pledged to hold further meetings in the future.

The episode confirms the view saying that ‘a political solution remains out of reach in the near future’, expressed by the UN panel of Experts in its latest report. At the same time, it suggests that Sarraj is still sticking to the roadmap agreed in Paris and considered the Cairo talks as an unmissable opportunity to find a common understanding with Haftar. The fact that press sources speculated about Sarraj offering of a power sharing agreement, turned down by Haftar, is indicative both of the compromising stance of the GNA Prime Minister and of its weakening position [Khalif Mahmoud, *Haftar rejects Sarraj offer to share power*, Asharq al-Aswat, 26 March 2018].

As opposition mounts among hardliners in Misrata, fighting intensify in Sabha and elections appear unlikely to be held this year, internal dynamics seems to have offered Haftar the upper hand. Moreover, the regional context, with the end of the electoral period in Egypt and the very likely scenario of a victory of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, could also play in his favour. After having adopted a more conciliatory approach during his presidential campaign, a re-elected Sisi could also rethink Egypt's role in Libya, resuming the traditional support to the LNA and returning to a muscular foreign policy more in line with his fight against terrorism not disliked by regional allies and international powerbrokers.

Umberto Profazio – *Holds a PhD in History of International Relations from the University of Rome Sapienza. He is ACD Analyst for the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London and a Security Analyst for a consultancy firm based in the United Kingdom.*