

Shifting International Support for Libya's Unity Government

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Brief Analysis

If the Trump administration steers away from the internationally backed unity government and toward the Russian/Egyptian-backed strongman, Khalifa Haftar, it risks ending Libya's fragile accord and sparking another civil war.

On the eve of the U.S. presidential transition, and amid renewed U.S. bombing against Islamic State (IS) targets near Sirte on January 18, international support for Libya's increasingly weak UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) is growing more divided. The latest example occurred when Gen. Khalifa Haftar, the polarizing, eastern-based head of the Libyan National Army (LNA), visited a Russian aircraft carrier sailing off the country's coast on January 11. Haftar led one side of the 2014-2015 civil war that ceased with the agreement forming the GNA, and he remains a major obstacle to Libyan unity today. The incoming Trump administration will have an opportunity to breathe new life into the weak unity government. Yet if it sidesteps that chance and instead acquiesces to Russia and Egypt's preference for anointing Haftar as a neo-Qadhafi, it would do so at the expense of the GNA, likely restarting a full-blown civil war.

FRAYING UNITY, AGAIN

The Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), the accord that created the GNA, was signed in Morocco on December 17, 2015. According to its terms, a Presidential Council would govern for a year with the House of Representatives (HOR) carrying over as the GNA's legislature. The UN Security Council has officially recognized the GNA, and Western powers deal exclusively with its prime minister, Fayez al-Sarraj. Even so, the GNA has been perpetually deadlocked, primarily because Sarraj and HOR head Aguila Saleh disagree on the cabinet's composition and the role of Haftar, who recently increased his leverage by seizing control of a key oil region while GNA-aligned forces were fighting IS and suffering heavy casualties in Sirte. As a result, Sarraj has been stuck in Tripoli with very little authority to govern (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/after-the-islamic-state-in-libya>)

all-out-war

Now that the GNA's one-year deadline for ceding authority to a constitutionally elected government has passed, its continued legitimacy is vulnerable. Elements of the General National Congress, the interim legislature whose term expired when the HOR was elected in 2014, already declared a separate National Salvation Government last fall. On January 11, their self-proclaimed prime minister, Khalifa Ghwell, announced that militias aligned with him had seized control of several ministry buildings in Tripoli, creating another crisis for the Presidential Council.

Meanwhile, poor living conditions across the country continue to undermine the GNA, including frequent power outages, fuel and currency shortages, and security problems.

PROLIFERATION OF REGIONAL EFFORTS

Each of the players involved in Libya's domestic affairs has different agendas, often at odds with each other. The UN was the primary designer of the LPA and remains the GNA's main advocate via the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and Special Representative Martin Kobler. Yet Kobler's ongoing mediation efforts to broaden internal support for the GNA have fallen short, and Haftar refuses to meet with him. The HOR leadership has held occasional discussions with Kobler and other Western envoys, but to no discernable outcome.

The main Western players in Libya (the United States, Britain, France, and Italy) have likewise backed the GNA, issuing frequent statements of support and imposing asset freezes and travel bans on "spoilers" who obstruct the LPA implementation process. Yet they differ somewhat on Haftar: Italy and France suggest he should be part of a political solution, while Washington and London maintain that he must be subject to civilian oversight, which he refuses.

The Western powers have also been active on the military front, combatting IS and helping Libyan forces that back the GNA. From August to late December, the United States conducted nearly 500 airstrikes in Sirte as part of Operation Odyssey Lightning, supporting GNA-aligned militias from Misratah, among other forces.

Italy is the most active Western player on the ground given its frontline status. It deployed a field hospital during the Sirte campaign as well as forces to protect medical staff, and Italian press reports indicate that Rome has deployed Special Forces to protect Sarraj and his government. In addition, the senior security aide to UNSMIL is an Italian general who is coordinating programs to build Libya's security forces, though very few training efforts have actually begun. Italy also reopened its embassy in Tripoli earlier this month, the first country to do so since violence forced the evacuation of international representatives in 2014. Finally, Italy is the most active European state working to contain the migration crisis in the Southern Mediterranean.

For its part, Britain deployed Special Forces to support the Sirte operations. In July, French intelligence operatives were killed in a helicopter crash in Benghazi, leading to suspicions that Paris was backing Haftar. The French are also active in Libya's south, consistent with their interest in the Sahel region.

As for neighboring countries, Egypt is the most significant regional player in Libya and has made clear its support for Haftar and his anti-Islamist agenda. Despite the UN arms embargo in place since 2011, Cairo is widely suspected of providing Haftar's forces with material support. The United Arab Emirates joined Egypt's pro-Haftar operations in 2014, though the Emiratis have since reduced their involvement in response to U.S. diplomatic pressure and priorities closer to home. Ideologically, both countries view Haftar as the best alternative to what they see as the GNA's overreliance on Islamist actors. The LNA's recent progress against Islamist militias in Benghazi will only encourage Haftar's backers to lend him additional political and materiel support.

Tunisia is not influential enough to play a meaningful role as an arbiter on Libyan issues despite its well-founded concerns about terrorism originating from next door. Tunis has been playing host to international representatives while Tripoli remains inaccessible, however, and Libyan actors meet there frequently, regarding it as a neutral site.

Algeria has uncharacteristically stepped into the mediation mix as well, hosting Sarraj, Haftar, Saleh, and High State Council president Abdulrahman al-Swehli, a leading politician from Misratah (made up of former GNC members, this council was tasked with an advisory role by the LPA, but its powers are ill defined). Algeria's anti-Islamist views align with Haftar and Egypt's, but it is trying to play a more balanced role due to its concerns about perpetuating instability on its borders and ceding all influence over Libya to Cairo.

RUSSIA POISED TO FILL THE VACUUM?

Moscow has received Haftar several times for high-level meetings, most recently in November, and the general (whom the HOR recently elevated to field marshal) no doubt hopes that Russia will arm and train his forces and help lift the embargo. The Kremlin has made its preference for Haftar, a graduate of Russian military academies, abundantly clear -- last week's carrier tour was only the latest demonstration. Yet if it hopes to steer international support away from the GNA and toward Haftar, it will face several challenges.

First, while Haftar has gained political popularity in the eastern half of the country and parts of the west, he is ardently opposed by the Misratah faction, who would likely go to war again to prevent him from taking over, as they did in 2014-2015. By throwing its weight entirely behind Haftar, Moscow risks upending the deal that brought an end to that fighting.

Second, in order to provide overt military support to the LNA, Russia would have to thwart international consensus, including the UN Security Council embargo and past resolutions backing the GNA. Although Moscow has proven willing to go that route in Syria, it may not wish to take the same risk in Libya, which is less vital to its geopolitical interests. European actors could prevent any formal lifting of the arms embargo, but it is difficult to envision how they would enforce potential arms-transfer violations without U.S. participation.

ENTER A NEW ADMINISTRATION

The main wild card for Libya is whether the Trump administration will continue current U.S. policy, namely, by encouraging the HOR and other groups to join with Sarraj while maintaining an active anti-IS and counterterrorism posture. Doubling down on the GNA may seem like an uphill struggle, but some positive indicators have emerged recently: oil production is up to 700,000 barrels per day after dropping to 200,000 for much of 2016, and the Central Bank agreed to release a \$25 billion budget to the GNA for salaries, public services, and critical infrastructure projects. Most important, as long as the GNA negotiations remain active, pro-Haftar forces are less likely to risk resuming war with forces from Misratah, who earned Western support by taking on IS in Sirte.

Yet if the administration tilts toward Moscow and Cairo's preference for restoring an anti-Islamist strongman in Libya, it could inadvertently plunge the country back into wider-scale inter-militia violence. In that case, Libya's already weak institutions would be further damaged, and the resulting chaos could spur IS to return in force from their suspected redoubts in the politically disconnected and largely ungoverned south. The forces from Misratah who were instrumental in evicting IS from Sirte might even switch sides and align with those same extremists rather than concede to Haftar and the LNA.

Ben Fishman, a former research associate at The Washington Institute, is the editor of the 2015 book North Africa in Transition: The Struggle for Democracies and Institutions. He served on the National Security Council staff from 2009 to 2013, including as director for North Africa and Jordan. ❖



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