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Oil, power and military might

General Haftar is expanding his influence in Libya. And so the danger of a renewed armed conflict is growing

As the world's attention has turned to the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza, a geopolitical vacuum in Libya has emerged. A vacuum that local political players and their allies in the region and abroad are exploiting to expand their influence. One of these people is General Khalifa Haftar, a military officer and commander of the Libyan National Army, who could end up coming out on top of this crisis. Haftar is seeking to bring the entire country under his control by consolidating a military regime, with his associates dominating the economy.

After nearly four years of fragile stability resulting in political deadlock, the deeply divided country is once again facing a crisis, risking the outbreak of fresh fighting. After the ceasefire and the formation of a unity government under the Berlin Process in 2020-2021, there was hope for unification of state institutions, as well as for democratic change and lasting peace. This hope soon dissipated after elections were postponed at the end of 2021 and a parallel government emerged in Benghazi in February 2022. Since then, only a power-sharing agreement between rival forces has provided a period of relative stability. But Libya doesn't need another power-sharing agreement between war criminals and corrupt elites. Instead, support is needed for democratic change by strengthening civil society, political parties and human rights organisations, as well as a rule of law that protects human rights and freedom of expression.

Pressure from the east

While the United Nations Mission in Libya (UNMIL) has so far failed to make headway with the elections and unite the country, the international community seems to be accepting this fragile stability as the lesser evil for the time being. For over a month now, military and political events in Libya have been pointing to a new order that instils the political will of Haftar and his allies in the east. This development is undermining the Government of National Unity led by Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah in Tripoli, whose focus is on distributing Libya's oil revenues and expanding influence across the country.

At the beginning of August, the National Army marched south-west, near to the Algerian-Libyan border, home to the largest oil fields in the country and key smuggling routes, under the pretence of national security and protecting the southern border against trafficking and illegal migration from neighbouring countries. The military expansion led by Haftar's son in this strategically vital area is not only a flex of power but also a serious threat to Dbeibah and the world. In doing so, Haftar wants to underline his demands for a greater share of power and resources and for the international community to recognise the government in the east, which is fully under his control.

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This is not the first time Haftar and the eastern coalition have tried to take political and economic power by force. Haftar's 2019 attempt to capture Tripoli by military assault failed thanks to Turkey's military support. The subsequent attempt in February 2022 to replace Dbeibah's government with a government under Fathi Bashagha through a political motion in parliament also failed. Nevertheless, the latest geopolitical and domestic events now seem to be taking a more favourable turn for the general.

First of all, Haftar and his allies have managed to expand their economic and military power even further in recent years. As well as being funded officially by the central bank, they appear to be using illegal sources to finance their endeavours. Haftar unofficially received a cut of Libya's oil production, which is being smuggled into neighbouring countries. His troops also control the migration routes and the gold mines in the south-east of the country. These off-the-record revenues go directly towards expanding Haftar's military and the state-run Libyan Development and Reconstruction Fund led by his son. By controlling lucrative reconstruction projects in the country, Haftar's family is securing shares in profits and corporate interests. Investors from the United Arab Emirates, on top of Turkish and Egyptian companies, are also showing interest in rebuilding Benghazi.

Strong international support

Haftar also continues to receive support from allies in the region and overseas. On 11 August, Egypt hosted the head of the eastern Libya government Osama Hammad, risking a diplomatic crisis with Dbeibah, who considers his government the only official one. This coincided with a diplomatic rapprochement between Egypt and Turkey, a major supporter of the western Libya government. And although Turkey has pledged to supply Dbeibah's government with modern air defence systems and has called for de-escalation, it is unlikely to support the Tripoli government to the same extent as it did in 2019. Ankara does not want to jeopardise its improved relations with Egypt.

As a key strategic ally in North Africa and on the southern border with the EU, Haftar continues to receive military support from Russia, which itself has geopolitical interests in Libya. In early 2024, Russia founded the Pan-African Africa Corps with almost 45 000 soldiers to replace the Wagner Group and protect Russian interests in the region. In addition to seizing military control over smuggling routes, it aims to secure access to economic resources such as oil and gas fields as well as gold and diamond mines in Africa. Southern Libya will serve as a pivotal location for the corps. This close connection to Russia can only strengthen Haftar's negotiating position with his critics, but also significantly restrict what Europe is able to do in Africa over the coming decades, especially when it comes to refugees and migrants.

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Domestic policy appears to be increasingly unfurling to Haftar's benefit. On 8 August, a close ally of Dbeibah lost the vote for Chairman of the High Council of State, which serves as the second chamber in Libya. He was replaced by Al-Mishri, who maintains good ties with the parliament in the east. Shortly thereafter, the Speaker of the Libyan House of Representatives Aguila Saleh adopted a controversial decision to end the mandate of the Presidential Council under Al-Manfi and Dbeibah's unity government. This would give Saleh the powers of the Presidential Council as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces in western Libya. The decision has not yet been implemented and has been deemed unlawful by Dbeibah and Al-Manfi.

The power struggle for key positions in Libya reached a climax when the Presidential Council ordered the dismissal of Al Sadiq Al-Kabir, the influential governor of the Central Bank of Libya. Production on several oilfields was subsequently halted to turn up the heat against this decision. Since then, oil production and exports have plummeted sharply, and the socio-economic crisis that Libyans face has worsened. Moreover, the conflict over the new governor has caused liquidity problems for banks. All of this has put more pressure on Dbeibah's government, which has failed to significantly improve people's living conditions since it came to power in 2021. Instead, Dbeibah has redistributed state resources to his allies and the Tripoli elite through nepotism and corruption, in an attempt to secure his position of power.

UN, US and European diplomats have been continuously working to de-escalate the situation and reach an agreement between the conflicting parties, but have been unsuccessful. With the UN meeting to end the central bank crisis alone being repeatedly postponed, both parties seem to be playing for a time until a satisfactory power-sharing agreement is reached. Although there is currently no military conflict occurring on a large scale, Haftar could make good on his threats, while the unity government and the Presidential Council are becoming increasingly weaker without firm international support.

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If Haftar were to come to power, he – like his allies in Egypt and Russia – would come down hard on his critics. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have been warning for years of the ever more brutal crackdown on opposition and civilians, criticising the lack of accountability for the country's war crimes. Haftar seizing power would therefore pose a serious threat to peace and human rights in Libya and potentially undermine Europe's efforts to achieve stability in the region.

European politics in Libya are only reactive rather than proactive, and there is no long-term strategy. The unconditional support of Dbeibah's government poses a problem. The ongoing crisis should be used to exert pressure on the unity government and on those preventing progress, so that elections can be held as soon as possible — a condition for further support and recognition. In addition to diplomatic efforts, the EU needs to make it perfectly clear that if Haftar and his allies were to take power by force, this would have serious consequences. A deterrent plan should include targeted economic sanctions against those responsible and judicial proceedings against war criminals.

Salam Said

Salam Said is Director of the Libya Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Her research focuses on the Arab economy, socio-economic developments in the MENA region and the political economy of Syria.

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