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Implications of Khalifa Haftar's “Popular Mandate” to Rule Libya

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Introduction

On 27 April 2020, retired Major-General Khalifa Haftar announced, in a televised statement broadcast by channels supporting him, that the Libyan Political Agreement (Skhirat) would be suspended and that the "military establishment" would "respond to the popular will" by assuming power. Haftar's decision comes a few days after his request for a "popular mandate" to run the country's affairs, according to a constitutional declaration issued by the military. But this new development coincides with a military shift in favour of the Government of National Accord (GNA), a year after Haftar launched an assault on Tripoli.

Reversal of Fates

On 26 March 2020, the Libyan GNA launched a military operation to repel an attack by Haftar forces on western Libya, named "Storm of Peace", with the aim of protecting the capital, Tripoli and its surroundings, from the missile and artillery shelling, which has severely damaged its residential neighbourhoods, service facilities and infrastructure. This operation coincided with the first anniversary of Haftar's launch of his attack on the capital on 4 April 2019, and after months of international initiatives that started with the Moscow meeting, coordinated by Russia and Turkey last January.

Since the start of Haftar's attack on the capital, GNA forces have found themselves forced to take a defensive posture due to their lack of coordination, armament, and effective air cover. Its offensive initiatives were limited to the military operation that led to the recovery of Gharyan in late June last year. While this military tactic succeeded in preventing Haftar's forces from further progress, its human and material cost was high, as the capital remained in the range of artillery, missile, and air strikes, and saw an exodus of residents from the fighting hubs.

Since the launch of Operation "Storm of Peace", the western and central regions have witnessed intense activity by the GNA Air Force, with raids on Haftar forces, from Sirte in the east to the Tunisian border in the west. By contrast, Haftar's air force retreated after being the most prominent military actor for a whole year and following a relatively long over the air. The GNA air strikes focused on the main fighting points of Al-Washka and Abu Qurain between Misrata and Sirte, Al-Wattia base southwest of the capital, Tarhuna, which is the main operations room for Haftar forces in the western region, and the cities of the western coastal strip.

The GNA's push towards the skies led to a shift in the military balance in the western and central regions. In the central region, the air strikes inflicted heavy human and material damage on Haftar's forces in Al-Washeka and Abu Qurain, and prevented them from advancing towards the administrative borders of Misrata.⁽¹⁾ The GNA forces achieved a major field breakthrough on the west

¹ "The Commander of the Operations Room of Sirte, with Haftar's Militias, Killed in a GNA Raid," *The New Arab*, 29/3/2020, accessed on 5/5/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2yQPLJC>.



coast by regaining control of the entire coastal strip between the capital, Tripoli, and the Tunisian border, and recovering the cities of Sabratha, Sorman, Al-Ajilat, Al-Jameel, Rikdalin and Zalatan, Al-Assah, and Al-Tawilah, in a lightning military operation in which they seized weapons, equipment and machinery. They also dismantled several armed groups and pushed others to flee back to Al-Wattia base. At the same time, the successive drone raids have neutralized the same strategic base and brought it out of service, after serving as a springboard for air strikes on Tripoli and the west, and a backyard camp for the Russian Wagner mercenaries. As soon as the western coastal strip was brought under their control and Al-Wattia neutralized, GNA forces headed to the city of Tarhuna, the main operations room in the western region, and managed to penetrate into its administrative borders, in parallel with air strikes targeting the “Kaniyat” camps of Haftar’s militia forces.⁽²⁾

Although GNA forces made important field progress during the first day of their movement towards Tarhuna, they were satisfied with securing their gains and imposed a siege on the city. It appeared that the nature of the battle there would not allow a repeat of what happened the western coastal strip; the geography is governed by elevated terrain and only two roads lead to the city centre, in addition to the complex social fabric in the region that extends to the southern fringes of the capital. On the other hand, there are not many options left for the “Kaniyat” forces, which are the solid core of Haftar’s forces in the city, desperately trying to defend their recent positions, taking advantage of GNA reliance on the air force due to the city’s overpopulation.

Ultimately, GNA forces succeeded, within a month of launching Operation “Storm of Peace” in securing the western coastal strip, neutralizing Al-Wattia base, imposing a blockade on the city of Tarhuna, and tightening the noose on convoys of supplies coming from the eastern region through Al-Jufra base. Meanwhile, securing the capital against the daily shelling depends on the development of the field situation in Tarhuna. In the event that the supply lines continue to be cut and GNA forces can recover the city, such development will mark the end of the battle on the southern frontiers of the capital.

Haftar’s “Popular Mandate”

In this context, it is possible to read Haftar’s declaration that he would “accept the popular mandate to assume power,” and its connection to the military upheaval on the field over the past month, and the repercussions it produced for its forces. These developments narrowed his options after he rejected, on more than one occasion, any political initiatives (regional and international) that would position him as a partner in the Libyan political scene. After the rapid progress achieved GNA forces, he found himself in a position that could not protect his incubators in the western region of the country. On the other hand, the high human cost incurred by the tribes of the eastern region and their cities as a result of the attack on Tripoli, without achieving the quick and easy deduction that Haftar promised at the launch of the operation a year ago, is an additional pressing factor exposing cracks in social and tribal support that Operation Dignity has received in the Eastern Region since 2014.

² For example, see: “GNA Forces Attack Tarhuna from 7 points... Read about It,” Arabi 21, 19/4/2020, accessed on 1/5/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3bPcioH>.

Although the region has not yet witnessed widespread and rejected manifestations of rejection and rebellion, there are several indications that Haftar's media, security and social "machine" is facing great difficulties in promoting the continuation of the military operation in the west of the country. He could also be struggling to control possible disruptions in a social hub that receives the corpses of the fighters every day without any resolution to an increasingly complex conflict on the horizon. Perhaps the heavy presence of foreign fighters in various fighting locales is another indication of the decline in the Haftar camp's ability to mobilize and recruit in the eastern region, and in the incubators loyal to it in the western and central regions. This foreign presence that cannot be entirely relied upon in resolving the battle, just as regional sponsors cannot be relied upon to bring in more fighters despite the frequent flights between Abu Dhabi, Khartoum and N'Djamena. This is in light of the serious economic difficulties experienced by the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, due to the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic, the collapse of oil prices, and the decline in demand for port services and transit trade.⁽³⁾

It is not yet clear whether Haftar's decision to take power, in his military capacity, was taken at the leadership level of the eastern region or at the request of the regional patrons, but he remains, in any case, unable to change the reality on the ground. In the east, Haftar has held all the military, security, and executive powers since 2014 and the interim government headed by Abdullah Al-Thani represents only a political facade with no real authority on the ground. The same applies to the Parliament, which has been incapable of holding even a plenary session for several years. In the western and central regions, Haftar has no real influence except in a very narrow geographical area that is currently limited to Sirte, Tarhuna and some social components in Bani Waled and Zintan, which are unlikely to persevere. In the south, ruled by intertwined and complicated social, tribal, and ethnic balances, the features of reshaping loyalties have begun in a manner consistent with recent events, which may lead to Haftar's concentrated military influence, originally, being limited to locations in Sabha, Kufra, and other less important towns.⁽⁴⁾

Taken together, these facts lead to the conclusion that Haftar's announcement alluded to a partition scenario. He knows that his decision to install himself as ruler over Libya, in light of the current political and social fragmentation, declining support on the ground will remain confined to the Eastern Province and the Petroleum Crescent, at best. Examining the implications of the political and media discourse that accompanied the declaration further indicates this allusion. It was marked by the evocation of the term "Barqa" (Cyrenaica) instead of "eastern region," a term that refers to pre-unification Libya, and by the presentation of the ongoing conflict as between the east and west of the country, with historical narratives related to the leadership status of Barqa and the roles of its tribes, and through statements of allegiance read out after tribal meetings.⁽⁵⁾

3 "Haftar Stops Fighting in Tripoli and Emirati Officials Secretly Land in Khartoum to Discuss Sending Mercenaries to Libya," Al Jazeera Net, 29/4/2020, accessed on 1/5/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2KQ0EhB>.

4 "Libya... the Tripoli Government Surprised Haftar in Sabha," Anadolu Agency, 1/5/2020, accessed on 1/5/2020, in: <https://bit.ly/2VUY3co>.

5 Libya channel, *al-Hadath*, for example.



Fate of the “Mandate”

The fate of Haftar’s “mandate” to govern Libya, even if the matter is reduced in the eastern region, is governed by developments on the field, the regional powers interfering in Libya, and the ability of Haftar himself to control the situation in the eastern region. On the military front, the course of events, based on an objective reading of what has been achieved in recent weeks and the ongoing preparations tends towards a further decline in the influence of the retired general. Indeed, the GNA seems to be continuing - despite the differences in its camp and its poor performance on more than one issue - its investment in agreements concluded with Turkey that had the most prominent role in the recent military shift.

There are several indications the outcome of the Al-Wattia base situation may not be resolved until much later, and that the training carried out by the Turkish Air Forces, which included mid-flight re-fuelling, is related to these preparations, given that the base includes fortifications difficult to destroy with drones.⁶ Although the base is currently out of service after most of its facilities were destroyed, seizing full control over it will represent a major political and propaganda victory for the GNA. The restoration of Tarhuna will enable the GNA to deal a painful blow to the opponents’ morale, and open the path to the Jufra base, Sirte and the Petroleum Crescent.

In view of the current situation in the Haftar camp, the cohesion of the social and political front loyal to it in the eastern region remains another important determinant of the fate of his “mandate” declaration. Perhaps Haftar is avoiding deciding the fate of the Tobruk parliament and its president Aguila Saleh Issa, who is from the influential al-Obaidat tribe as well as the fate of the Abdullah al-Thani government, because he is wary of the disintegration of the political and tribal belt supporting him since the start of the “Operation Dignity” in 2014. Previous examples, such as the 17 February revolution in addition to the launch of Operation Dignity, show that the balance of power has a significant impact on fragile political and tribal loyalties. The situation in the eastern region is further complicated and shaken, and reports have been received of the GNA intention to form an operations room for eastern region liberation led by a senior officer from the region, and with the participation of battalions of eastern residents displaced to the west, continuing its battle in the eastern region, through the tribes themselves.

Meanwhile, Haftar’s declaration has yet to be explicitly accepted by any regional or international force, neighbouring countries in particular. There is no doubt that the main reason for this is its military defeats rather than lack of legitimacy. The US ambassador to Libya warned of the danger of taking unilateral steps in dictating the future of Libya, while the spokesman for the United Nations Secretary-General considered the Skhirat Agreement the only international framework applicable to Libya. The Russian foreign minister stressed that his country does not support Haftar’s statements, while the Tunisian president rejected any division of Libya.

⁶ Emad Abu Al-Rus, “Arriving on the outskirts of Libya... Turkish Fighters in the Mediterranean... Why?”, Arabi 21, 4/22/2020, accessed on 1/5/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3aU4MHT>.



Conclusion

The retired Major General Khalifa Haftar's announcement that he will assume full power in Libya following a military shift in favour of the Government of National Accord, reveals the limited options available to him. It is likely that this will lead him to take the shortcut of dividing the country and activating his alleged popular mandate within "Cyrenaica." However, his ability to do this remains dependent on the fate of the current battle, and his ability to obtain regional and international support and control the social, tribal and political base that supports him in the eastern region.