The Libya Conflict and its Implications for the Broader Region

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FOREWORD

The Report Series aims to explore the Eastern Mediterranean as a distinct geopolitical space in the context of global and regional transitions. It conceptualizes the Eastern Mediterranean’s new geopolitical identity both historically and theoretically and looks at its security and politico-economic prospects. At the same time, it tracks the main challenges that regional states face, and attempts to re-imagine the patterns of conflict and cooperation by examining the potential of regionalism and inter-state cooperation in various sectors. In doing so, the series makes recommendations about the way forward in addressing important obstacles to further regional cooperation and with regard to the strategy that could be followed towards designing a viable and sustainable regionalism project in the Eastern Mediterranean. The series begins with the conceptualization of the Eastern Mediterranean as a region and the specific sector of the environment as an entry point to discussing a more expanded regional cooperation. It then moves to other policy sectors and matters pertaining to the Eastern Mediterranean state policies and interests as well as to the role of greater powers.

Dr. Harry Tzimitras
Director, PRIO Cyprus Centre
INTRODUCTION

Libya is fractured. Its civil war is a complex conflict fought out between myriad smaller militias loosely integrated into two main factions. Khalifa Haftar’s siege of Tripoli and its UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) has at the time of writing gone on for almost a year. After some major gains for Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA), the siege has been stuck in a stalemate with frontlines running along the southern suburbs of the capital. Each side is backed by various regional and extra-regional powers, and the ensuing military stalemate has taken precedence over the democratic transition that many were hoping for after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The civil war was born out of the power vacuum that followed Gaddafi’s removal. State institutions were generally not able to manage the shift from the old regime to the new, and any notion of social cohesion or even general security remains severely limited in the fragmented country. At present, the civil war has taken on the appearance of a low-intensity political and military quagmire, marred by daily drone strikes and smaller skirmishes along the frontlines. Over 120,000 Libyans have been displaced since the beginning of Haftar’s offensive on Tripoli in April 2019, and according to the UNHCR, over one million are in need of humanitarian aid.¹

A political solution has proved elusive for the GNA, with Haftar unwilling to integrate the LNA into a unified Libyan army. Several European countries have tried to take on the role of peacemaker and unite the various factions but have thus far failed. In fact, the different approaches of many of Europe’s southern powers have revealed their diverging interests in North Africa. The lack of a unified approach to the situation has contributed to the fractured and volatile situation. Germany is about to try its hand at bringing Libya’s main players together, but in the absence of an agreed response among foreign actors, their attempt will likely be thwarted. Even as negotiations continue, various outside influencers are ramping up their support, as they flood the country with advanced weaponry. This only serves to further

increase the destructive capacities of each side, effectively torpedoing on-ground efforts to provide security for the population. The most recent diplomatic effort has been undertaken by Russia and Turkey. The two countries called for a ceasefire in Libya while the heads of the warring sides have been called to Moscow for talks - at the time of writing these efforts have yet to prove successful while diplomatic developments around the Libya peace process are rapid.  

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FROM TRANSITION TO STALEMATE

The current civil war in Libya can be traced to the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 and the subsequent toppling of the long-standing Gaddafi regime (established in 1969). What began as peaceful demonstrations for democratic reforms in February 2011 quickly spiralled into all-out civil war following the regime’s violent crack-down on protesters. As local militias were organized and armed to defend the demonstrations, the security situation deteriorated, and Gaddafi’s responses became increasingly brutal. The United Nations Security Council soon isolated his regime, citing protection of civilians, and eventually issued a mandate for military intervention. Initially, the United States, the United Kingdom and France carried out airstrikes and coordinated attacks to halt regime advances against the opposition, but when the mandate was taken over by NATO under the moniker Operation Unified Protector, the intervention took on a clearer anti-Gaddafi approach. By summer, the NATO coalition was in effect supporting the rebel advances on Tripoli; this eventually resulted in the removal of Gaddafi from power in October that same year.

The ousting of the old regime without a clear plan for a democratic transition created a power vacuum that pitted local militias across the country against each other along political, economic, ethnic and tribal lines. As the state monopoly crumbled, it became clear that tribalism trumped nationalism, leaving the transitional government unable to govern large swathes of Libyan territory. Some areas became virtually lawless, with both local militias and radical jihadists vying for control. Elections were held, and there were attempts to foster national unity, yet all efforts have so far failed to achieve anything; in fact they have instead led to even more factions competing for control of the country. Several explanations for Libya’s failed transition from the post-Gaddafi crisis have been presented. While some point to the lack of a coherent plan for the country at the international level, others blame domestic

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4 Ibid, p. 32.
5 Ibid, p. 37.
6 Ibid, p. 36.
factors such as the lack of social cohesion, weak state institutions and few socioeconomic opportunities. Meanwhile, others argue that insufficient effort has been put into reform of the corrupt and opaque economic institutions that survived the revolution, such as the Central Bank of Libya and the National Oil Company, which oversees Libya’s oil fortunes. What is likely a combination of these various explanations has in truth been accelerated by a lack of steady and unifying leadership, destructive foreign involvement and a passive international community.

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THE SECOND LIBYAN CIVIL WAR

The heavy fragmentation of the Libyan political map is well illustrated by its complex civil war, which broke out in 2014. Grossly ineffective, the post-Gaddafi government more or less undermined any notion of national unity, resulting in chaos and crisis. Today, there are two different governments, each grounding their legitimacy in the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR), and each vying for control of Libya’s vast territory. Both governments receive support from foreign states, some of which in fact contribute, at least nominally, to both sides. In addition, international jihadi networks such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, as well as numerous locally based militias and paramilitary groups, are trying to wrest control and influence for themselves.

At present, the map of Libya is divided between two main factions: General Khalifa Haftar’s LNA controls most of the territory from eastern Cyrenaica and Sirte to large parts of western Tripolitania and most of the southern Fezzan region; forces loyal to the UN-backed GNA defend the capital, Tripoli, while also controlling most of Zintan to the west, as well as Misrata along the Mediterranean coast. However, this situation between what appears to be two sides competing for control of the country in fact obscures the numerous other actors operating at the local level, some of whom most likely have national aspirations. At the same time, while the major factions are fighting each other, the above-noted jihadi networks are taking advantage of the situation and are again making advances, disrupting Libya’s political progress at every turn.

The eastern warlord

Haftar, an officer serving under Gaddafi, defected to the United States after the regime’s war with Chad during the 1980s, but returned in 2011 to fight against the old regime. His LNA is based in eastern Libya, where they have the support of the Tobruk-based HoR. The HoR was elected in late June 2014 to succeed the General National Council (GNC) based out of Tripoli,

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shortly after Haftar launched his Operation Dignity campaign against the Islamist alliances controlling Benghazi. However, with the security of voters severely threatened during the June election, turnout was only 18 percent and the HoR was subsequently declared defunct by the Islamist parties that had dominated the GNC. Thus, the GNC was restored in Tripoli while the HoR, comprised mainly of liberal and anti-Islamist parties, set up in LNA-controlled Tobruk.  

The establishment of the HoR set a precedent for the parallel government of Abdullah al-Thinni, formed in neighbouring Al-Bayda. This government is regularly referred to as the “Tobruk authorities,” and is still being upheld, although under the domination of the LNA. The Tobruk authorities have so far maintained their support for Haftar and his Operation Dignity, a campaign that has enabled Haftar to take over most of Libya’s territory under the pretense of fighting Islamic terrorism. Although it has successfully rooted out ISIS and Al-

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The Second Libyan Civil War

 Qaeda forces in most of north-eastern Libya, Haftar and the LNA have also attacked the Islamist groupings that were loyal to the GNC and the so-called National Salvation Government (NSG) in Tripoli. In April 2019, Haftar began to advance on the capital itself, seeking to take control of the whole country.

Haftar’s secular stance has secured him the support of several foreign governments. Among the most prominent are Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, from whom he has received substantial military and economic aid, including drone support, armed vehicles and other weaponry. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia, France and Russia have also been supportive to varying degrees, and for different reasons. The Saudis are investing heavily in the ongoing propaganda war between the two sides for the same anti-Islamist reasons as the UAE; France aims to support Haftar’s counter-terrorist efforts with special forces operations; and Russia, which in fact has supported both sides tacitly in the past, is looking to increase its influence in the region.

The divided capital
The situation in Tripoli is even more fragmented. Following the HoR’s establishment in Tobruk, the GNC was reinstated by the leading Islamist parties and a National Salvation Government (NSG) was declared. The NSG, led by Khalifa Ghwell, received substantial support from Turkey, Qatar and Sudan due to its Islamist make-up, with the Muslim Brotherhood a very influential member through its Justice and Construction party. These countries primarily contributed financially and by facilitating arms trade with the Libyan Islamists, and in Qatar’s case, with substantial propaganda power through pro-Islamist media outlets and social media campaigns. However, parallel to these events, representatives from both the GNC and the HoR agreed to a UN-brokered deal in 2015, dubbed the ‘Libyan Political Agreement’ (LPA), or Skhirat-agreement, which created the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli.

The LPA reduced the GNC to a consultative body and recognized the HoR as the constituent body of the government, pending a vote of confidence. Additionally, it created a Presidential Council (PC) to act as the head of state. Despite this vote of confidence having yet to materialize, with the HoR continuing to support al-Thinni’s government in Al-Bayda, the

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13 Missaglia, “Chaos in Libya.”
15 Lorenzo Marinone, “Information Warfare in Libya. The online advance of Khalifa Haftar” (Rome: Centro Studi Internazionali, 02.05.2019). URL: https://cesi-italia.org/contents/Analisi/Informazione%20warfare%20in%20Libya%20The%20online%20advance%20of%20Khalifa%20Haftar_1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3dbzl-7hEj8s8fJXNsOT4HDx22LXmxQ6tZioP3ezl28E17halDjJHWQCC (Accessed on 18.09.2019)
16 Marinone, “Information Warfare in Libya.”
17 Missaglia, “Chaos in Libya.”
GNA still functions as Libya’s only internationally recognized government and is led by Fayez al-Sarraj as acting prime minister. Importantly, the GNA has managed to secure the control of, and support from, the country’s two central financial institutions, the Central Bank and the National Oil Corporation, the latter controlling the majority of Libya’s petroleum industry.

Some of the Islamist parties went on to ally themselves with militias from the by then de facto city-state of Misrata as well as with more Jihadist leaning groups associated with Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM). This coalition, dubbed Libya Dawn, sought to counter Haftar’s military power and acquire territory for the Tripoli authorities. However, after succeeding to secure control of the Tripoli International Airport from a Zintan based militia, this Islamist coalition started to disintegrate as public support for the NSG eroded by the time of the GNA’s arrival in 2016, causing many to switch their loyalties to Al-Sarraj. Today, the NSG is effectively disbanded and GNA forces have driven Ghwell out of the capital. Furthermore, following Haftar’s advances, the Islamist militias now generally contribute to the defence of Tripoli together with the GNA’s allied militias. Along with the Misratan militias, the forces aligned with the GNA also managed to oust the so-called Islamic State (IS) from the town of Sirte, south of Misrata.

The local actors
The two main factions in the conflict are in fact made up of loose coalitions of different militias. As such, the ‘Libyan National Army’ is not an army per se. Beyond its core militia of about 7,000 soldiers, it also includes 18,000 or so auxiliary troops comprising various armed tribal and local groups, as well as foreign mercenaries. This makes the LNA Libya’s largest coalition by far, but it also makes it even more dependent on cohesion, discipline and clear lines of communications. On the other side of the siege line, the coalition defending Tripoli can perhaps be seen as more anti-Haftar than pro-GNA. Their allegiances, foundations and targets vary greatly, yet the ongoing siege of Tripoli has consolidated them to some degree. Despite this, the participating militias will likely remain suspicious of each other due to earlier rivalries. Additionally, if one or several of the larger factions were to defect to the LNA or flee, the coalition could crumble quickly.

Being a paramilitary in Libya is profitable. Literally anyone registered as a fighter (or revolutionary) with the central government, whether they be pro-GNA or -LNA, is paid a monthly salary by the government through the Central Bank. Participation also provides access to revenues from trafficking and illicit trade, such that, arguably, militias exchange their goal of achieving stability to that of sustaining the fragmented status quo. This dynamic

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18 Ibid.
21 Ibid, p. 5.
has allowed for both the maintenance and relative independence of Libya’s militias. These groupings differ in make-up and principles, and thus they vary in terms of purpose (local defense, ideology, religion, etc.) and targets (rival militias, Islamists, LNA, etc.). Local militias, highly variable in size and composition, generally divide their efforts between defending and policing their local community, and pursuing their political and economic goals in competition with other communities. Yet, because of militias’ experience with coalitions such as those of the LNA or the GNA, the dynamics are changing. For example, some militias representing the Tebu and Tuareg minorities in the south have regularly clashed over the control of smuggling routes and oil fields; however, after Haftar’s advances towards the south and west, these have united in order to stage a defence, aligning with the GNA in the process.

The city-state militias stemming from Misrata and Zintan also play a central role: with over 200 militias, Misrata’s military, although divided into smaller units, is among the largest in the country. Today it is aligned with the GNA and takes part in the defence of Tripoli, while also keeping in check the LNA advancement along the coast in Western Libya. Zintan is another de-facto city state, located in the western Nafousa mountain range. In 2014, Zintani militias clashed with some of their current allies that had previously made up the Libya Dawn coalition. Today most of its militias are aligned with the GNA in Tripoli, with the remainder supporting the LNA offensive. These city-states act as smaller, coordinated local coalitions seeking influence in whatever will be the ‘final’ makeup of Libya’s political system, and are opportunistic in terms of who they support.

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24 Pack, “Kingdom of Militias,” p. 27.
### Table I: Libyan militia groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>Area of operation</th>
<th>Targets</th>
<th>Number of militants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Libyan National Army</td>
<td>LNA</td>
<td>Khalifa Haftar</td>
<td>Anti-Islamist</td>
<td>Several areas in Libya</td>
<td>Extremists, jihadists, civilians, minorities</td>
<td>Roughly 7000+18000 auxiliary forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (Defeated)</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Ateyah al-Shaari</td>
<td>Jihadism</td>
<td>Derna</td>
<td>Civilians, security forces, oil infrastructures, state institutions</td>
<td>600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khalid Bin Walid</td>
<td>LNA</td>
<td>Yousif Hussain Salah</td>
<td>Makhdali Salafism</td>
<td>Sabha</td>
<td>Criminals, Chadian militias</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th Liwa – Kani Brigade – Kaniyyat</td>
<td>LNA</td>
<td>Muhsin Khalifa al-Kani</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Tarhuna</td>
<td>Tripoli militias, local tribes</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Deterrent Fores (RADA)</td>
<td>GNA</td>
<td>Abdul Rauf Kara</td>
<td>Makhdali Salafism</td>
<td>Tripoli (Mitiga)</td>
<td>Jihadists, homosexuals, drug users, criminals</td>
<td>Less than 1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nawasi Brigade</td>
<td>GNA</td>
<td>Mustafa Gaddour</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Tripoli</td>
<td>Islamists, jihadists, homosexuals, drug users, criminals</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tripoli Revolutionary Brigade</td>
<td>GNA</td>
<td>Haithem Tajouri</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>East Tripoli</td>
<td>Criminals, competing militias</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301 Battalion</td>
<td>GNA</td>
<td>Mohammed al-Haddad</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>South-West Tripoli</td>
<td>Criminals, competing militias</td>
<td>Less than 1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abu Salim Central Security Force</td>
<td>GNA</td>
<td>Abdulghani Kikli</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Abu Salim Tripoli</td>
<td>Criminals, competing militias</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bynyan al-Marsus Forces</td>
<td>GNA</td>
<td>Mohammed al-Ghasri</td>
<td>Mixed, some Islamist, some Makhdali, some anti-Islamist</td>
<td>Misrata, Sirte</td>
<td>Criminals, competing militias, ISIS, Tawergha ethnic group</td>
<td>Roughly 6000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zintan Military Council</td>
<td>Zintan, GNA</td>
<td>Osama al-Juwali</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Jafareh, Zintan</td>
<td>Criminals, competing militias</td>
<td>Roughly 3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steadfastness Front</td>
<td>NSG</td>
<td>Salah Badi</td>
<td>Islamism</td>
<td>Misrata</td>
<td>Civilians, anti-Islamists, competing militias</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasr Brigade</td>
<td>GNA</td>
<td>Mohammed Kashlaf</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Zawiyya</td>
<td>Opposing tribes, migrants, civilians</td>
<td>Unknown (1200?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some Islamist-leaning militias enjoyed support and legitimization from the NSG while it was still in effect. However, the uprooting of Ghwell at the hands of pro-GNA forces has placed them in an uncertain position.\textsuperscript{26} Furthermore, ties to known terrorist entities like AQIM and Ansar al-Sharia have tarnished their reputation internationally such that some are now targets of sanctions as well as foreign drone strikes and special-forces operations. On the other hand, there are many Islamist and Salafi militias, and so while some have been restricted by their ties to radical jihadists, others have successfully integrated into the coalitions of the two main factions of the war.\textsuperscript{27} This includes the predominantly Madkhali-Salafi militia Special Deterrence Force, or RADA, which is more or less essential to the defence of the capital while also acting as a local police force. On the other hand, and perhaps ironically, Madkhali groups have also been absorbed by Haftar and the LNA, further obscuring his meta-narrative of uncompromising secularism.\textsuperscript{28} Most, however, are aligned with the GNA at the time of writing.

\textbf{Foreign actors}

The Libyan civil war is increasingly becoming a proxy war. Because of the country’s oil reserves, its high migration out-flow, and the civil war’s various Islamist, liberal-leaning and anti-Islamist movements, several regional and international players have become involved. There are also a number of foreign states that have intervened, primarily to curb the influence of their rivals. Thus, Libya is increasingly subject to the dynamics of regional power struggles that have shaped the MENA (e.g., the so-called Arab Cold War). As noted earlier, not only have countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar and the UAE invested their interests in the future of post-Gaddafi Libya, but European states such as Italy and France have taken an active role, and the United States and Russia are also involved to varying degrees. Finally, the United Nations has been continuously engaged in the country’s transition since 2011, although with limited success.

Since 2011, the UN has maintained an arms-embargo on Libya. However, this has been weakly enforced, with several of the above-mentioned states saturating the country with weapons and military equipment. Nor have economic sanctions against the main players come in place, and both Russia and the United States have blocked several motions by the UN Security Council that could check Haftar’s advances.\textsuperscript{29} Instead, such diplomatic actions in combination with lobbying from the UAE and Saudi governments have allowed Haftar’s diplomatic star to rise in the international community—in fact, he has been praised by US President Donald Trump for his fight against terrorists.\textsuperscript{30} And while the UN has given its

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{} Ibid, p. 28.
\bibitem{} Ibid.
\bibitem{} Megersisi, Libya’s Global Civil War, p. 11; p. 13.
\bibitem{} Ibid, p. 12.
\end{thebibliography}
official recognition to the GNA, it has not been able to facilitate a conclusion to hostilities. Additionally, Haftar’s advance on Tripoli has delayed plans for a UN-sponsored National Conference, initially scheduled for fall 2019, which could have seen the two sides meet to discuss a political solution.

Supporting Haftar

It is Haftar’s anti-Islamic stance that is the primary draw for those countries supporting him. Egypt, one of his closest allies, sees him as a natural partner to its own regime, and has provided strong military and economic support. Haftar’s anti-Islamist, and particularly anti-Muslim Brotherhood, rhetoric is almost interchangeable with Al-Sisi’s, and his military credentials speak for themselves. Cairo’s motives for intervention mainly revolve around security and economics, with the two countries sharing a long border that makes Egypt prone to potential spill-overs from the conflict. Moreover, historically it has had close ties to the Libyan petroleum industry, both in terms of cheap oil imports and providing labour. Because of these factors, Egyptian weapons, drones and money are now central to Haftar’s siege of Tripoli, and have been so for most of his campaign.

This approach has also made Haftar popular with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the latter providing him substantial military, economic and diplomatic aid. The UAE is actively engaged in the war, using Chinese-built drones to strike targets in and around Tripoli on almost a daily basis. Riyadh, while apparently more focused on containing Iranian influence in Yemen and Syria than on securing influence in Libya, has facilitated aid for Haftar through a Saudi-aligned, armed religious group, the Madkhalis. Yet because this is one of the country’s largest religious groups, with allegiance from several influential militias on both sides, many are worried of the Saudis’ influence.

There is also the fact that these two countries are working diplomatically to elevate Haftar’s position in international politics, potentially normalizing his candidacy for leader of Libya. To this end, Russia’s voting in the Security Council has also been important.

Given the general disengagement of the US from the Libyan civil war, Russia has found significant leeway for its intervention. Here it is important to note that Russia has supported both factions: despite strong backing for Haftar, it also maintains diplomatic ties with the GNA whose establishment it supported through the LPA. Recently Russian support for Haftar has been even greater and more concrete, as Moscow has provided the LNA with mercenaries on the ground through the infamous Wagner Group, as well as access to arms markets and an influx of fake currency.
Russia’s involvement can be interpreted along both historical and ideological lines. Historically, the Soviet Union (and subsequently the Russian Federation) has nurtured close ties to the Gaddafi regime, supplying it with weapons and military training, in Libya as well as Russia (in fact, most LNA officers received training in Russia at one point). Additionally, by the time of the Arab Spring, Libya owed Russia several billion dollars in various military- and energy-related contracts, which Moscow is keen to recoup. Ideologically, it has been argued that Russian intervention in Libya is part of a greater strategy to counter-balance American influence both regionally and globally.35 This would include securing access to Mediterranean ports and maintaining a stronger presence in the MENA region, with some also arguing that Russia has courted Haftar to advance its relationship with Egypt.36 From a Russian perspective, greater influence in Northern Africa could possibly provide it with leverage over both the EU and NATO.37 Currently, its increased involvement on behalf of Haftar is seen by some as a potential breakthrough for the LNA, and could lead to Putin again assuming the role of kingmaker in a MENA conflict.38 This view is reinforced in light of the key role that Moscow has undertaken in the wake of 2020 in getting the two sides to the negotiation table.

Officially ambiguous regarding their role in Libya, France nevertheless also maintains close cooperation with Haftar. And while having tried to broker peace between the two sides, French special-forces have also provided training for the LNA, been involved in anti-jihadist operations, and have likely supplied weapons.39 French foreign policy has become increasingly engaged in Northern Africa since 2012, and its intervention in the Libyan civil war is related to its operations in Mali, Niger and Chad. It has been suggested that Macron’s policy is opportunistic in its attempt to achieve a swift foreign policy victory: not only would radical Islamists be on the losing side, but France would have a good chance of securing potentially lucrative reconstruction and petroleum contracts in the aftermath of a peace deal.40 However, exposure of French support for Haftar has put Paris in an awkward position, with the end of the conflict nowhere in sight and their strategies at odds with the ongoing UN process as well as the general stance of the European Union. Whether this will force Macron to realign with his European allies remains to be seen, but for the moment he is in deep with Haftar and the Tobruk authorities.

35 Andrea Beccaro, “Russia: Looking for a Warm Sea,” in Foreign Actors in Libya’s Crisis, p. 74.
36 Megersisi, Libya’s Global Civil War, p. 10.
37 Beccaro, Russia: “Looking For a Warm Sea,” p. 88.
There are also examples of solicited support for Haftar and the LNA. Several paid interest groups are operating on his behalf, working to secure diplomatic and economic support—a strategy that has been partially successful. Lobbyists have facilitated deals with private military contractors and foreign militias, allowing Haftar to buy weapons and deploy large numbers of foreign mercenaries among his rank and file. One example is the recently documented presence of the Sudani Rapid Support Force (RSF), commonly known as the Janjaweed, in the eastern LNA-controlled territories of Libya. Haftar’s access to foreign mercenaries allows him to control already conquered areas while focusing most efforts on the campaign against Tripoli, and generally reflects his ability to put funds from foreign backers to military use.

**Supporting the GNA**

With Turkey and Qatar’s support of the GNA against the Egypt and UAE-backed Haftar, the Libyan civil war is well entrenched in the Middle East regional power struggle. And although Turkey’s involvement with the GNA also has a historical component, due to its multi-billion-dollar contracts made under the Gaddafi-regime, perhaps more pressing is its support for the Muslim Brotherhood activities in the country following the uprising, and its opposition to Egyptian and UAE involvement. These factors have prompted Erdogan to play an increasingly more overt role in the conflict, such that Turkey has allowed exiled Libyan Islamists a great deal of freedom in terms of brokering arms imports, and has more recently provided GNA forces with military equipment and precision drone strikes. Diplomatic ties with Al-Serraj have advanced following the erosion of popular support for west-Libyan Islamist groupings, such as the Libya Dawn coalition, and now form the basis for Turkey’s wholehearted contribution to the defence of Tripoli. Moreover, at the beginning of 2020, the Turkish parliament approved the deployment of troops to Libya. However, these are limited to military consultants and trainers in addition to a few hundred Syrian fighters and mercenaries that were sent from Syria.

Qatar’s bet on the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Northern Africa has put it on edge with the other Gulf monarchies. This has however not deterred it from continuing its support for the Islamists, although Doha’s contributions have gradually shifted into the financial sector as the NSG and several of its aligned militias were defeated by either Haftar or the GNA. Qatar funding of several anti-Haftar media campaigns is illustrative of this.

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44 Ibid.


Additionally, Qatar has intensified its support for the UN political process in a bid to strengthen the GNA. As Doha has fewer traditional allies in Libya, Qatar’s present involvement likely hinges more on a wish to block an important propaganda victory for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.47

**Missing in action?**

As with France, the US has remained ambiguous on Libya, with the Trump administration preferring to take a backseat approach so as to not get bogged down in another ‘Endless War,’ as the President has often dubbed them. As noted, this has cleared the way for Russia to take a more active approach, but the US is most likely still monitoring the situation closely. In terms of actual activity though, Washington has refrained from any significant action beyond tacitly backing each side diplomatically on different occasions and contributing to various anti-jihadist operations, especially during the liberation of Sirte from IS.48 However, some have argued for a potential win-win scenario for Trump in Libya, where stronger US diplomatic and economic pressure could force the two sides into negotiations within the UN framework. If Trump could break the current military deadlock and perhaps even negotiate a political solution to the conflict, he would inevitably gain some respect.49 However, the US president’s recent increased efforts to reduce American presence in Syria might hint at his reluctance to become deeply involved in another civil war in the area.50

Although accused of supplying Gaddafi with weapons during the 2011 revolution, China has taken a more neutral stance since the outbreak of the 2014 civil war. Generally operating within the UN framework, Beijing has pledged support to a political solution of the conflict while otherwise remaining in the background.51 It might be worth noting that Chinese weapons have been used extensively by the UAE in its support of Haftar; however, reports have suggested that these weapons were probably not supplied specifically for use in Libya.52 Moreover, considering Beijing’s multi-billion dollar contracts with the Gaddafi regime and its general strategy of asserting its influence in the Middle East and Africa, it would seem likely that the country has an interest in Libya.53 However, having learned from the backlash of its support for Gaddafi, it now seems China’s main tactic is to hold out for a resolution before it engages directly with one of the factions.

48 Ibid, p. 12.
53 Ramani, “Where Does China Stand?”
HUMAN AND REGIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

Since 2011 the situation in Libya has created major security concerns for neighbouring countries, mainly revolving around jihadist terrorism and migrant flows. These concerns remain real today, and are being addressed by the continued American airstrikes on IS militia groups in the south and the recent renewal of the EU deal to curtail cross-Mediterranean migration by funding the Libyan coast guard and their indefinite internment of captured migrants.

Migration and refugee waves
Contrary to the other countries in the Maghreb, Libya has historically been a destination for migrants rather than a place from which people migrate. According to estimates, until the 2011 revolution, almost half the country’s population were foreign workers, most of whom worked in the country’s expanding petroleum industry. During the ensuing civil war however, over 768,000 foreign nationals—mainly Tunisians and Egyptians—fled the country. Today, estimates suggest that there are hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons in Libya, with UN estimates putting over 800,000 in need of humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, around 120,000 have been displaced since the offensive against Tripoli began in April 2019.

While the country’s post-revolutionary instability has garnered international attention, so too have its flows of refugees and migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean—as up to 90 percent of those crossing embark in Libya. Although some of these migrants are persons

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56 MPC team, “Libya migration profile” (Florence: Migration Policy Centre, June 2013). URL: http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/migration_profiles/Libya.pdf [Accessed on 05.11.2019]
57 UNHCR, “Libya Fact Sheet.”
displaced by the Libyan civil war, even more are in fact fleeing from the wider Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa. As such, Libya is actually much more of a transit country than an original source of migrants; for example, most of the 180,000 migrants who arrived in Italy in 2016 crossed from Libya.\(^5^9\) The bureaucratic overload of such numbers has nearly crippled European immigration services, and elicited a virulent anti-immigration political reaction in many countries and from the EU itself. The numbers increased dramatically in 2014-2016 due to several factors: weakening of border regimes and internal control in Libya during the ongoing civil war; droughts and instability in neighbouring countries.

In addition to the obvious lack of security for migrants in Libya, these migration flows also stimulate illicit trade and human trafficking in the border regions.\(^6^0\) This feeds transnational criminal networks that deal in weapons, drugs and persons, and in and of itself presents dire consequences for the various countries in the region: gangs and human traffickers are better armed and illicit arms trade remains unchecked, both of which threaten overall stability and local security. Moreover, trafficking also provides revenue to militias on both sides of the civil war, besides stimulating corruption at government level in Tripoli.\(^6^1\) This obscures the situation and obstructs efforts to address it.

As the EU tightened immigration policy in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis, the GNA was pressured to stop migrants leaving Libya for Europe.\(^6^2\) Italy has taken an active role in this effort, due to its geographic proximity and its history of migration cooperation with Libya. For example, in 2017 the two countries renewed an earlier (2008) agreement that institutionalized the de-facto outsourcing of migrant containment to Libya, an initiative that has been supported and partly funded by the EU as well.\(^6^3\) Considering the country’s political chaos however, it is perhaps not surprising that this agreement has worsened the situation for migrants in or off the coast of Libya. This action has also incurred heavy criticism from media and non-governmental actors,\(^6^4\) and led the UN to close some internment camps and move detainees to safer locations. Nevertheless, thousands still remain in harm’s way.

These initiatives have, however, strongly curbed migration flows out of Libya, almost halving numbers of migrants making the trip to Europe. Funding the coast guard has been

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64 Ibid; Hayden, “The U.N. Is Leaving Migrants to Die in Libya.”
an important factor in this, but stronger border controls in the Libyan south and information campaigns in sub-Saharan countries have also played important roles, underlining Libya's status as a transit country.\(^{65}\) The civil war also factors in this development, as migrants are increasingly aware of the dangers posed by being detained in Libya, with several examples of interned refugees getting caught in the crossfire.\(^{66}\) Obstructing migrant efforts to reach Europe also has implications for Libya's neighbouring countries. For example, reports have shown that greater numbers are settling in the wider Maghreb, in part because of Libya's stricter migration regimes.\(^{67}\) This poses a challenge to governments in countries like Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, where the influx of mostly Christian sub-Saharan Africans is causing demographic pressures and public reactions, as well as the usual socioeconomic problems caused by mass-immigration.\(^{68}\) While these issues might be cause for concern, perhaps especially in the new democracy of Tunisia, they might also present an opportunity for cooperation with both African and European neighbours, as well as a reason for aid and international support.

**Jihadist terrorism**

Jihadist networks, such as IS and AQIM, have been contained— to some degree—by the various factions of the civil war, perhaps most notably the LNA in Benghazi and the Misratan militias in Sirte. Many fighters remain, however, hiding out in the southern Libyan Desert and likely also in the hinterland of Sirte. The vastness of the Sahara Desert, few border controls and the two factions' focus on fighting each other enable jihadists to regroup after their setbacks since the outbreak of the war. Although their numbers should not be exaggerated, there have been several cases of jihadist terrorism in both urban and rural areas, as well as reports of IS taking control of strategic points in the southern Fezzan region.\(^{69}\) Thus, despite the constant threat of US airstrikes and hostile militias, Libya is still considered to be a potential terrorist hotbed, perhaps rightly so.\(^{70}\)

Libya has a long history of Jihadist violence: as far back as the 1980s the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIPG) tried to stage a string of insurrections against the Gaddafi regime.\(^{71}\) Then, as now, Libyan Jihadists travelled abroad for practical experience and to join global Jihadist movements. In the 1980s the hub was Afghanistan; today it is Syria. Clearly, the

\(^{65}\) Barigazzi, “Italy sees unexpected reduction in Mediterranean migration flows.”


\(^{67}\) Malka, “Destination Maghreb.”

\(^{68}\) Ibid, p. 2.


\(^{70}\) Laessing & al-Warfalli, “US air strike kills 17 in southern Libya.”

presence of IS cells in Libya carries immense security implications for the region. The group became active in Libya soon after the revolution, proclaiming its caliphate in the cities of Sirte in 2014 and Derna in 2015. Sirte, where Gaddafi was killed during the 2011 uprising, was widely covered by world media for the brutal jihadist executions of Coptic Christians kidnapped from Egypt. It took lengthy campaigns coordinated with foreign special forces to oust the jihadists from both cities. By 2016, IS presence was distinctly more limited and its fighters had been chased into the desert. Yet, because attention is now focused on the ongoing siege of Tripoli, some experts see a real possibility of radical resurgence.\(^{72}\)

Jihadist terrorism has had important security implications for all of Libya’s neighbours. Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Chad have all seen spikes in jihadist violence since the outset of the instability in 2011, and thousands of unregistered weapons stemming from the Libyan conflict are estimated to be circulating in the region.\(^{73}\) Tunisia and Egypt seem to have borne the brunt of jihadi activities, with Tunisia’s transition to democracy imperilled as a result. Several attacks have rocked Tunisia since its own Arab Spring revolution in 2011, including the June 2015 attack on a Sousse beach, in which an IS fighter trained in Libya opened fire on tourists, killing 38 people.\(^{74}\) Egypt has been the target of several serious attacks that trace back to camps and terrorist cells in Libya. These prompted the country to engage more directly in Libya’s civil war through support of Haftar.\(^{75}\) Both countries have sought to increase border security, although that poses its own problems. In Tunisia, for example, strong counterterrorism efforts have been put in place, including daily UAV-patrols and physical barriers. But with no organized system on the Libyan side, where the border regions are controlled by several different militias, the situation remains chaotic and the stalemate in the civil war does little to better it.\(^{76}\) In fact, even if the status of Tripoli were to be resolved, it is likely that consolidating power over the city and its institutions would be of more urgency than strengthening the borders.

Moreover, closing the borders might spur more resistance to the respective regimes, as these border communities rely in large part on trade, licit as well as illicit, across the frontiers.\(^{77}\) Strict border controls might actually catalyse jihadist recruitment unless economic measures to pacify the local population are also put into place. While such issues have brought Egypt and Tunisia together in the struggle to curb violence emanating from the Libyan conflict, a major breakthrough in the security situation is unlikely until Libya settles further.

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\(^{75}\) Feuer et al., “State Collapse in Libya: Prospects and Implications,” p. 48.

\(^{76}\) Pothecary, “A Neighbor’s Dilemma,” p. 6.

\(^{77}\) Ibid.
Considering that IS in Libya has successfully recruited from abroad, the eventual return of foreign fighters poses another problem. Again, Tunisia is the country that will suffer the most from returning Jihadists, having seen an estimated 1500 young men leave for Libya to join extremist groups in the past several years. 78 Many of these have since gone on to fight in Syria, but many too have stayed behind in Libya. However, whereas Syria’s contingent of foreign fighters comprises a remarkably high numbers of westerners, Libya has drawn mostly Africans. One noticeable factor here is the many continental Africans who have joined the various Jihadist groups, with countries such as Kenya, Sudan, Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria all strongly represented. 79 Most of these fighters arrived in 2014-2015, answering an IS call to strengthen its newly formed caliphate in and around Sirte. For the countries of origin, these fighters making contact with the wider Jihadist movement in Libya means the potential bolstering of insurrections at home and the establishment of better organized extremist networks where they didn’t exist before. 80 Again, their numbers should not be exaggerated (they are estimated to be in the low hundreds at the most), in large part due to the US-led air raids. Still, the general security vacuum, weak border regime and continuous stream of migrants moving through the country might allow them to diffuse through the region nonetheless.

**Geopolitical Repercussions in the Eastern Mediterranean**

Apart from instability and various domestic and external security issues, the Libya conflict and the country’s political dynamics have also had direct and indirect repercussions for interstate relations in the Eastern Mediterranean. A case in point is the way that Turkey’s close relationship with the GNA – and the latter’s dependence on Ankara’s support – has transformed into a regional dispute, exacerbating pre-existing problems on maritime zones. 81

On 27 November 2019, Turkey and the GNA signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in this regard. 82 As Libyan Foreign Minister, Mohammed Sayala, noted: “the maritime MoU aims at protecting the legitimate rights of the two countries in their respective [exclusive] economic zones,” and likewise aims at contributing “to the protection of Libyan sovereignty on the Mediterranean.” 83 The MoU essentially paved the way for the two countries to delimit their Exclusive Economic Zones [EEZ] and continental shelves.

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79 Ibid, p. 10.
80 Ibid.
The issue of maritime borders and boundaries has for decades been a sore point in the Eastern Mediterranean, and especially for the Greek-Turkish relationship. The Turkey-GNA MoU disregards entirely Greece’s sovereign rights in the area as well as Athens’ role in the delimitation of these maritime zones. Moreover, it infringes on the rights of Greece and Egypt to negotiate the delimitation of their own EEZs between themselves. A statement from the Greek Foreign Ministry read as follows:

The violator par excellence of international law in the region persists in failing to realise that illegality does not produce law. Turkey’s ongoing violations, sometimes in the form of threats and other times through practical violations of international law, unfortunately not only confirm this capacity but also undermine the stability and interests of all the peoples of the wider region. They also demonstrate Turkey’s flagrant contempt for the principles of good neighbourly relations, the cornerstone of the peaceful coexistence of states and a fundamental precondition for Turkey’s European perspective. It is sad that the Turkish President chose to turn a project of peaceful cooperation into a show of belligerent rhetoric and contempt for international legality… We hope the Turkish leadership comes to realise that respect for international law is not an option, but an absolute obligation.84

The Egyptian Foreign Ministry also issued a statement:

The two memoranda of understanding have no legal effect, they cannot be officially recognised in light of the Skhirat Agreement’s Article 8, which stipulates that the [Libyan] government or the cabinet, not the prime minister, have the authority to sign international agreements…. These two agreements do not have any effect or impact on the rights of the countries on the Mediterranean or maritime borders in the Mediterranean region. 86

The Foreign Ministry of the Republic of Cyprus has also condemned the deal, noting that “Such a delimitation, if done, would constitute a serious violation of international law,” and “would be contrary to the recognised principle of the convention on the law of the sea and the rights of islands’ EEZ.” 87

The Turkish response reflected the long-standing and deep-seated political and legal problems on maritime zones (and beyond) among the states of the Eastern Mediterranean: 88

By the agreement signed with Libya, a part of the western borders of our maritime jurisdiction areas in the Eastern Mediterranean is delimited. The agreement is in accordance with the court decisions that create the international jurisprudence and international law including the relevant articles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. All parties are in essence aware that islands cannot have a cut-off effect on the coastal projection of Turkey, the country with the longest continental coast line in Eastern Mediterranean, that the islands which lie on the wrong side of the median line between two mainlands cannot create maritime jurisdiction areas beyond their territorial waters and that the length and direction of the coasts should be taken into account in delineating maritime jurisdiction areas. As a matter of fact, prior to the signing of the said agreement, Turkey has repeatedly invited all parties to negotiations for a consensus based on equity and remains ready for negotiations. However, instead of engaging in negotiations in response to Turkey’s international law and equity-based approach, the parties only preferred to take unilateral steps and try to shift blame on Turkey. Maximalist and uncompromising Greek and Greek Cypriot claims lie behind this understanding, whereas for example, Kastellorizo, a small island immediately

85 Refers to the political agreement that established the GNA in 2015.
across the Turkish mainland is supposed to generate a maritime jurisdiction area of four thousand times larger than its own surface. This understanding caused Egypt to lose an area of 40,000 square kilometres. Through this agreement with Libya, the two countries have clearly manifested their intention not to allow any fait accomplis.  

Turkey has not signed the Law of the Sea Treaty of 1982 (UNCLOS III), upon which the remaining countries of the region make their maritime claims or signed delimitation agreements (e.g., Cyprus-Egypt, Cyprus-Israel). Moreover, Turkey's maritime policy in the Eastern Mediterranean falls within a broader strategic framework that aims to make the country not only a maritime power with power projection capabilities beyond the Mediterranean, but also a regional – or even, a great – power. Therefore, the build-up of its naval power and its increased emphasis on maritime zones and hydrocarbons are seen as imperatives and means to accomplish its higher aims.  

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90 For more on Turkish foreign policy see, Zenonas Tziaras, Turkish Foreign Policy and Security in Cyprus: Greek-Cypriot Security Perception, PRIO Cyprus Centre, Report 6 (Nicosia: PRIO Cyprus Centre).
the GNA to acquire this MoU on maritime zones, thereby finding some long-sought legitimization for its maritime claims—so far only condoned by northern Cyprus, a break-away entity controlled by Turkey/Turkish-Cypriots and recognized only by Turkey. By establishing an EEZ with Libya, if only on paper, Turkey poses challenges to the delimitation of the Greece-Egypt and, potentially, the Greece-Cyprus EEZ as well, while raising obstacles to the prospect of an EastMed pipeline (between Cyprus, Israel, Greece and Italy).

Apart from external opposition to the Turkey-GNA MoU, there has been domestic backlash as well. Libya's eastern parliament, which is—at least partially—allied with Haftar’s LNA, condemned the MoU as a “flagrant breach” of the country’s security and sovereignty.91 What is more, Khalifa Haftar himself condemned the Turkey-GNA deal, calling it an “act of aggression that threatens international peace and security and marine navigation,” while urging the United Nations Security Council to “confront and thwart Turkish plots that are aimed at restoring its destructive influence in the region.”92

Indeed, the Turkey-GNA agreement complicates the Libya conflict and might raise new obstacles to the peace process,93 i.e., if the crisis escalates with Haftar gaining more power domestically and regional or international actors growing disappointed with the GNA. The EU has also become involved, issuing a European External Action Service (EEAS) statement that says that it “stands in full solidarity with Greece and Cyprus regarding recent actions by Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean, including the Aegean Sea. Turkey needs to respect the sovereignty and the sovereign rights of all EU member-states.”94 In the same vein, a US State Department spokesperson stated:

These developments highlight the risk of the Libyan conflict taking on wider regional dimensions and the urgent need for all interested parties to work toward a negotiated solution. In particular, the announcement of a signed Turkish-GNA delimitation memorandum of understanding has raised tensions in the region and is unhelpful and provocative.95

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It is true that Libya’s domestic instability, and the absence of a government with adequate legitimization, power and control – despite the GNA being the “internationally recognized” government – has had an effect on many other policy issues and geographical locations. There is also the fact that this situation allows various external actors to use the country to promote their own agendas. The Turkey-GNA agreement is a good example of how the lack of a political settlement will continue to produce instability, geopolitical problems and security threats, with implications not only for the future of Libya itself, but for the broader region as well, especially among countries such as Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Cyprus, Israel and Libya.
CONCLUSIONS

The obstacles to a political solution of the Libyan civil war are many. Even though the GNA supposedly has been open to recognizing Haftar as leader of a united Libyan military under its command, the LNA remains outside civilian control, with Haftar still determined to suppress the Islamist influence in Tripoli and seize power of the country for himself. Furthermore, any potential compromise between the GNA and the LNA would likely alienate Islamist militias to a degree that could catalyse intra-coalition violence. At the same time, the Jihadi networks operating in the country are taking advantage of the ongoing stalemate between the sides, and still hold a presence in the country’s southern regions as well as in the hinterland of Sirte in the north, while refugees and migrants are caught in the crossfire. With all the various foreign states fuelling and rearming the two sides, a continued stalemate is sure to be costly; when you then add the array of local militias to the equation, including the de facto city states in Misrata and Zintan, the Tuareg, Amazigh and Tebu minorities, the complexity of the situation and the magnitude of its stakes are obvious.

In military terms, the odds seem to be favouring Haftar. Currently, he has the numbers and the territory to consolidate his power, as well as backing from foreign allies. Meanwhile, the pro-GNA coalition is encircled and highly vulnerable, although Turkey has stepped up its support. Furthermore, if fighting reaches central Tripoli, the inhabitants might turn against their government to restore order, as they did with the Gaddafi regime in 2011. A military victory for Haftar could in turn be followed by a new spiral of violence as he goes after those who opposed him and tries to assert his power, while it might also spur into action new factions who oppose a return to authoritarian times. But this scenario is put on hold as Russia, supported by Turkey, is trying to get the warring parties to an agreement and ensure the stabilization of Libya through a political transition - in conjunction with the UN-led peace process as well.

The complexity of the Libyan crisis calls for a more unified stance from Europe - which has thus far been weak - and its allies; with an upcoming conference in Berlin – and an ongoing peace process – on the issue, many are hoping to get one step closer to just that. Considering the destabilizing effect this conflict has on the wider region, potentially stretching beyond the Sahel into sub-Saharan Africa as well as southern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean, funding for, and close coordination with, African and afflicted European allies should also be a primary focus. Considering their geographically adjacent position, the Eastern Mediterranean
states have the potential to take a leading role in any mediating efforts, yet the rivalry between Egypt/Greece and Turkey is likely to block any real progress in this regard.

Due to the highly fragmented situation, both security-wise and socially, it is hard to know where to start in addressing the future of the country. Still, going forward, it will be essential to work towards de-incentivizing local participation in militias. This can be accomplished by creating new economic programs and tackling Libya's obscure economic structures; this will serve to bolster social cohesion and offer much-needed economic opportunities for the population. Stimulating alternatives to illicit trade, trafficking and militia participation would advertise stability while also significantly improving the plight of transiting migrants. Even though democracy needs to be the ultimate goal, creating the foundation for a future state that Libyans can actually unite around must come first. Moreover, it is of paramount importance to deal with those states that are currently funding militias and flooding the country with weapons and mercenaries. If Libya can be stabilized domestically, the entire Mediterranean and North African region will benefit as well.
Libya is fractured. Its civil war is a complex conflict fought out between myriad smaller militias loosely integrated into two main factions. Khalifa Haftar’s siege of Tripoli and its UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) has at the time of writing gone on for almost a year. After some major gains for Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA), the siege has been stuck in a stalemate with frontlines running along the southern suburbs of the capital. Each side is backed by various regional and extra-regional powers, and the ensuing military stalemate has taken precedence over the democratic transition that many were hoping for after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The civil war was born out of the power vacuum that followed Gaddafi’s removal. This report looks at the evolution of the Libyan conflict since 2011 and maps out the various domestic and external – both state and non-state – interests that clash directly or indirectly in Libya. Moreover, it analyses the various security implications that the conflict has for the country itself and the broader region more generally. Lastly, the report comments on the prospects of the conflict and the peace process pursued by the United Nations and other international actors.