

LIBYA'S GLOBAL CIVIL WAR

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SUMMARY

- Foreign actors have long been an underappreciated driver of conflict in Libya, to the detriment of European and UN policymaking in support of a political solution there.
- These actors facilitate their Libyan client groups' belligerence and escalate the conflict through financial, media, and military support.
- Europe must understand the role of other foreign actors in Libya if it is to prevent the conflict from devolving into an intractable proxy war akin to that in Syria or Yemen.
- Such a war would destabilise Libya's neighbours, directly threatening European security interests and global energy markets.
- Major powers such as the United States and Russia are unwilling or unable to play a constructive or unifying role in Libya, putting the onus on Europeans to lead the effort to reach a solution.
- This will require European countries to neutralise or co-opt other foreign actors' partisan support for Libyan groups.
- It will also require them to establish an inclusive international working group on Libya, using a mixture of incentives and disincentives designed to prevent escalation.

Introduction

The Libyan National Army's (LNA) recent advance on Tripoli, under the leadership of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, has pushed Libya into what could become a far-reaching proxy conflict on Europe's southern border. With the advance reaching deep into the city's southern suburbs, the European Union and its member states now have a strong interest in preventing the situation from developing into a nationwide war. Such escalation would lead to further state breakdown and provide sanctuary to terrorist groups and people smugglers. Therefore, it is critical that Europeans understand the international dynamics of the intensifying violence in Libya. Left unchecked, foreign interventions in the country will continue to drive the conflict – not least by blocking any EU and UN diplomacy designed to resolve the crisis through a power-sharing agreement. The result could very well be an intractable regional crisis of Syrian proportions.

The role of foreign states in Libya's civil war has long been murky, yet hugely significant. Interventions designed to serve foreign states' political or regional interests have been a constant feature of the country's post-revolutionary fractiousness and strife. Various Gulf Arab states – particularly Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – have sponsored Libyan political movements and armed groups, aiming to establish regional hegemony amid the ashes of the Arab uprisings.

These efforts were a driving force in the collapse of Libya's first post-revolutionary parliament and the outbreak of its civil war in 2014. The conflict shifted the centre of Libyan politics onto a historical east-west divide, with leaders in western Libya affiliated with a rump parliament and linked to Qatar and Turkey, and those in the east increasingly under the sway of Haftar, who has ties to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The conflict also created space for the Islamic State group (ISIS) to seize territory and for people smugglers to thrive. Moreover, the war led to the formation of military groups that have plagued attempts to stabilise Libya ever since.

The country's embrace of the Arab uprisings dragged it into a regional competition driven by ideology and realpolitik. Its geographic position and economic potential

have made it a coveted prize in this contest, while the threats to Europe that emerged from the civil war have prompted interventions from Western powers that only complicate the situation.

The 2014 Libyan conflict initially led to a rare show of unity among foreign powers, in support of the United Nations' political process and a new Libyan Political Agreement. But the political institutions created under the deal failed to forge a consensus. International support for these bodies became ever more superficial and Western states adapted accordingly, with key European actors focusing more on their narrow interests than the search for a comprehensive solution to the crisis. For instance, Italy directly intervened in Libya to mitigate the migration crisis that began in 2015, supporting militias loosely affiliated with the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. Similarly, France adopted a Libya policy that focused on counter-terrorism and, as a result, became increasingly dependent on Haftar. These dynamics deepened the divide between the GNA and the House of Representatives, a body based in the eastern city of Tobruk that eventually became almost completely beholden to Haftar's military-focused enterprise.

Thus, rather than working through a unified Libyan chain of authority, international actors increasingly sided with one of the rival groups. Those more invested in the west ignored the deeper flaws of the GNA and the deteriorating security environment there so long as their interests were secured; on the other side of the country, many external actors succumbed to the pro-strongman argument that so often results from counter-terrorism relationships, leading them to tacitly accept, or actively engage with, Haftar's campaign despite his obvious lack of commitment to the UN process. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE encouraged and facilitated Haftar's advance on Tripoli. In these circumstances, it was almost inevitable that the civil war would reignite – despite the best efforts of Ghassan Salamé, head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya, and proclaimed international support for his mission.

This paper examines recent developments in the conflict and analyses the positions and interests of the many non-European foreign states that have intervened in Libya. Focusing on attitudes towards Haftar, the paper explores various actors' motives for, and modes of, intervention, as well as the impact of their activities on the country.

Europeans urgently need to devise a strategy to address the role of other foreign actors – particularly those that back Haftar's highly destructive and almost certainly futile advance on Tripoli – before military escalation in Libya triggers an all-out regional proxy war. Foreign actors' substantial investment in Libya makes this task very difficult, particularly given that France has tacitly backed Haftar. But Europeans can still make a positive contribution. They should focus their attention on pressuring other external actors to de-escalate the conflict, by attempting to enforce the UN Security Council's arms embargo on Libya and by using their close relationships with Gulf Arab states to emphasise the risk that military escalation poses to everyone's interests. If there is to be a genuine prospect of a ceasefire and a political process to end the conflict, Europeans will need to work to minimise these actors' partisan and incendiary activities in Libya.

Regional and global powers' impact on the conflict

The pro-Haftar camp

Since the resignation of the Islamist-backed government in Tripoli in 2016 and the gradual removal of its international supporters from the city, the overwhelming majority of outside interference in Libya has come from Haftar's backers (a trend that became even more apparent following the end of the 2017 battle for Benghazi). He has long relied on the support, if not followed the lead, of the UAE and Egypt. Haftar launched his assault on Tripoli shortly after returning from a trip to Riyadh, where he likely secured approval to advance with support from countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The core of this support comprises states that share a broad political vision of rolling back the politics of the Arab uprisings, particularly democratic and pro-Islamist forces, and backing autocrats who can fit into a new regional order. Libya's role as a theatre for regional rivalries, as well as its economic potential, has heightened the importance that these supporters attach

to its fate.

Egypt's changing calculations

Egypt's support for Haftar stems from a mixture of economic opportunism, direct threats to its security interests, and Haftar's and President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's shared ideology of militarism as the only antidote to an existential Islamist threat. In 2014 Egypt identified its roughly 1,100km-long desert border with Libya as a vulnerability that directly contributed to the growing number of terrorist attacks on its territory and the insurgency on the Sinai Peninsula. Haftar has been a natural ally for Cairo due to the location of his forces near the Egyptian border. Additionally, Cairo hopes that a stable Libya will [prop up the ailing Egyptian economy](#), maintain the supply of the subsidised oil it has relied on since the first gulf war, and allow Egyptian labourers in the country – who, prior to the Arab uprisings, accounted for roughly \$33m per year in remittances – to resume work.

These considerations led Egypt to [invest heavily](#) in Haftar, providing him with substantive military and diplomatic assistance after he launched Operation Dignity, in 2014. Having begun as a military campaign to displace Islamists and more extreme jihadist movements from their ascendant position in Benghazi, the operation grew to represent a wider, more political, mission. As such, the relationship between Egypt and Haftar quickly deepened, with Egyptian forces even carrying out airstrikes in Libya on his behalf [later that year](#). However, by 2019, Egypt felt that Haftar had marginalised it in favour of close contact with the likes of France, Russia, and the UAE. This, along with concerns that he was dangerously overextending himself, prompted Egypt to explore other avenues to protect its interests – including by cultivating ties with the GNA's prime minister, Fayez al-Sarraj, and its speaker of parliament, Aguila Saleh, and by aiding a resurgence of the *ancien regime*. Egypt also began to craft a political process of its own through its chairmanship of the African Union, attempting to rival and, it hoped, supplant the UN's national conference process. This proposal was likely designed to create a power-sharing deal between Sarraj and Saleh that could have unified the state and contained Haftar within a civilian legal system – at least until Libya held an election or underwent another political transition.

However, Haftar's assault on Tripoli forced Egyptian leaders to recalculate and, eventually, reaffirm their support for him. In the “with us or against us” dichotomy

Haftar created, Egypt aims to protect its investment, as the defeat of his forces would be ruinous for its interests – and, even in a military stalemate, Cairo could have opportunities to profit and to restore some control over him.

During his visit to the White House on 9 April 2019, Sisi reportedly spoke to President Donald Trump at length about the need to support Haftar and not “[leave him out in the cold](#)”. This led to a phone call between Trump and Haftar on 15 April, and a subsequent shift in the United States’ position that provided Haftar with important US diplomatic cover.

As the war entered a stalemate, Haftar’s forces started conducting airstrikes at night, which the GNA’s interior and defence minister, Fathi Bashaga, blamed on “[two Arab countries](#)”. The shrapnel of blue arrow missiles found in Tripoli suggests that these strikes came from Chinese-made Wing Loong drones – a type [Egypt](#) and the UAE have both used in Libya – that were likely piloted from Jufra airbase, near Sirte. If Haftar’s war effort continues to falter or the rumoured attack on Sirte materialises, Egypt might once again deploy piloted aircraft in Libya, another dangerous escalation in the war. It seems inevitable that, unless it discovers a cheaper way to protect its interests, Cairo will continue escalating the conflict through arms shipments and airstrikes that give its client a military advantage.

The UAE’s push for a new regional order

The UAE views the Arab uprisings’ promise of a push towards representative government – and the prospect that the (often Islamist-leaning) parties that remained in opposition for decades could one day come to power through the ballot box – as an existential threat. Emirati leaders fear that the uprisings’ popular demand for rights and representation could reach their borders if successful elsewhere. Since 2011, Abu Dhabi has positioned itself at the forefront of a regional battle against the Arab uprisings and political Islamist groups – particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, which it sought to push back by supporting Sisi’s takeover of Egypt. The UAE views Libya as a central battleground in this struggle.

Libya’s geographic position makes it important to the UAE’s [economic plan to dominate shipping lanes](#) that flow into the Mediterranean. Libya’s huge energy resources and need for reconstruction – both areas in which the UAE specialises – have created lucrative opportunities that the Emiratis aim to exploit, after they [failed to do so in the past](#). This attractive mixture of political and economic

interests has made Libya a key piece of the regional order Abu Dhabi seeks to create.

Like Egypt, the UAE sees Haftar's political attitudes and military stylings as complementary to its vision. Since 2014, the UAE has been key to strengthening his military capabilities, as well as his political support base (in Libya and abroad) and his international standing. The UAE has allegedly violated the UN Security Council's arms embargo to provide Haftar with a variety of military equipment, including armoured personnel carriers and even [aircraft](#). The Emiratis have [built facilities at al-Khadim airbase](#) – near the north-eastern Libyan city of Marj and Haftar's headquarters at el-Rajma – that are capable of housing advanced jets, such as the F-16 and the Rafale. The airbase has also been used to deploy Wing Loong drones and to fly sorties that were vital to Haftar's military successes in Benghazi and Derna, and to his efforts to maintain control of the oil crescent in Libya's east. The UAE has even tasked a US private military firm (owned by Erik Prince) with operating a [squadron of aircraft](#) in Libya, to help Haftar maintain battlefield superiority and gain control of more territory. This independent source of military support has also helped Haftar resist pressure to politically engage with the UN and western Libyan factions.

Moreover, the UAE has seemingly played a key role in waging the fierce narrative and media war that has racked Libya since 2011, driving conflict and deepening the rift between east and west. Abu Dhabi is widely viewed as being key to the creation of several television stations and news websites behind the pro-Haftar propaganda machine that dominates the Libyan media landscape. This machine has been crucial to strengthening Haftar's public image, generating public support for his military advances, and slandering his opponents – including, at times, Salamé and others involved in the political processes.

From May 2017, the UAE took a direct approach to elevating Haftar to power, hosting meetings between him and Sarraj. This process was essentially intended to legitimise – eventually by seeking UN support – a political agreement that would have installed Haftar as Libya's de facto leader. Yet it failed, due to both Sarraj's refusal to sign off on it and Haftar's unwillingness to accept the fig leaf of civilian authority the new system would have placed him under.

Since Haftar began his advance on Tripoli, there have been regular flights of transport aircraft between the UAE and eastern Libya – likely carrying shipments of arms and supplies – and a series of UAE-linked drone strikes on Tripoli. As the war has progressed, it has appeared increasingly likely that representatives of Haftar’s Emirati and other foreign backers have been on the front line, providing strategic advice and targeting assistance to facilitate precise airstrikes. Abu Dhabi has also propagated a domestic and international narrative that the campaign is part of a struggle to liberate Tripoli from criminal militias and terrorists, claiming that Haftar has abided by the political agreement while Sarraj-linked criminal militias and terrorist groups have [broken it](#) to provoke conflict. The UAE seems to have been at the forefront of attempts to ensure Haftar’s forces maintain a qualitative edge, allegedly sourcing [Nigerian Igirigi](#) and [South African Mbombe](#) armoured personnel carriers, and even Russian-made [Pantsir-S1 mobile air defence batteries](#), after GNA forces acquired drones of their own.

A turning point in Saudi policy

Having long seen itself as the de facto leader of the Sunni Arab world, Saudi Arabia initially took a very different path than other regional powers to influencing Libya’s transition. Rather than engaging in overt political intervention, Saudi policy operated through a Salafist group that follows the teachings of Medina-based Islamic scholar Rabea al-Madkhali – a group that is on the fringes of the Sahwa movement but close to the state. After decades of fraught relations with former Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, Saudi leaders viewed Libya’s revolution as an opportunity to transform the country into an ally. Perhaps recognising that one arm of its traditional influence-generating mechanism, financial sponsorship, would be ineffective in oil-rich Libya, Riyadh seems to have focused on the other arm, religious authority. Thus, it seemingly aimed to build influence and transform the socio-cultural identity of the Libyan state into one more amenable to an alliance.

Since 2011, the Madkhalist group has grown quickly to take a dominant role in Haftar’s security services (despite his avowed secularism, as well as Egyptian and Emirati disdain for Islamists) and Libya’s religious institutions. The group’s belief in total obedience to the national leader (a concept known as *wali al amr*) and its animosity towards the Muslim Brotherhood made it an appealing early ally for

Haftar. With a semblance of nationwide cohesion, the group operates semi-autonomously: it responds to the Libyan political environment and sermons from Saudi Arabia, but also acts in line with its own religious reasoning and opportunistic interests. The messages that Saudi-based scholars have directed at the Madkhalists appear to have shifted over the years in accordance with Saudi policy, suggesting a political link. However, the group's independent goals make it less malleable than Riyadh may desire. For example, while many Madkhalists in eastern Libya have joined Haftar's forces, those in the west remain unwilling to participate in the conflict – having long claimed that their religious obligations demand loyalty to Sarraj as their leader and, seemingly, viewed the conflict as seditious.

The group can take this approach partially because it maintains independent revenue streams. Although there are rumours that it receives cash from Riyadh via the airports it controls, the group also runs a surprisingly lucrative business selling religious paraphernalia sourced in Saudi Arabia.

Haftar's attempts to co-opt the movement's adherents in the west, and to play up to Madkhalists in the LNA, were in evidence on 4 April 2019, when he announced the offensive on Tripoli in a speech laden with religious rhetoric. More recently, he has reminded his followers that Ramadan is a month of jihad.

Haftar's visit to Riyadh a week before the launch of the offensive marked a turning point in Saudi policy, which shifted from a relatively quietist position towards more active support for him. His meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is widely perceived as having prompted the final decision to launch the offensive, allegedly following Saudi pledges of financial support for the operation. It is unclear what sparked the change in Riyadh's approach – although it fits with a series of foreign policy initiatives under the young prince that pursue intervention and alignment with the UAE to fashion a new authoritarian regional order. Saudi Arabia's push for economic diversification, apparently another facet of this approach, is especially evident in the gas sector – an area in which Libya has great potential. Yet it is possible that political tribulations in Algeria, Sudan, and Turkey led Saudi and Emirati leaders to believe they had a rare opportunity to act while their rivals were distracted.

Like the UAE, Saudi Arabia has also mobilised its propaganda machine to win the narrative war around Haftar and his offensive. Through a network of blogs that published an average of 1,000 posts per day in the first 15 days of the offensive, Riyadh has sought to dominate the Libyan media landscape. An army of bots that tried to shape Arabic social media coverage of the war, and gradually infiltrated English- and French-language social media, have been traced back to Saudi Arabia. Since Haftar's advance on Tripoli began, [34 percent of the total volume of content created on Libya comes from Saudi Arabia – relative to only 7 percent from Libya itself and 5.2 percent from Qatar.](#)

Wildcard world powers

Haftar also has varying support from Russia and the US. These actors may currently be on his side, but they are more likely than his regional allies to adjust their loyalties as the war goes on.

Russia's pursuit of influence

Since 2014, Russia has spoken to all sides in the Libyan conflict, albeit some more than others. Although their origins are not entirely clear, Russian activities in Libya appear to be the product of various state institutions, particularly the Ministry of Defence. In the absence of a clear overarching policy, these institutions appear to seek maximum return on minimal investment and to exhibit Russia's capability to solve problems created by the West.

Russia likely courted Haftar to strengthen its relationship with Egypt. While this is not its sole motivation, the move would have seemed particularly opportune from 2014 onwards, after Washington had distanced itself from Cairo in response to Sisi's bloody ascent to power.

Like many other countries, Russia has been crucial to Haftar's successes, raising his international standing and assisting him financially by [printing a new Libyan currency](#) on his behalf. The corresponding ties Moscow maintains with the GNA and Misrata – a commercial centre in which Russia previously held investments, and the home of the largest anti-Haftar military force in Libya – reflect its awareness that either Haftar is unlikely to be successful or that an exclusive relationship would be unprofitable. And Haftar has taken a similar approach, often

floating the idea that he will establish a closer relationship with Russia to gain concessions from Western actors.

Since 2014, there have been widespread reports that Russia has provided military assistance to Haftar in the form of advisers, training, and the maintenance of Russian weaponry through private military contractor the Wagner Group. Recently, there have been rumours of a Russian military presence in Haftar-controlled areas such as the oil crescent, which Moscow may have deployed to benefit from illicit sales and Haftar's forward operating bases in western Libya. In addition to providing this material support, Russia blocked on 7 April a UN Security Council statement intended to voice opposition to Haftar's offensive. By naming Haftar as responsible for opening hostilities, the statement could have opened the door for further action by the Security Council. Therefore, the decision to block it suggests that Russia is now coming down harder on his side.

Like some of Haftar's co-opted forces in western Libya, Russia could have backed the offensive to facilitate the political return of former regime affiliates given its pre-existing relationships with them. But Russia is likely playing a deeper game as well. The Kremlin appears to use the Libyan conflict to advertise its multi-faceted value to authoritarian states in the Middle East and Africa. Moscow sees the conflict in Libya as, like other crises in the region, a medium through which it can increase its influence abroad, particularly in relation to the West, and secure a key role for itself when the warring parties eventually make peace. The longer the conflict persists, the greater the opportunities for Russia to increase this influence. Russia hopes to use the current circumstances to pursue a more diverse range of goals than merely supporting Haftar, as seen in his failure to secure meetings with high-level officials during a visit to Moscow on 30 May.

The Kremlin's strategy may be working. In April, shortly after Haftar allegedly visited Moscow, GNA Foreign Minister Mohamed Taher Siala publicly announced that he would schedule a trip to the city. After Russia blocked the Security Council resolution, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte sought out Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss Libya on the sidelines of the Belt and Road Initiative summit in Beijing. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also made offers of investment to Russia (as part of an attempt to establish a closer working relationship in the Middle East and north Africa broadly). Libya even featured in a call between Putin

and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, president of Turkey – Russia’s most important Middle Eastern trading partner.

Uncertainty in the United States

Following the outbreak of the Libyan civil war in 2014, the US largely reverted to its 2011 policy of “leading from behind”. Although it has publicly backed the UN process, led associated economic negotiations, and engaged in stabilisation projects in Libya, the US has taken on a more understated role in the country than European and Middle Eastern powers.

Yet the US has assertively protected its main interests in Libya: countering terrorism and preventing Libyan politics from disrupting global oil markets. For example, the US military was key to defeating ISIS in Sirte, providing special forces and air support to the Misratan-led Bunyan al-Marsous alliance there.

Although many in the pro-Haftar camp openly supported Trump’s presidential campaign in the hope that he would serve their political goals, they were initially disappointed with the new US administration. The previous US special envoy to Libya, Jonathan Winer, claims that, shortly after Trump was elected, Haftar’s sons led a delegation to Washington in the hope of gaining the president-elect’s blessing for an attack on Tripoli – to no avail. And in 2018 the US made a decisive intervention against Haftar, working to break a blockade he had established as part of a plan to sell oil – a plan that was in violation of a UN Security Council resolution that protects the National Oil Company as Libya’s sole legitimate oil trader.

However, there are rumours that Haftar received a tacit US blessing for the assault on Tripoli during his meeting with Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh. [A confused phone call](#) between US National Security Advisor John Bolton and Haftar shortly after the launch of the offensive did little to dispel that notion. Although the State Department initially condemned the offensive, energetic lobbying by Haftar’s regional allies – who reportedly claimed that he was fighting al-Qaeda and ISIS militias in Tripoli – prompted Trump to call Haftar on 15 April to praise him for combating terrorism and safeguarding Libya’s oil. The confusion over the president’s position transformed into de facto US support for Haftar’s advance on Tripoli, despite the fact that it targeted the same forces the American military worked through to defeat ISIS in Sirte.

The US has subsequently hindered international diplomacy to deter Haftar's advance, including UN Security Council action designed to name him as accountable for the war, a first step towards imposition of punitive measures. As is often the case in Trump's America, the government bureaucracy may gradually resolve the differences between the White House and established policy. Thus, it is unclear where the country will eventually stand on the issue; the US position on Haftar's advance could well change. Indeed, on 16 May 2019, a bipartisan group of seven congressmen on the House Foreign Affairs Committee [asked](#) the attorney-general and the director of the FBI to consider bringing war crimes charges against Haftar, who is a US citizen. On 29 May, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations formally asked the president to call for a ceasefire and support the UN process geared towards a "multi-stakeholder" diplomatic process. This could herald things to come: the more Haftar and his allies escalate the war, the greater the threat to US interests and, accordingly, the greater the likelihood of another shift in US policy.

The anti-Haftar camp

Haftar's advance on Tripoli, and the existential threat many Libyans perceived in his prospective victory, polarised Libyan society. It also pushed key constituencies in western Libya onto a war footing and away from the UN process they had once engaged with. This has created opportunities for regional actors such as Turkey and Qatar. These countries previously had a dwindling presence in Libya due to the inactivity and political marginalisation of many of their Libyan interlocutors, but they now have a chance to reassert themselves and thereby frustrate the machinations of their regional rivals Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Like all external actors, they continue to see the potential for political and economic reward if their Libyan allies gain control of the state.

Turkey's increasingly overt role

Turkey has played a mercurial yet growing role in Libya as its interests there have developed. Initially, Turkey was almost wholly motivated by the desire to fulfil the contracts it had in Libya in 2011, which were [worth roughly \\$15 billion](#) (an interest that led it to become a late supporter of the revolution that year). Following the creation and initial success of the Justice and Construction Party – the Libyan

branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, fashioned in the likeness of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party – Turkey began to see Libya as important to its attempt to boost its influence by cultivating the political Islamist groups that emerged across the region during the Arab uprisings. After the onset of Libya's civil war in 2014, Turkey became a haven for Libyan exiles – including political Islamists – as one of the rare countries Libyans could travel to, and conduct business in, without encountering significant red tape. It took advantage of this connection – as well as its embassy in Tripoli and its consulate in Misrata, at a time when most diplomatic missions to the Libyan authorities were located in Tunis – to pursue its political and economic interests in Libya.

Like other powers, Turkey adopted tactics that reflected the wider regional competition. Ankara strengthened its relationship with groups in western Libya not just because that is where its key economic interests lay, but also doubtlessly in opposition to Haftar's growing alliance with Egypt and the UAE. In this light, it seems likely that Turkey turned a blind eye to the activities of some of the exiled Libyans it hosted, who used Turkish ports to channel arms, explosives, and ammunition into western Libya. In the past five years, Ankara has continued to play a quiet role in Tripoli.

The development of Turkey's relationship with Libya since 2014 explains why the GNA and other western Libyan factions quickly looked to Ankara for assistance after Haftar began his advance. It is likely that Turkish-based Libyan networks immediately ramped up their efforts to source weapons from across eastern Europe to ship to Libya.

The Turkish government also took more forceful action to oppose Haftar's advance. Following a phone call with Erdogan on 29 April, Sarraj declared that each side would activate Libyan-Turkish security agreements. Meanwhile, Erdogan stated that Turkey would mobilise all available resources to “disappoint those who want to turn Libya into a new Syria” – a clear reference to the broad regional struggle for power. The next day, Bashaga arrived in Istanbul to discuss defence cooperation between Libya and Turkey.

These developments led to overt Turkish assistance to the anti-Haftar war effort – perhaps including the alleged attack on Haftar's airbase in Jufra on 16 May, which

involved Bayraktar armed drones launched from Misrata. This was the first recorded use of Turkish-made drones in Libya. Since then, such drones have played a prominent role near the front lines in Tripoli; there are persistent rumours that Turkish personnel are operating the vehicles while training Libyans to use them. Anti-Haftar groups recently received a high-profile delivery of Turkish-made BMC Kirpi armoured trucks and other weaponry, which arrived in Tripoli from Turkey in a Turkish-owned (and Moldovan-flagged) vessel. However, this appears to be just the beginning of Turkey's assistance package. Such shipments have continued, involving a wide range of weaponry suited to confounding Haftar, including drones and air defence systems. Turkey appears to be committed to frustrating its regional competitors in Libya by arming the anti-Haftar camp. If its current efforts to upgrade Tripoli's capacity to defend against Haftar's relatively advanced weaponry prove insufficient, Ankara could soon supply offensive military capabilities that prompt further escalation.

Haftar's current failure to seize Tripoli militarily, and the GNA's reliance on Turkish support in the face of broad international disengagement, suggests that Turkey has protected its interests in Libya for now. Ankara's next step may be to manufacture a multilateral group of regional actors – possibly including a larger power, such as Russia – to push for a political settlement that will secure these interests in the long term.

Qatari financial might

Qatar was one of the key regional players in Libya in the Arab uprisings and the aftermath of Qaddafi's fall, providing military, economic, and political support to the rebels. But its involvement in Libya waned after Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani took power in Doha, adopting a less interventionist foreign policy. As Qatar drew back from Libya, the country's Gulf rivals likely saw sponsorship of Haftar as an opportunity to tip the balance of power away from Qatari-backed Islamists in Libya. During this shift, the LNA defeated many of Qatar's Libyan interlocutors, such as the Sallabi brothers and their associated forces in Benghazi. Other Libyan Islamists who had exploited the civil war in 2014 to set up their own government (in defiance of the GNA and the UN process) gradually drifted to the margins and were eventually driven out of Tripoli. Those who remained active in Libya, either in exile or in the country itself, saw their relationship with Qatar shift to the financial sphere, as they started to raise their economic profiles, partly by making

significant investments in television stations and websites. Libyan Islamists have dramatically increased their involvement in such media outlets since 2014, aiming to oppose Haftar in the toxic propaganda war that has engulfed Libya. Indeed, the deluge of Qatari-sourced bots and social media accounts that followed Saudi Arabia's initial foray into the Libyan media showcases some of the unconventional aspects of this war.

In recent years, Doha has been broadly supportive of UN efforts to broker a political solution to the Libyan conflict. But Haftar's advance on Tripoli may encourage Qatar to revive its initial, more assertive, Libya policy. For the moment, it remains unclear whether it will do so, even if there has reportedly been a resurgence in communication between the anti-Haftar camp and Doha.

Like Turkey, Qatar has probably increased its support for Libyan factions that oppose Haftar to prevent its regional rivals from gaining power in Libya and the wider region. Qatar is rumoured to have made covert offers of assistance to a range of Haftar's opponents, suggesting that it will at least assume the role of financier in a loose coalition with these groups and Turkey. The Turkish economic crisis and the fractious nature of the militias fighting under the GNA potentially leave Qatar with a valuable part to play in the coalition. Yet, given that it has largely abandoned its regional political project in favour of domestic issues – and given the variety of Libyan groups it allegedly liaises with – Qatar will likely focus less on supporting Islamists in Libya than on embarrassing and frustrating Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The risks of escalation

In this environment, regional rivalry drastically increases the risk of escalation. Should Turkey and Qatar step up their support for Tripoli even further, this could motivate Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to increase their military assistance to Haftar. Indeed, this process has already started: as foreign investment in the conflict rises, so do Libyans' grievances; as propaganda outlets push the sides to pursue a military victory, the prospect of a negotiated solution becomes ever more distant. The publicity war between GNA troops showing off weaponry they acquired from Turkey and the LNA forces displaying their armoured personnel carriers underlines the pettiness of the rivalry between regional powers, as well as

its destructive potential. Worse, although the fighting has been limited to Tripoli and its environs, the situation is so volatile that it could spread to eastern and southern Libya at any time. If the intermittent stability the country has experienced since 2017 completely collapses, it will prove impossible to restore in the short term, amid the myriad subplots of the conflict and the humanitarian disaster they could create.

As discussed above, this poses a significant threat to not only Libya and its immediate neighbours but also Europe, which would become ever more vulnerable to the activities of terrorist groups and people smugglers. Such a collapse would also significantly escalate the proxy conflict in Libya and push the country towards implosion. Since Haftar began his advance on Tripoli, ISIS has stepped up its attacks across southern and central Libya. While the Libyan forces that fought ISIS are engaged in battles with Haftar, the group has been emboldened to carve out a safe haven in which it can regroup, before launching attacks on the security forces and civilian infrastructure, as well as seizing resources.

There is also the threat that Haftar will once again try to export oil to finance his war effort, supplementing the support Saudi Arabia has allegedly provided. Recent developments in the oil crescent suggest that Haftar believes Washington's unclear position could mean that it will not actively enforce international resolutions on Libyan oil sales – thereby providing him with an opportunity to set a precedent. If this happens, it will become even harder for Europe and even Haftar's regional allies to exert leverage over him. It would also likely precipitate further escalation in the conflict – as anti-Haftar forces sought to regain control of oil facilities – and deepen the administrative and other fractures between eastern and western Libya.

Moreover, as the situation develops along its current trajectory and regional actors harden their positions in Libya, Europe's opportunities to reverse these trends diminish. European countries will lose influence as Libyans witness other actors taking on a larger role in their country. The battle for Trump's attention taking place, as both sides in the war hire lobbyists to make their case in Washington, indicates how events may unfold. Given his transactional doctrine and his endless search for foreign policy victories, Europe could be left with little space to protect its interests. Even more worryingly, a phone call between Erdogan and Putin on 30 April, in which Libya was one of the main topics of conversation, suggests that the

political process could eventually mirror that in Syria: led by Middle Eastern actors and Russia. This would leave Europe out of the main negotiations over a conflict in which it has a greater stake than most foreign actors.

What can Europe do?

While Haftar's advance on Tripoli has changed the way in which regional actors and other major powers engage with Libya, Europe has seemingly been caught off guard by the fluidity of the situation. European countries have failed to adequately understand the new situation, particularly the scale and risks of the crisis, and the urgency with which they must find a solution. Haftar is incapable of winning the war in a decisive fashion, as demonstrated by his inability to complete his advance as the GNA pushes back. But each side is committed to achieving victory and retains the capabilities to prosecute a drawn-out conflict. Moreover, due to the opportunism and polarisation the war has created, the UN Security Council is incapable of effective action as it has been in other crises in the region.

In Libya as elsewhere, a prerequisite for constructive European peacemaking will be a degree of unity between EU member states. Having cultivated strong relationships with Haftar and his regional allies, France may have long accepted his rise and tacitly supported his recent advance. But it needs to change its position. Paris should acknowledge that Haftar is not the strongman it believed him to be, as he is unable to assert control of the country militarily and counter terrorist threats to Europe and French interests in the Sahel. In fact, there is a risk that he will exacerbate these threats if he continues along his current path.

If France is willing to change tack, it will be well placed to lead a new attempt at de-escalation due to its strong ties to Haftar and his allies – who remain the primary belligerents. It is critical that France use its influence in common cause with other European states.

The risks of escalation in Libya should make Europeans put aside their differences on the conflict there. Their response to the crisis is no longer about backing Haftar or Sarraj; it is about stopping the war and beginning a political process that can gain support from a critical mass of Libya's various constituencies.

During the UN Security Council's Libya session on 21 May, European

representatives advocated a three-stage approach to resolving the crisis. This centred on an immediate ceasefire, a return to the political process, and the strict implementation of the arms embargo. These measures are an appropriate foundation for a solution, but they need to be tailored to the current reality in Libya.

Implementing a ceasefire

Although an immediate ceasefire would be ideal, it is incompatible with the warring parties' calculations. Haftar's opponents are deeply distrustful of the international community, believing that it is complicit in the predicament they are in and that, at a minimum, he must leave western Libya or credibly commit to ending his advance on Tripoli if they are to agree to a ceasefire. To them, foreign powers' current calls for an immediate ceasefire are a thinly disguised ploy to buy Haftar time and space before he launches a new offensive. Yet, as Haftar showed during his visit to Paris on 22 May, he is unwilling to accept a ceasefire even though it may be tactically favourable to him. Having invested a great deal in the offensive, he appears to view any ceasefire or peace process as an admission of weakness, and to believe that, given enough time, he can win.

But European countries can change the calculations of these Libyan actors. The solution to Haftar's belligerence and the siege mentality of his opponents involves an effective embargo on the weapons that are flooding Libya and an international consensus that deters further escalation. This requires an approach that balances political outreach to key regional actors – designed to push them to see the risks of escalation, curtail the flow of weapons into Libya, and restrain their allies in the country – with credible threats of punitive measures against states that violate the arms embargo.

The differences between Egyptian, Saudi, and Emirati interests in Libya mean that some foreign actors will be harder to persuade than others. But Europe should prove that, as it has long argued, it can use its close security relationships with these states to temper their worst instincts and protect key European interests. Libya's stability is one such key interest, given the stark threats that Europe will face if the conflict continues to escalate.

The longer the war continues, the more taxing it will be on Haftar's regional backers – both politically and, given his funding problems, financially. Moreover, in

a drawn-out conflict, Haftar could experience military defeat or lose the support of Libyans in the areas he already controls, who suffer most from the negative security and economic effects of his campaign. As such, Europe has an opportunity to persuade Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to de-escalate, before they become too invested in their proxies to co-opt them into a different approach. Europe should try to convince Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi that Haftar cannot win, and that they will incur reputational damage if they back his futile effort. Although it will be difficult to discourage their zealous support for Haftar, Europe could succeed in this by coupling a pragmatic argument with credible threats – such as those to enforce sanctions on state and non-state actors that are involved in arms smuggling in Libya or that directly participate in the conflict – and providing a political solution that allows Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi to cut their losses. Egypt may be particularly amenable to ending its support for Haftar in exchange for a role in a credible new process, given its sensitivity to the situation.

Equally, if Ankara and Doha are primarily involved in the conflict to frustrate their rivals, it is crucial that Europe dissuade them from increasing their military support for their proxies and encourage them to pivot back to a political process. They are likely to do so only if they reach a credible agreement with Haftar's backers, given the latter's role in sparking the latest round of fighting. As part of this, Europe should make clear that, even if Haftar's advance on Tripoli reignited the conflict, any counter-escalation will be met with equally strong condemnation and punitive measures.

European governments should monitor arms embargo violations through the EU Satellite Centre, while setting out scalable punitive measures to police the embargo and involving the US in the process once more. They should try to convince Trump that the war facilitates a resurgence of ISIS in Libya and that further conflict could imperil Libyan oil flows and the stability of global oil markets (which are in a precarious position due to crises in Venezuela and Iran). This would appeal to his desire to strengthen his economic credentials and counter-terrorism record in the run-up to the 2020 US presidential election. Additionally, the EU should explore new ways to police the flow of arms from eastern Europe to Libya, aiming to prevent one of its neighbours from destabilising another.

Launching a new political process

These initial steps should focus on securing a much-needed ceasefire and avoiding wider regional escalation. But, to have any hope of sustainable progress in Libya, Europe will need to make use of incentives as well as threats. The most appealing incentive for all regional actors involved in the conflict, as well as Russia, could be their inclusion in a solution that plays to their core perceived interests. Given that states such as Egypt have valid interests in Libya, Europe should both prevent the Libyan conflict from becoming as destructive as that in Syria or Yemen and establish a new political process – one that discourages Libyan actors from pursuing absolute victory. In a war in which further military action is likely to both fail and inflict significant reputational damage on those involved, some states may be willing to accept a solution that will allow them to save face.

Nonetheless, there is no political process that will immediately persuade all sides to lay down their arms. However, if Europe enforces the arms embargo and deters military escalation and violations of international humanitarian law – through an Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights inquiry, sanctions, or International Criminal Court referrals – the cost of the war could rise enough to force a ceasefire. Europe would need to seize this opportunity to start a political process that overcomes the failures of the negotiations that preceded Haftar’s advance on Tripoli.

Europeans should urgently engage with the US to outline a new political strategy. They should also seek to upgrade the existing international working group to include Russia – as a permanent member of the UN Security Council – along with key regional actors, to agree on the tenets of a new political process. This could facilitate UN Security Council resolutions that achieve their aims – initially, in establishing a ceasefire and, perhaps, a mechanism to monitor it on the ground.

France should scrap its current plan to pursue an elite deal between Haftar and Sarraj. Given that the deal failed in peacetime, it will be impossible to achieve now. And there will be a heavy opportunity cost in seeking to revive it. Haftar has repeatedly shown his lack of interest in a political solution that leaves him with anything other than absolute power. Meanwhile, the militias fighting to defend Tripoli no longer have faith in Sarraj to act as their sole representative. As such, there is no way to acquire the trust or leverage needed to weld the parties together under such a deal.

This does not mean ignoring the reality of Haftar's and Sarraj's positions but instead recognising the need for a broader, more pragmatic approach that mitigates the problems of relying solely on them. Europe should attempt to bypass their intransigence through local talks between delegations from eastern and western Libya or between various factions in and around Tripoli (from Misrata and Tarhouna). This would provide meaningful representation for the warring parties while moving beyond poisonous personality politics. Delegations of political and military leaders from east and west could work towards de-escalation, unifying administrations and banking systems to undercut Libya's growing social and economic crisis while averting an impending humanitarian disaster in the south (which could become a new source of conflict). This approach should centre on efforts to forge an institutional, rather than a personality-driven, power-sharing agreement that protects the key interests of domestic and international actors.

The UN-backed national conference – which was an effective replacement for a Libyan Political Agreement that fed instability (before it was hijacked by the elite power-sharing deal) – could form the next stage of the process, once the sides have sufficiently de-escalated the conflict. This would provide all parties with an objective to work towards, preventing them from using the process to merely stall while they find fresh excuses to return to war.

Given the UN's paralysis, the impetus for a new approach should come from Europe. This is doubtless a hard road to travel but, unless there is an end to destructive external interventions in Libya, any political process in the country will fail and Europe will be left to contend with yet another growing security threat on its doorstep.

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