



## EMERGING CHALLENGES January/1 2019

### **Libya, from a proxy war to an international conflict?**

The Libyan crisis is entering a new dimension. The conflict between the internationally recognised Tripoli Government of National Accord (GNA) led by al-Sarraj and the forces of General Haftar in the east has always been something more than a civil war. Both parties are multifaceted and uneasy amalgamations of militias backed by external sponsors. Sarraj, along with the vocal support of the UN, enjoys the assistance of Turkey and Qatar, providing him with weapons and munition, whilst Haftar has been financed and supplied by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Russia — with France providing him with crucial political support.

The proxy dimension of the conflict has now reached new heights. In mid-November a UN inquiry found that an attack on the Tajoura detention centre on 2 July, that resulted in some 200 dead and wounded among migrants and which had been initially attributed to Haftar, had in fact been carried out by the air force of a UN member state “in direct support” of Haftar. No country is mentioned, but all evidence hints at the UAE, which built an air base in eastern Libya in 2014. The military stalemate (the battle around Tripoli has been ongoing almost uninterruptedly since 4 April) has also stimulated both parties to rely increasingly on new assets. Haftar’s Chinese-made Wing Loong drones (the Chengdu produced Pterodactyl I is a Chinese strike drone, capable of carrying 1.000 kg of ordnance guided and unguided) are facing GNA’s Turkish Bayraktar TB2 (the Kale-Bayrakar produced Standard Bearer reconnaissance drone has a payload of 55 kg, including also smart micro-munitions) drones in an unprecedented drone campaign. In the meantime, Turkey’s special envoy to Libya, Emrullah Isler, declared that Ankara is ready to despatch troops, should the GNA request direct military assistance.

Moreover, hundreds of fighters by Russian PMCs (including Gruppya Vagner and Gruppya RSB) have joined Haftar, introducing new tactics and firepower on the battlefield whilst securing Russian interests over Libyan oil flows, thus blurring the lines between private and state forces. Similarly, 1.000 Sudanese troops have joined Haftar. Moscow’s endeavour might trigger a reaction by the US, which already carries

out its own periodic drone strikes against ISIS-affiliated groups in the Fezzan area, while some reports talk about the presence of US paramilitaries.

Thus, the Libyan proxy war is being turned into a fully-fledged international conflict, in which national forces and assets of foreign powers are increasingly used alongside more traditional proxies, operating in a sovereign country with complete impunity. This emphasises the urgency for a new international conference to contain the escalation; unfortunately, the Berlin conference on Libya has already been postponed, and with international attention shifting on Syria, Libya may remain free ground for international ploys for many months to come.

**Stefano Marcuzzi** – *PhD in Military History at the University of Oxford, he was a Max Weber Fellow at the EUI Florence in 2016-2018 and is now a Marie-Curie Fellow at UCD and a Visiting Fellow at Carnegie Europe. His major fields of expertise are hybrid warfare and EU-NATO relations in the Mediterranean.*