



MAGHREB April 2019

Tunisia increasingly uneasy with the rise of Haftar in Libya

The offensive launched by General Khalifa Haftar against Tripoli in April 2019 stemmed not only from the ambiguity of international powers but was also eased by the internal difficulties of Libya's western neighbours. The Libyan National Army (LNA) took advantage of a favourable international landscape. The start of the Operation 'Flood of Dignity' took place on 4 April, just two days after the massive demonstrations and the pressure by the military forced the Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to resign. Demonstrations against a fifth mandate for the ailing President have intensified since late February, when the LNA was already making inroads in southern and western Libya, taking control of strategic sites such as the Sharara and El Feel oilfields. The timing of the military operation coincided with the presidential campaign in Algiers, where the political crisis diverted the government's attention from the Libyan conundrum [Youssef Charif, How far can Haftar get with his Tripoli offensive, 8 April 2019, al-Jazeera].

Also Tunisia, which shares 500 km of porous borders with Libya, is expected to hold presidential and parliamentary elections at the end of this year. Haftar's offensive raised obvious concerns in Tunis, worried about the potential regional destabilisation. Considered supportive of the Government of National Accord (GNA) and close to revolutionary militias in Tripolitania, the Tunisian government has stepped up efforts to find a political solution to the resurging crisis. On the 20th of April the Tunisian Foreign Minister Khemaies Jihnaoui had a phone call with Haftar, in which he called for an immediate ceasefire in Libya. Three days later Jihnaoui also met in Tunis with the UN Secretary General Special Representative in Libya Ghassan Salamé, whose revised Action Plan presented in November 2018 miserably crumbled just a few days ahead of the National Conference, expected to be held in Ghadames on the 14-16th April [Patrick Wintour, UN postpones Libya national conference amid fighting in Tripoli, 9 April 2019, The Guardian]. The Tunisian government also tried to reach out to other countries supportive of the GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj: the visit of the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on 1 May to Tunis, where he met with his Tunisian counterpart Youssef Chahed and President

Beji Caid Essebsi, confirmed the convergence between Rome and Tunis, both pushing for a return to the political track.

The intense diplomatic activity was due to the deep repercussion of the renewed fighting in Tripoli. The arrest of two groups of 'Europeans' along the country's western borders in early April suggested a more rigid approach vis-à-vis traditional allies in a delicate electoral year. The arrest of the first group, intercepted offshore on 10 April, can be traced back to the evacuation of the EU Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) personnel in Libya [*Tunisia: imbroglio autour de diplomates européens arrêtés à la frontière libyenne*, 18 April 2019, Radio France Internationale]. On the other hand, the details emerging from the second group, stopped at the Ras Jadir border crossing, raised an enormous amount of speculations. The 13 Frenchmen apparently refused to handover all their arms to the Tunisian border guards, an incident that resulted in them being held at the border crossing for several hours. According to the French embassy in Tunis, the group was a security detail for the French diplomatic staff coming from Libya. The French Foreign Ministry denied any diplomatic incident, saying that the agents were inspected and allowed to continue their journey back to France.

Irritated by the incident and presumably opposed to France's policy in Libya, in the following days the Tunisian Presidency leaked information saying that the agents were members of the French intelligence services [*Tunisie: les française intercepté seraient agents de renseignement, Tunis dement*, 23 April 2019, Radio France Internationale]. The leak, denied by the *Palais de Carthage*, was consistent with previous press reports about the presence of 15 French intelligence officers in Gharyan, south of Tripoli to support LNA officials planning the advance on Tripoli. These unconfirmed reports drew the ire of the GNA, whose Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha decided to suspend the cooperation with Paris, considered supportive of Haftar. The imbroglio highlighted the peculiar position of Tunisia, a regional crossroad where diplomatic and intelligence activities are ramping up at incredible pace. The arrest on 26 March at the Tunis airport of Moncef Kartas, member of the UN Panel of Experts to monitor the arms embargo in Libya, was another case in point. Accused of being associated with a foreign intelligence agency, Kartas was monitoring the flow of arms to Libya. According to Mondafrique, he was heading to Tunis to take part in the African Union (AU) summit to share new evidence of the violations of the arms embargo committed by Qatar, Tunisia and Turkey (all considered supportive of the GNA) in the past years [Nicolas Beu, *Un diplomate de l'ONU, Moncef Kartas, emprisonnée en Tunisie*, 29 March 2019, Mondafrique].

Despite the lack of details about the arrest, the episode showed once again Tunisia's uneasiness with the irresistible ascendancy of Haftar in Libya. The presence of the coalition government in Tunis, which includes Ennahda, the Islamist party that has strong links with the GNA and revolutionary groups in Libya, represents a relevant factor in the Libya policy of Tunisia. Nevertheless, the military developments in the troubled neighbouring country are producing new dynamic, to which the Tunisian government is struggling to adapt, A protracted conflict in Tripoli is likely to produce deep repercussion in economic,

social and humanitarian terms in Tunisia. It will also have a destabilising effect on its fragile political context, a few months ahead of elections that will determine the country's future and its role in the Maghreb.

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