



Editor: Irit Back. Assistant Editor: Adi Kraut-Adler

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### **Libyan crisis reshuffles traditional alliances**

**Rina Bassist**

The April 4 offensive launched by Gen. Khalifa Haftar and the National Libyan Army (LNA) to take control of Tripoli is now, as of May 2019, in its second month; regional actors are becoming fearful of a bloody stalemate. While the ongoing civil war in Libya has pitted mostly local forces against each other, countries such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia have allied against Italy and Great Britain, in an intensified diplomatic battle primarily being waged at the UN Security Council. In fact, the ongoing Libyan crisis has shattered traditional alliances. The usual global camps have been turned upside down, replaced instead by new, improbable partnerships.

This article will deal with these new emerging alliances which are replacing, in this particular context, the long-established balance of power in the UN Security Council and the international arena. More particularly, we will look into the motives behind the strategic shift, and why world powers have abandoned their initial objectives for Libya.

Eight years of civil war and three governments operating simultaneously have rendered the crisis in Libya practically unsolvable. Repeated efforts by the international community to advance an election date or a reform of the Libyan constitution have failed. French Foreign Minister Yves Le Drian admitted<sup>1</sup> on May 14 that the road map for political solution advanced at the February 27 Abu Dhabi meeting had failed. And so, the major international players have opted for short-term interests instead of long term-goals. Espousing short-term goals explains the creation of those

improbable alliances within, and also outside of, the UNSC. Each world power focuses now on its own short-term interests.

### **New alliances emerging**

The most unforeseen convergence on Libya is that of Russia and the US. On April 18, Russia and the United States rejected a British-sponsored draft for a cease-fire in Libya. According to reports in the media<sup>2</sup>, Russia refused to adopt a text that specifically criticizes Khalifa Haftar for his campaign to take over Tripoli, while the United States appealed for more time to weigh its options. Both countries were reportedly joined by South Africa, Ivory Coast and Equatorial Guinea, against Germany and Great Britain who called for the draft to be adopted. Overtly, Paris expressed its support of the British draft, but behind closed door French diplomats campaigned discreetly to omit Haftar's name from the text.

The UNSC draft example illustrates the complexity of the Libyan case, where international actors engaged in the crisis are separated between those who openly support one side or the other, and those who either hesitate or maintain an opaque policy. The countries who have clearly staked their position include Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, all of which unequivocally support Haftar. We also find Italy, Great Britain and Germany emphatically supporting Sarraj and the UN project. In the more ambiguous camp, we find Russia, the US and France.

### **Washington, Paris hesitating**

Lately, President Trump has signaled a shift in the American position. Over the past few months, Washington supported the UN-backed government in Tripoli. Shortly after Haftar's offensive against Tripoli, the State Department issued a statement saying that "We have made clear that we oppose the military offensive by Khalifa Haftar's forces and urge the immediate halt to these military operations against the Libyan capital."<sup>3</sup>

But one day later (April 8), the US decided to temporarily withdraw some of its forces from Libya due to "security conditions on the ground." Pundits considered the decision to be a sign of distrust of the military ability of the Tripoli government to hold the capital. Yet, a statement released by the White House on April 19 revealed a real and significant policy change. According to the statement, President Trump spoke on the phone a week earlier with Gen.

Haftar, indicating that Washington might have adapted its earlier position. The President “recognized Field Marshal Haftar's significant role in fighting terrorism and securing Libya's oil resources, and the two discussed a shared vision for Libya's transition to a stable, democratic political system,” read the statement.<sup>4</sup>

Haftar’s offensive on Tripoli was not mentioned in that communiqué, nor did it mention any contacts between the President and Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. In fact, it seems that President Trump never called Sarraj on the phone, the way he did with Haftar. EU officials greeted Trump’s remarks with disbelief, estimating that Egypt’s Sisi had campaigned vis-à-vis the White House in favor of Haftar. From the EU’s point of view, Sisi was pushing the US away from the United Nations position and towards that advocated by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia.

Like Washington, Paris had repeatedly expressed its support of the UN-backed government in Tripoli and of UN secretary General Antonio Guterres’ peace efforts. Still, it also insisted along the way that Khalifa Haftar must be part of any political solution for Libya. In July 2016, former French President Hollande admitted that three French special-forces soldiers had been killed in Libya in a helicopter accident. It was the first official affirmation that France had operational troops in the country. The revelation confirmed an earlier report by Le Monde published in February of that year, which claimed that French troops were engaged in the war in Libya against the Jihadist network and Islamic State affiliated groups.<sup>5</sup> Also, an article published in France on May 8 claimed that France had supported Haftar since 2014, and that French intelligence officers have been sharing intelligence info gathered in Libya with Haftar’s men.<sup>6</sup> President Macron apparently opted to join the Egypt-United Arab Emirates-Saudi Arabia camp (all strategic and commercial partners of Paris), though he preferred not to say so explicitly. No one can tell for the moment who will win this diplomatic struggle.

### **Moscow battling to regain influence**

During the Ghaddafi era, Italy and Russia benefitted from comfortable petrol contracts. The fall of Ghaddafi’s regime, and the concomitant battle over Libyan petrol, opened up the market to other forces. This was an opportunity which the US or even France could not let pass by, and could well provide a partial explanation for the changing alliances. Russia must now fight back to gain control over Libyan petrol, and the person controlling the most petrol fields is Haftar.

Moscow has never publicly admitted that it supports Haftar against Sarraj, yet its ties with Haftar are solid. Haftar, who speaks Russian, was invited to Moscow in 2017, where he met Defense Minister Sergey Shoygo. On March 3, 2019, the British broadsheet “The Daily Telegraph” published that hundreds of mercenaries linked to Russian military intelligence have been backing Haftar.<sup>7</sup> Russia’s rejectionist stance in the Security Council, and its active on-the-ground support of Haftar’s forces, position it, once again, as an active player in the Middle East and Africa. It is the same ‘spoiling’ tactics used by Russia in recent years in the Central African Republic and in Syria.

### **EU rift widens**

The motives behind the ambiguous French position are different. In 2011, France played a central role in the campaign to oust Ghaddafi, but the disastrous consequences of his fall pushed Paris to focus on short-term goals instead of attempting to obtain sweeping strategic gains. Paris believed that it could reconcile supporting Haftar’s battle against Islamists while simultaneously backing the Tripoli government; the offensive on Tripoli forced the international community to take sides. The European Union’s High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, published a statement on April 8, describing the attacks by the LNA troops as a danger to the Libyan people, as well as to the UN-mediated peace process.<sup>8</sup> Mogherini called on the LNA and government forces to agree to a ceasefire. Still, she avoided mentioning Haftar by name. Reports published later argued that it was Paris that pressured Mogherini against naming Haftar as responsible for the escalation. Mogherini emphasized in her statement the need for the EU to project a unanimous message. But it was precisely this wording that exposed the rift between EU members over the Libyan issue.

More specifically, the UNSC draft exposed once again the growing rift between Italy and France. And though Italy is not itself a member of the Security Council, it certainly has lobbied intensively within UN channels for the draft to be adopted. Italy was initially against the 2011 overthrow of Ghaddafi. Now it backs the Sarraj government because it is adamant on protecting its diplomatic and commercial interests in neighboring Libya. On January 22 of this year, Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini said that “In Libya, France has no interest in stabilizing

the situation, probably because it has oil interests that are opposed to that of Italy... We won't be taking any lessons in morality from [French President] Macron.”<sup>9</sup>

In recent days, France and Italy have tried to demonstrate a united front on Libya. Publications about the expected visits of Haftar next week, first in Paris and then in Rome, are part of this European diplomatic campaign. But in spite of these efforts, and in spite of the May 13 joint communiqué by both foreign ministers (Italy's Enzo Milanese and France's Le Drian) supporting the UN-led process in Libya,<sup>10</sup> France is now paying the price for its short-term policy. Not only has it created a serious rift within the European Union, but it has also destabilized France's own standing within the Security Council. Over the years, Paris preached that international actions could be taken only within the framework of the UN and following a UNSC mandate. This was the case in Libya to begin with, in Mali and also in the Central African Republic. The case of Haftar challenges this approach.

On May 8, President Macron received Prime Minister Sarraj at the Élysée, stating that France continues to support national reconciliation efforts. Macron called for an end to the offensive on Tripoli, but did not mention Haftar by name. Diplomatic sources said after the meeting that Macron wishes to meet with Haftar to advance a cease-fire over Tripoli, though a meeting is yet to be set. And so, the UN-backed government in Tripoli can surely count on UN's Guterres to protect its interests, but cannot be certain that it will be able to count on the permanent members of the UN Security Council.

*Rina Bassist is the head of the Africa Desk at the Israel Public Broadcasting Corporation (Kan Radio) Foreign News Department, based in Paris. She also writes for the Jerusalem Post and Al-Monitor. Prior to her journalistic career, Rina Bassist served in Israel's diplomatic corps.*

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<sup>2</sup> "US, Russia thwart progress on UN call for Libya ceasefire", *France 24*, April 18, 2019.

<https://www.france24.com/en/20190418-us-russia-thwart-progress-un-call-libya-ceasefire-diplomats>

<sup>3</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, U.S Secretary of State, "Situation in Libya, Press Statement", *U.S Department of State*, April 7, 2019.

<https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2019/04/290949.htm>

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<sup>4</sup> Ryan Browne, "Trump praises Libyan general as his troops march on US backed government in Tripoli", *CNN*, April 19, 2019. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/19/politics/us-libya-praise-haftar/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> Nathalie Guibert, "La guerre secrète de la France en Libye", *Le Monde*, February 23, 2016.

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<sup>6</sup> Claude Angeli, "Le ‘‘Trouble Jeu’’ de Macron en Libye", *Canard Enchaîné*, May 8, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Alec Luhn and Dominic Nicholls, Russian mercenaries back Libyan rebel leader as Moscow seeks influence in Africa, *The Telegraph*, March 3, 2019. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/03/03/russian-mercenaries-back-libyan-rebel-leader-moscow-seeks-influence/>

<sup>8</sup> "Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council", *European Union external action*, April 8, 2019. [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/60761/remarks-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-press-conference-following\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/60761/remarks-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-press-conference-following_en)

<sup>9</sup> "Italy's Salvini says France has no interest in stabilizing Libya", *Reuters*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/r-italys-salvini-says-france-has-no-interest-in-stabilizing-libya-2019-1?IR=T>

<sup>10</sup> "Déclaration conjointe de Jean-Yves Le Drian et d'Enzo Moavero Milanesi, ministres des affaires étrangères de la France et de l'Italie", *French Foreign Ministry*, May 13, 2019. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/italie/evenements/article/declaration-conjointe-de-jean-yves-le-drian-et-d-enzo-moavero-milanesi>