

The Prevalence of External States' Covert Interests over Overtly Emphasised International Conflict Resolution Agendas Throughout a Decade of Libyan Uncertainty

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This study offers a comparative perspective on four external states' behavioural tendencies in contrast to their officially upheld ambitions witnessed throughout the past ten years in Libya. Sound promises on conflict resolution, mitigation and alleged alignment with R2P principles is of course nothing new in the international arena, nor is the fact that the parallel existence of selfish agendas constitute an “innovation”. Nevertheless, the case of failed reconciliation and stabilisation process of Libya despite seemingly massive international support offers a recent sphere for investigating the whole spectrum of underlying opposition among the external parties. What started out as a domestically rooted conflict, soon developed into an increasingly international one. After several attempts at the establishment of a truly unified government, interests have never got sufficiently close to each other. What this article sets out to expand on is a fundamentally balance of threats motivated geostrategic opposition, which was only seemingly centred around local key figures like Haftar, Sarraj or even influential tribal leaders. Numerous foreign stakeholders were acting against the very declarations and statements they themselves called their fellows to comply with via means of proxy actions and in hopes of capitalising on the advantages stemming from the status quo. This work discusses the means these states acted counter-productively against the Libyan conflict resolution.

Keywords: Libya, proxy war, balance of threat, Russia, Turkey, France, Italy

Introduction

The initially widely celebrated movements of the Arab Spring in the MENA region were fuelled with optimism in relation to a promise of democratisation waves. In most cases though, these promises were never fulfilled and a regional instability as well as uncertainty spread out. Reigns of regional leaders were challenged and, in some cases, defeated as

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part of the unfolding events. In Libya, these have resulted in the fall of the country's notorious dictator and in evolving subsequent civil wars that saw the state falling apart. Many researchers argued it to be a failed state² in the absence of capable governing forces and fundamental characteristics of statehood itself.

The Middle East has often been an area accommodating conflicts due to the lack of economic development, presence of significant ethnic and religious diversities and above all because of the operating types of regimes.³ Additionally, it has always been a region penetrated by foreign powers with significant influence over matters of security, trade and politics. Recently, there has been an increased instability following the Arab Spring movements, greater influx of arms,⁴ an arisen power vacuum rooted in the disengagement of the U.S. that is sought to be filled by regional and other international actors and finally the lack of coherent regional dispute resolution mechanisms as well as insufficient norms of internationally mediated conflict resolution.⁵ Not surprisingly, competing international actors disadvantageously effect prospects on peacebuilding.⁶ Notably, these factors directly impact the endurance of conflicts besides their more frequent occurrences. It seems there is a vicious circle that involuntarily the whole region became a part of, and Libya is not different.

As it is going to be elaborated on, official conflict resolution agendas and deniable proxies can coexist, and they provide a comparatively advantageous way of intervention for actors seeking to avoid overt involvement. Most importantly, they carry the potential to enhance the enforcement of one's will while holding the umbrella against full-scale international condemnation and marginalisation. Unfortunately, from the perspective of war-torn countries, the coexistence of these two support the prolongation and further escalation of conflicts themselves that by definition also means the failure of conflict resolution programs.

Given states' perceivably selfish preference of goals, this work somewhat pessimistically reasons those efforts on the true resolution of conflict will be ineffective as long as terms are not acceptable for stakeholders across the national border. It does not argue for the total ineffectiveness of non-state actors to swiftly resolve a conflict and maintain a high importance of humanitarian needs, but it states that unity is key in achieving those goals.

Accordingly, the following pages will argue that *conflict resolution strategies in Libya proved to be insufficient because of persisting incoherence among states, oftentimes allies.*

Official standpoints

In accordance with the standard and rightfully expected norms, states of the international arena have all expressed their desire of seeing swift conflict resolution in Libya. In fact, this occurred on numerous instances over the years via statements, joint declarations,

² HARKAI 2017: 123–137.

³ SØRLI et al. 2005: 141–165.

⁴ WEZEMAN et al. 2018.

⁵ CAMMACK–DUNNE 2018.

⁶ LU–THIES 2013: 239–253.

enhanced mediatory roles, various contributions to physical security, etc. Some of these states have also taken on prominent roles in the related processes within the UN, NATO, the EU and other alliances they were members of. These altogether constitute the official set of goals of these actors that were not met for more than a decade now, which legitimises the quest of exploring the perceived, or even said real foreign policy ambitions they have pursued during the same period. For obvious risks and reasons of accountability though, those could not have equalled the officially articulated goals.

Real motives under the surface

Throughout the past few years, a complex struggle has developed among an increasingly wide range of international actors attempting to carve bigger shares of influence on the Libyan stage.

The following pages are going to discuss four of them that perceivably were among the most influential ones. Precisely, Russia, Turkey, France and Italy have all contributed to a meaningful extent via either military, financial or political means. Importantly, they have carried different stakes and interest for which they were willing to take a certain level of risk. Libya's location, its abundance of easily and cheaply extractable hydrocarbon resources, exposure to extremists and insurgents over the past decade as well as strategic advantages in the international migration routes flowing through its territory qualify the country strategically important sphere of interest for many. The below pages will elaborate on these four states' oftentimes competing actions.

The Russian Federation

Russia did not veto the UNSC resolution 1973, but it abstained during the vote on the no-fly zone over Libya. Its official standpoint was the support of the GNA but its support towards General Haftar – which have manifested on multiple occasions via frequent high-level meetings, not to mention the supply of weapons, trainings that have fundamentally contributed to the further escalation of the conflict⁷ – was hard to misinterpret. The General's three years long siege of Benghazi, takeover of essential oilfields providing the financial means for subsequent operations could hardly have been successful lacking such foreign contributions. Importantly, these events have aided him to greater popularity in Cyrenaica as he capitalised on local tribes' decades-old sense of oppression.⁸ Most certainly, a list of norms and embargoes are in place to prevent arms' supply into a civil war-torn area, but attainments of proxy warfare secure non-overt means to contribute. In this specific case, weapons may have reached their destination to fight proponents of the GNA via indirect routes while President Putin may have officially called for ceasefire

⁷ PUSZTAI 2017.

⁸ LEFÈVRE 2014: 268–273.

in alignment with the requirements of the international public opinion.⁹ Additionally, Moscow was suspected of having printed Libyan dinars to resolve the LNA's liquidity problem – which also indirectly further destabilised the country's economy – probably in exchange for a beneficial share from the oil reserves in abundance on the territory controlled by the General's forces.¹⁰ Finally, Moscow's smooth diplomatic operation conducted simultaneously with later deployment of air force to halt the LNA's pushback¹¹ and enhanced level of supply of modern weaponry was a further example of tactical manoeuvring.

Notwithstanding, it seems that the Russian strategy was not based on Haftar's identity, rather on what he represented: the potentially greatest challenger of the GNA supported by many groups within society opposing the Tripoli establishment, who – should things develop in the desired way – would have been able to grant the Kremlin a beneficial position. Consequently, his support was conditional, and it may have lasted only as long as it was in alignment with the demands of Moscow. Naturally, the issue of morality is relevant in this context, even though the Kremlin provably did not break any regulations. The past ten years' valuable experience (Crimea, Syria and of course Libya) that has enriched Russian strategies is part of this story. This is how Russian mercenaries called the Wagner group¹² are fighting and providing intelligence to local militias¹³ in Tripoli allegedly without the President's awareness or endorsement – similarly to the little green men in the Ukrainian crisis¹⁴ – ensuring neutrality in advance, would these soldiers get involved in atrocities with Turkish, etc. troops.

The central motive of the Putin-led Russia's Libya strategy was to hinder any Western-friendly government's consolidation of power, for that would definitively have revoked any prior successes and would have pulled Russia into an unfavourable negotiating position in relation to any trade or commercial agreement, not to mention the harm it would have caused to the ambitions in the Mediterranean. An aspect of this strategy was to step up as a mediator – that has aided Russia to remain a prominent shareholder in Libya – coordinating with foreign and domestic actors. These efforts have particularly intensified after the offensive against Tripoli – which has commenced in April 2019 – when Russia did not sign the common UN declaration, rather published its own statement. All in all, the Russian involvement cannot be described as constructive. It rather carried the characteristics of a strategy seeking to shape classic geopolitical influence in a beneficial manner. It also carried characteristics of appropriating long-term economic gains. A soon

⁹ SALEH et al. 2020.

¹⁰ RAMANI 2020.

¹¹ DIXON 2020.

¹² Approximately 2,000 soldiers were fighting in Libya. They have reached their destination indirectly, through Syria, Egypt and Jordan to Benghazi. President Putin has on multiple occasions claimed that the group is a strictly private entrepreneurship with no ties to the Russian Government. Furthermore, he stated that even though Russian citizens might be among the members, they are not acting upon the Kremlin's orders.

¹³ TURAK 2020.

¹⁴ SHEVCHENKO 2014.

de-escalation of the conflict under certain conditions could be in its interest, but Moscow became very cautious over the course of past years.¹⁵

The Turkish stance

A recent study conducted on tendencies of Turkish conflict resolution efforts has revealed that Ankara tends to regionally rely on tools of hard, rather than soft power and it often acts as an insider peace enforcer, even if a sufficiently coherent strategy based on the cases where it was an active stakeholder cannot be concluded.¹⁶ Furthermore, it applies a dual approach within its conflict resolution strategy with the combination of bilateral and multilateral elements, which entails diplomatic and military tools on the one hand and an engagement with other external actors on the other. However, the former clearly outweighs the latter.¹⁷

Turkey's role is special in the sense that both its applied rhetoric and exercised behaviour endowed diplomacy a secondary role behind military force in pursuing its foreign policy goals. President Erdoğan did participate in multiple conferences on the requirements of peace, but ensuing events suggest that he valued palpable military intervention to be more expedient. Throughout the year of 2020, Turkish military presence in Tripoli got considerably strengthened: the few hundred military instructors and advisors, drones were accompanied by warships carrying modern weaponry, vehicles and supply, Turkish soldiers and Syrian mercenaries.¹⁸ This was a clear and impossible to misread declaration that Ankara supports the internationally acknowledged GNA against Haftar. This cooperation was also strengthened when President Erdoğan signed an agreement on security cooperation and a shared maritime border with Prime Minister al-Sarraj and proceeded with providing vital intelligence to allied militias.¹⁹ It is important to add that Ankara had already sent weapons and military supply to back up GNA militias even before it had its own boots on ground;²⁰ however, it must have realised the level of danger the dragging assault on Tripoli and the simultaneously increased military and financial capabilities of the LNA represented.

Scrutinising further motives behind the intervention of this magnitude, it can be ascertained that the decision-making process was not dominated by ideological interests, even if one cannot neglect to interpret it within the context of Sunni world and what a Muslim Brotherhood²¹-supporting government of Libya would mean²² apart from the realist framework. Moreover, even though the President's domestic rhetoric occasionally

¹⁵ Moscow perceived to have been outplayed by Western states in Libya as their contribution to the UNSC resolution was followed by a NATO intervention.

¹⁶ DAL 2018a: 2291–2314.

¹⁷ DAL 2018b: 2207–2221.

¹⁸ MAGDY 2020.

¹⁹ NAAR 2020.

²⁰ GALL 2020.

²¹ Initially arrived at the country from neighbouring Egypt in 1949 and established the Libyan branch in 1968, the group consisted of a few thousand individuals in 2011 aiming for legitimacy and acceptance.

²² AHMED 2020.

included a reminiscence on the Ottoman era with a sense of nostalgia, both timing and the scale of tackled risk refuted the possibility of increased participation stemming from a contingent, historic bond-fed cultivation of relationship between Turkey and Libya. A far more likely scenario would be President Erdoğan's accurate interpretation of the status quo – similarly to the one he capitalised on in Northern Syria – and a recognition of a potent strategy through which Ankara would be able to place itself into a more advantageous position in yet another dispute. Namely, the signed maritime agreement would enable an enhanced military presence and influence in the Mediterranean that can provide the higher ground in the quarrel with Cyprus and Greece. It should also not be neglected that the area that Turkey can now consider to be legally part of its own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) has rich sources of natural gas and crude oil that Ankara wanted to exploit,²³ while it is also ready to take part in post-conflict infrastructure reconstruction programs.²⁴

It is indisputable that Turkey took the advantages of the possibilities stemming from the divided Libya and Tripoli's hard situation to facilitate the come about of such a beneficial agreement. Firstly, the GNA's room for movement at the time was significantly narrower by this putting Turkey into a more advantageous negotiating position when it came to post-conflict commercial and trade agreements. Turkey's economy – that suffered greatly over the past decade²⁵ – could profit a lot from the materialisation of such agreements especially considering the outstandingly high rates of unemployment. Also, it had the benefit of aligning with the international community's official agenda, which would ensure no punitive actions and wide-scale condemnations would follow its overt involvement. The only exception in this perspective was the maritime agreement that did not only create new turbulent waves among regional powers²⁶ but also escalated the whole Libyan civil war into a complex case of international law as Egypt and Greece have signed their own agreement responding to their perceived threat.

Thirdly, many regional rivals already supported the LNA, so the potential gains of siding with the opposite party were immensely higher. Indeed, Turkey proved to be a more reliable ally of Tripoli than Italy, and without its help the al-Sarraj Government would likely have been defeated. Furthermore, Turkey's support provided the sufficient aid to break Haftar's siege of Tripoli and to start pushing the LNA back.²⁷ Notwithstanding, this scale of commitment unavoidably triggered greater risks that was well perceived in Ankara. In light of all these, the primary Turkish goal was that the Tripoli Government would not fail, since that would have meant Ankara's simultaneous loss of a main ally and an outpost of its power projection, as well as prestige. Thus, the mission of Turkish troops in Libya was to strengthen and defend the GNA while pushing back and weakening LNA forces and its allies.

²³ PITEL–SHEPPARD 2020.

²⁴ COSKUN–GUMRUKCU 2020.

²⁵ GOODMAN 2019.

²⁶ BUTLER–GUMRUKCU 2019.

²⁷ As part of Operation Peace Storm.

European allies' conflict of interests

Examining the EU's approach towards Libya is an exceedingly difficult task predominantly due to Member States' immensely different views on the appropriate strategy for handling mass migration, which oftentimes hindered arising drafts of resolution with promising practical relevance like a 'bureaucratic anchor'. Statements and reactions by representatives of various member states suggest that conflict resolution is a surpassingly important matter for Southern member states – that is understandable given the more direct and greater challenges these countries face –, while for others this equation appears to be more complex. One should not neglect the danger of the already discussed dominant members of regime when it comes to alliance politics, including techniques of securitisation that is a truly influential tool.²⁸ Numerous indicators highlight that unofficial and selfish foreign policy goals played their part in the background, too. Within the Libya analogy, a French–Italian opposition has been evolving over the course of the years that did not only create a political dispute – to which member states may have joined alongside moral, political or economic interests – but it indirectly contributed to the weakening of the EU's relative power. One clear manifestation of this was the fact that Turkey could obtain control over some parts of the flow of migration from North Africa that was certainly a scenario to be avoided for Europe. The significance of the EU's internal opposition overwrote the factors of geographic realities and commercial potential that would predestine the EU to be the most influential stakeholder in the region. Precisely, the above-described incoherence has undermined this position and aided others to greater influence. There are no other two countries better exemplifying the intra-organisational lack of cohesion within recent context of common foreign and security policy than Italy and France.

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's friendly relationship with Gaddafi proved to be insufficient in the prevention of the NATO intervention. Later, a prominent role was taken on that manifested in the *Skhirat Agreement* establishing the GNA, which involved significant backing from Italy that decreased substantially once the attack on Tripoli unfolded and Haftar was recognised as a legitimate actor.²⁹ In the subsequent maze, Rome experienced the negative effects of the above articulated lack of synergies in Europe and has implemented a new and reasonably potent strategy: instead of conducting negotiations with GNA politicians immensely dependent on the backing of the UN, it has directly reached out to leaders of major tribes³⁰ and decided to finance and train the Libyan coastguard in order to attempt decreasing the pressure stemming for migration over the course of past years.³¹ This was a vital turning point suggesting that Italy comprehended

²⁸ McDONALD 2008: 563–587.

²⁹ The intention was to step up as a mediator facilitating unity between opposing parties, but it proved to be a false strategy inasmuch as Haftar felt he had the higher ground and was not willing to settle for anything less than total victory that ultimately made Rome look as a weak and untrustworthy ally of the GNA. The incurred loss of credibility overwrote Italy's perceived capability of regional influence – and essentially marginalised it on the benefit of other actors – and it haunted later efforts seeking settlement as well.

³⁰ REYNOLDS 2018.

³¹ DOMINIONI 2020.

the workings and mechanisms running the Libyan society which – although has developed since the colonial times – did not change fundamentally.

In the aftermath of GNA militias' military success significantly aided by Turkish troops, Rome wanted to re-establish trust with Tripoli that might have been beneficial for both parties. Specifically, securing the production of crude oil and natural gas in Libya is in the fundamental interest of *Eni*, Italy's greatest energy corporation, which is one of the most important partners of Libya's NOC but suffered significant losses this decade.³² On the other hand, decreasing the international marginalisation and furthering the number of tangible allies was in the interest of the al-Sarraj Government as it would be important to the new government, too. Nevertheless, a military involvement was unlikely because of the already persisting domestic tension circulating around the financial aid Italy was providing to Tripoli, as well as the until then experienced tendencies.

The first and foremost important contribution of France was of course through bombing which it evaluated as a great success amid of strong division among allies.³³ What followed was a behaviour with a blurry set of ambitions since multiple Presidents of France got involved in scandals suggesting a variation between articulated and real goals. More and more tangible pieces of information indicated that Paris supported Haftar despite of UN and EU directives.³⁴ Instances backing this allegation included the arrest of French diplomats at the Tunisia border transporting weapons, questionable intelligence operations³⁵ and the bombing of Chadian troops³⁶ – potentially marching to fight Haftar – by the French Air Force, etc. Presumably, geopolitical reasoning was behind this tactic inasmuch as France attempted to enhance its regional influence in order to gain access to natural resources, including to uranium in the South,³⁷ as well as crude oil in the East.³⁸ Arguably, had Gaddafi not spoken out about the funds he donated to the campaigns of Sarkozy,³⁹ the French contribution to *Operation Unified Protector* would not have been so outstanding. Nevertheless, President Macron's role as pragmatic mediator did not represent a fundamental alteration from the Hollande Government's Libya strategy. The French behaviour suggested for a long time that it recognised Haftar to be the reality on the ground, while later it seemed to have reached a stalemate due to developments, and so it took on a more distant, neutral position measuring its options. Obviously, France could not have raised its objection to Turkey's enhanced involvement, but it did not fail to miss the chance to openly criticise Ankara in relation to the breach on international law triggered by the Ankara–Tripoli pact,⁴⁰ and allegedly it did so in order to stand with its

³² SERTIN 2020.

³³ GRAND 2015: 183–204.

³⁴ TAYLOR 2019.

³⁵ CHASSANY–SALEH 2016.

³⁶ AMIEL 2019.

³⁷ EL-GAMATY 2018.

³⁸ EL WARDANY 2019.

³⁹ JARRY 2018.

⁴⁰ MOMTAZ 2020.

European partners Greece and Cyprus. Paris even attacked the behaviour of Ankara as a NATO ally⁴¹ that played its part in a fragmentation amongst alliance members.⁴²

Conclusion

These competing set of actions have resulted in a universal inability to consolidate power by either domestic party in Libya. In the abundance of this magnitude of foreign support, domestic actors appeared to be less open to negotiate or compromise that resulted in the persistence of domestic actors without sufficient nation-wide recognition or acceptance, whose sphere of authority lied on sub-regions. Whereas in some cases local proxies were exceedingly dependent on certain external actor's support, proxy-initiated exploitation of masters also occurred multiple times throughout the years. The various examples have clearly proven that official conflict resolution agendas and deniable proxy relationships can and do coexist, and in Libya they have provided a comparative advantage for those actors that aimed to intervene but wanted to avoid overt means.

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⁴¹ IRISH–EMMOTT 2020.

⁴² PEEL et al. 2020.

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