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Prospects for the Stabilisation of Libya

Patrycja Sasnal

At the beginning of May, an agreement was reached by the leaders of two rival powers in Libya—the prime minister of the Government of National Accord (GNA), Fayaz al-Sarraj, and the commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA), Gen. Khalifa Haftar. The Libya Quartet (EU, UN, LAS, AU) could help moderate the growing influence of third countries, including Russia, on the parties to the conflict. Russia is beginning to replicate its actions in Syria, aiming to increase its involvement so that any agreement without it won't be possible.

The Situation in Libya. Libya is torn by a military conflict between the two major powers in the country, each composed of a coalition of smaller local forces.[1] On one side is the Government of National Accord (GNA, the executive branch), which is located in Tripoli and controls the western part of Libya. It is made up of moderate and Islamist politicians and supported by powerful militias from Misrata. On the other side is the House of Representatives (HoR, the legislative branch), supported by the anti-Islamist Libyan National Army (LNA), commanded by Gen. Khalifa Haftar, which is located in Tobruk and controls the eastern part of the country. ISIS and other jihadist groups are also present in Libya. The military conflict flares up mainly in the "Oil Crescent" (north-central part of Libya) near oil infrastructure (in March, Haftar took control of key oil terminals in Ras Lanuf and Sidra). In the east, Haftar's forces regularly clash with the jihadists, though skirmishes also occur in the capital, Tripoli.

The meeting and informal agreement between Haftar and Prime Minister Fayaz al-Sarraj in Abu Dhabi on 2 May is unprecedented. The details of the deal have not been made public except for a joint declaration to refrain from fighting and to hold parliamentary and presidential elections in 2018. Immediately following the agreement, Haftar called off the LNA's offensive on GNA forces in the vicinity of Sabha, in the south. GNA and HoR representatives met in Rome on 21 May and a commission for dialogue was established as a result. The Islamist militias in the west, however, object to Sarraj's deal with Haftar. They suspect that once Haftar is in Tripoli he will take over power in a military coup. The militants' attack on 18 May on the Brak al-Shati air base, where more than 140 people—mostly LNA troops—were brutally killed, should be considered an attempt at torpedoing the agreement. After the attack, Sarraj suspended his minister of defence and set up an inquiry commission.

Involvement and Interests of Other Countries. A destabilised Libya is a security challenge for neighbouring countries Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia, as well as for EU Member States, notably Italy. Neighbouring countries want to seal their borders to limit smuggling and the extremists' movement. Egypt has an additional political goal: by supporting Haftar, it hopes to curtail the influence of Islamist parties in Libya, which it views as sister organisations of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt cooperates with Russia, which has special forces stationed at an Egyptian base near the Libyan border. Russia also backs Haftar financially, militarily and diplomatically, i.e., it trains LNA fighters. In the 1970s, Haftar studied at a Russian military academy and maintains good contacts with Russian military leaders. Not only is Russia counting on future

[1] A. Minda, P. Sasnal, "The Crisis in Libya and the Rise of Jihadism and Migration," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 21 (871), 10 March 2016.

defence contracts with the Libyan army but it also has plans to establish a military base in Libya (the Qaddafi government was ready to approve the base in 2008).

In February, Italy and Libya signed an agreement to curb illegal immigration, human trafficking and further cooperation on border control. NATO's *Sea Guardian* mission serves similar purposes. The Italians help patrol the Libyan coastline and the southern border. On 23 May, Italy, Libya, Chad and Niger agreed greater border controls and the creation of new migrant reception centres in Chad and Niger. Sarraj does not object to granting third countries greater access to Libyan territorial waters. Because Libyan borders likely will be sealed soon, migration has intensified in recent weeks. So far in 2017, more than 45,000 people have reached Italian shores, more than in the same period last year. Stopping the migration, however, will keep thousands of people stranded in Libya, where, according to the UN, they are living or being held in inhumane conditions.

European and Russian involvement in Libya also has an economic angle. Libya is a member of OPEC but was excluded from oil production cuts. Its share in European oil imports in recent years has fluctuated between 3% and 8%. In May, oil production surpassed 800,000 barrels a day, the highest output since 2014. Libya's oil infrastructure is located in areas controlled by both internal powers. Hence, the National Oil Corporation (NOC) recognizes them both, which often allows it to maintain production even when fighting erupts. The biggest Libyan oil field, Sharara, in the west is run by a commercial consortium consisting of NOC, Spanish Repsol, French Total, Austrian OMV and Norwegian Statoil. Smaller fields are operated by the Italians. Russia's share of the Libyan oil market is growing: On 20 February, Russian Rosneft and NOC signed a deal to cooperate on research and exploration for oil. Rosneft thus is expanding its presence in North Africa: in Egypt, it already has 30% of the Zuhr oil field. Russian private military companies are already deployed in Libya on such work as demining. These firms could also be used to protect oil infrastructure.

The U.S. administration has yet to define its Libya policy. President Donald Trump does not see a role in Libya for the U.S., but its UN representative, Nikki Haley, confirmed American support for the Libyan Political Agreement of December 2015. To coordinate the activities and interests of third countries as well as to support the Libyan reconciliation process, the so-called "Libya Quartet", consisting of the European Union, United Nations, League of Arab States and African Union, was formed.

Two Stabilisation Plans. There are two competing ideas for the resolution of the Libyan conflict. An inclusive plan by the UN, supported by the EU, AU and the U.S. under the former administration, presupposes balanced power-sharing among the main political forces by way of a national unity government. The plan is difficult to put into practice because the consensus needed from all major stakeholders takes time, negotiation and the involvement of many countries. It minimizes the risk, though, that the state-building process can be undermined by its participants, which in turn allows the country to focus on reform and fighting jihadists. Another advantage of the plan is that under the December 2015 agreement, the GNA was established under the leadership of Sarraj. For it to be successful, the GNA now needs the support of the Tobruk-based HoR, propped up by the LNA.

The second plan focuses on militarily strengthening the most powerful faction—Hafter's LNA—so it can dominate the other forces in the country. This plan is supported by Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Its champions think that given the numerous political, regional and tribal divisions in Libya, consolidating rule under Haftar as a strongman could quickly stabilise Libya and marginalise the Islamists. The downside of this plan is there would likely be an escalation in fighting until Haftar can extend LNA control over the country, and that would antagonise large parts of Libyan society and, in the end, may not guarantee stability.

The meeting between Haftar and Sarraj and their provisional agreement attest to calculations by the former's foreign backers that their side has more to gain by partaking in the national reconciliation process. If the general and his forces cannot take control of the whole of Libya by themselves—even if it were possible, neither the EU nor the UN would consent—it seems more rational to legitimise Haftar's current position. If the GNA does not stick to the agreement, it will be more difficult to dispute the legitimacy of an LNA decision to resume fighting. The events after the May agreement show that Haftar has better control of his forces than Sarraj, whose work is being torpedoed by militias theoretically loyal to him. Such a turn of events strengthens Haftar. Russia, therefore, is beginning to play a role like the one it has played in Syria: it aims to increase its involvement so that any agreement on Libya is not possible without Russia.

The best chance for the stabilisation of Libya is not only the Sarraj-Haftar agreement but also the joint effort of the Libya Quartet. If the agreement holds and the parties agree a date for elections, the chances for stability in Libya in the long run will grow. If Haftar allows the LNA to resume its attacks on the GNA, however, long-term stabilisation will require the cooperation of Egypt and Russia.