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Libya: civil war or proxy war?



The Operation Dignity offensive, started by the LNA last April 2019. Source: Wikipedia.

Recently, a new major fight has erupted around Tripoli. Eastern Libya leader Khalifa Haftar, who, since 4 April, has been trying to seize Tripoli by sheer force, has launched a second offensive on the capital held by the UN-recognised Government of Fayeze al-Sarraj (GNA). Codenamed Zero Hour, the attack has met with fierce resistance by GNA forces and the Western militias supporting Sarraj. As the battle ends into another stalemate, statistics by the World Health Organization set Libyan civilian and military casualties at 1.093 dead and 5.700 wounded since April, with an estimated 100.000 people displaced. Migrants stuck in Libya also took their toll, as Haftar's air forces bombed (possibly by accident) the Tajoura detention centre on the 2nd of July, killing 44 migrants and wounding over 130. Some international observers now openly refer to the crisis a civil war. But to what extent are the drivers of the Libyan conflict domestic, and to what extent are they external?

Both Sarraj and Haftar reject the notion of civil war. The former holds that he is facing a rebellion by Haftar; while the latter calls it a liberation from the corrupt and inept GNA. Behind their clash lay longer-lasting factors. First, a struggle over power, influenced by the traditional disunity of the Libyan society – fragmented in tribes and along the centre–periphery and East–West divides; aggravated by Ghaddafi’s dismantling of the Libyan government (and the Libyan army), this encouraged a progressive polarisation of the political landscape from 2011, epitomised by militias’ competition. In this context, Haftar presents himself as the strongman, claiming he is leading a national army whereas he is, in fact, relying heavily on militias and foreign fighters. GNA supporters consider him simply a new Ghaddafi.

Yet the struggle between Libyan factions might have ended in mutual exhaustion by now, had it not been fuelled by external actors. Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia have aided Haftar with weapons and at times air power, in open violation of UN resolutions; their regional rivals, Turkey, Qatar and Sudan back the GNA. Greater powers are also involved. Russia and, more recently, the US have been sympathetic to Haftar, whereas the EU is, in theory, behind the GNA, though some of its member states like France have given Haftar considerable political support. Divided, the UN Security Council has no leverage to call for a ceasefire and enforce it. Thus, foreign influence is expanding and prolonging the conflict.

A protracted war of attrition will have a traumatic impact on both Libya and the broader region, probably leading to a militarisation of Libyan oil infrastructures, an increasing competition for and looting of the country’s resources, an expansion of the already rampant illicit transnational businesses, and a revival of migration flows. Finally, the chaos and the power vacuum are giving a new life to Daesh in Fezzan.

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