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# Libya after the Fall of Al-Watiya

Unit for Political Studies

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### Unit for Political Studies

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The Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) forces recaptured the strategically important Al-Watiya airbase on 18 May 2020, in the context of a shift witnessed by the ongoing battles in western Libya since General Haftar launched an attack on the capital last year. This defeat represents a springboard for the restoration of GNA control over all the cities of the west coast and steps towards the city of Tarhuna and towards targeting the supply lines between Al-Jufra air base and fighting hubs in the west.

## The Significance of al-Watiya's Fall

Al-Watiya Air Force Base is located southwest of Tripoli, 140 kilometres away, and within the administrative borders of the city of Aljmail, just 27 kilometres from the Tunisian border. The base was established by US forces in 1942 during the allied administration of Libya during World War II. Its infrastructure and facilities were developed under the rule of Muammar Gaddafi and it was able to accommodate large numbers of aircraft as well as 7,000 military personnel.

The base is far away from any residential areas and bordered by a terrain that provides natural fortifications. It was bombed by NATO forces in 2011, before coming under the control of military formations from Alzintan and allied tribes. The base returned to the forefront of events in 2014 following the division that accompanied the launch of Haftar's Operation Dignity to which the Alzintan forces allied themselves. Since then, the base has remained one of the advance sites for Operation Dignity in the western region.

The base has played an important military role since Haftar launched the attack on the capital last year, as it became a centre to gather and load supplies for Haftar's forces and allied mercenaries and a launch point for aircraft that targeted Tripoli, Zawiya and other cities under the control of the GNA, west and southwest of the capital. Since the GNA launched Operation Peace Storm, the base suffered a series of drone strikes, severely damaging its equipment and infrastructure, and killing a number of individuals. The victims have mainly hailed from Rajban and Alzintan, or been deserters from the cities of the West Coast, among them their commander Osama Msek.

On 5 May 2020, joint forces affiliated with the GNA attempted to storm and control al-Watiya, but were forced to retreat after incurring human losses, returning on 18 May to take full control of the base following the withdrawal of Haftar's militants. It appears that the interruption of supplies to those at the base, the military pressure and the human and material losses inflicted by several weeks of continuous air strikes, in addition to arrangements made by the GNA with social groups in the region that secured GNA control in exchange for allowing the withdrawal of the Alzintan and Rajban militants back to their regions and leaving others to flee back to areas under Haftar's influence.



## Securing the Capital from All Sides

After regaining control of all the cities of the West Coast and Al-Watiya base, the GNA still has three important military fronts to capture in order to secure the capital and the western region as a whole, and to enhance its negotiating positions in any upcoming political settlement. These fronts are in the areas south of Tripoli, Tarhuna, and Sirte - Al-Jufra. Although the battle appears generally in the form of interlinked rings that lead one to the other, many field and societal particularities apply to each front.

As soon as Al-Watiya was recaptured, GNA forces moved to the city of al-Asaba, which was one of the ports of entry for Haftar forces into Gharyan and then Tripoli on 4 April 2019, taking control of them after one day of clashes. Despite the limited population size of the city of al-Asaba, taking control of it required securing the southern flank of Gharyan, the road leading to Alzintan, Rajban and the other cities of Jabal Nafusa, as well as opening the road towards the cities of Mizda, Qurayyat and Ash Shwayrif, which are major service stations for supply convoys coming from Al-Jufra airbase.

Despite no indications that the GNA forces are ready to advance on these towns, their drone attacks on convoys passing through them over the past weeks has limited the ability of Haftar's forces in the western region to withstand the scarcity of fuel and ammunition supplies. The GNA appears to be counting on a policy of continuous pressure to establish understandings with social groups in these areas, as they did at al-Watiyah. Initial indications appear that a breakthrough can be achieved in this direction, in light of the statement issued by the tribes of Mizda city, in which they declared loyalty to the GNA and desire to distance the region from any armed conflict.

Seizing Al-Watiya represented a significant symbolic victory for the GNA going beyond the strategic field gain. Although the capital and the cities of the western region are safer, this does not mean the collapse of areas south of the capital and the city of Tarhuna is inevitable. They are the two most important fronts in the vicinity of Tripoli, as happened in the cities of the western strip. Haftar and his regional supporters realize that the fall of Tarhuna and areas south of the capital will represent the greatest blow to his efforts to control western Libya, and that the repercussions will not stop at the borders of Tripoli and the west. Consequently, For this reason, Haftar's forces have bombed streets, farms, housing, mosques, and schools in the regions south of Tripoli to impede the progress of the GNA forces, prevent the return back to normal daily routine and of the displaced. This has posed a real challenge that has hindered progress and killed large numbers of GNA fighters in recent days.<sup>(1)</sup>

Despite these field difficulties, the GNA forces are slowly advancing and recovering areas that have been under the control of Haftar forces since April 2019, and are close to surrounding Tripoli Airport and Qasr Bin Ghashir; the two most heavily fortified outposts in the south of the capital. In the same context, the "Al-Kaniyat" forces (of the Al-Kani family), which forms the solid core of Haftar's forces

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, "Military Engineering Brigades Continue the Process of Removing Mines Planted by the Haftar Militias, South of Tripoli." YouTube, Al-Ahrar Libya Channel, 27/5/2020, accessed 30/5/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/36JrQbK>.



in the Tarhuna suburbs and south of Tripoli, realizes that the fall of the hubs south of the capital will lead to the siege of Tarhuna.

The pressure on supply lines and the withdrawal of Russian “Wagner” mercenaries has compounded the difficulty of the battle being fought by Haftar’s forces in their recent positions in the region. Highly trained mercenaries had been providing, in recent months, advanced operations along the southern outskirts of the capital.<sup>(2)</sup> Given these facts combined, it appears that the remaining positions of Haftar forces in the area are likely to collapse eventually with the battles spreading to the fringes of Tarhuna.

## The Battle of Tarhuna

Since April 2019, Tarhuna has been Haftar’s main operations room in the western region. His capture of Tarhuna, along with Gharyan, represented the most important field gains achieved at the beginning of its attack on the capital, with its importance doubling after GNA forces recovered the city of Gharyan in late June of the same year. Moreover, the city of Tarhuna is gaining importance with the Haftar forces from its geographical location and its social extension to the southern and eastern belt of the capital. Members of the Tarhuna tribes represent varying proportions of the inhabitants of Qasr bin Ghashir, Ain Zara, Wadi Al-Rabi’a, Souq Al-Khamis and various neighbouring towns, in addition to its proximity to the road and to the Misrata expressway. The main military force in the city, known as al-Kaniyat is one of the most formidable armed formations among the pro-Haftar militia in the western and central regions. When the GNA Forces took control of the cities of the western coastal strip, they headed towards the city of Tarhuna and came very close, in conjunction with unmanned air raids on kaniyat camps and locations within the city. Despite the field gains achieved by GNA forces in their April offensive, they were forced to retreat, while maintaining their siege of most access points to the administrative borders of the city. The GNA seems to have realized the difficulty of replicating their gains on the western coastal strip on the Tarhuna Front, with several factors impeding field gains in a quick surprise assault.

On the other hand, the Kaniyat forces are aware that their options are very limited, and that the siege and drone attacks will definitely affect its military capabilities. It also realizes that the collapse of its advanced defence lines in the suburbs of south Tripoli will reflect negatively on the morale of its fighters, and will narrow its range of movement on the ground, thus limiting military operations into the city itself. The withdrawal of Russian mercenaries from the outskirts of southern Tripoli and Tarhuna is compounded by factors of field weakness, whose indicators have begun to appear through the continuous retreat of Haftar forces in the airports, Qasr bin Ghashir and Ain Zara. At the same time, the city’s home front is another weak spot for the Kaniyat forces, in view of their assassination campaigns against family, tribal and political targets in the city since their control over it.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Withdrawal of Russian Mercenaries from Tripoli ... Final Departure or Abandonment of Haftar?”, Al Jazeera Live, 29/5/2020, accessed 30/5/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3ciZ0QA>.



## Al-Jufra and Questions about the Russian Role

Al-Jufra Air Base has enjoyed an advanced function in the military operations of Haftar forces since the start of its attack on Tripoli and the western region. In April 2019, it was the point of contact with the Emirati Al-Khadim base south of Al-Marj, and with Sweihan Air Base in Abu Dhabi, where flight tracking applications showed frequent flight activity and Emirati freight planes entering the base, in addition to becoming a centre for mercenaries from the neighbouring countries of Africa to gather.

For a whole year, supplies continued to flow from the base of Al-Jufra to Haftar forces in the western region across the road passing from Mizda, Qurayyat and Ash Shwayrif, but the movement across this road witnessed a significant decline due to the repeated GNA drone strikes on the supply convoys. Al-Jufra Air base has returned to the top in recent days after the withdrawal of large numbers of Russian mercenaries from the southern outskirts of Tripoli, and after the US military command in Africa “Africom” revealed the stationing of 14 Russian military aircraft in it to support the military effort of Haftar’s forces.<sup>(3)</sup> Although the Russian bias towards Haftar is not new, the arrival of the MiG and Sukhoi military aircraft to this strategic base, and the subsequent US reactions, raises many questions about the activity of the Russian Air Force and the limits of the role it can play in light of the continuous setbacks of Haftar, in addition to its relationship with the Turkish support for the GNA, which was the most contributor to the recent military shifts.

While the Russian leadership remains silent about the details of its intervention in Libya, the Russian media have broadcast a brief statement by the Vice-Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Council of the Russian Federation denying the news,<sup>(4)</sup> which added to doubts about Russian intentions and the implications of its widespread interference in complex Libyan affairs, which appear open to many possibilities. It is clear that their retreat in the western region affected the political situation of Haftar in the east, but it did not retreat for the benefit of the GNA local powers; rather, it has been proven that Haftar is unable to rule or unify Libya. However, the achievements of the GNA, which enjoys international legitimacy, are still limited to the western region, and even in this region the government has not yet succeeded in forming a unified national army and the absorption of local militias within it, which raises the big question about the future of Libya and the need to reach a political solution that guarantees its unity in one sovereign country.

## Conclusion

By regaining control of Al-Watiya, advancing on the southern outskirts of Tripoli, besieging the administrative borders of Tarhuna, and targeting Haftar’s supply lines, the GNA is close to reaching the scene in the west as it was before the April 2019 offensive. In the coming stage, the GNA seeks

3 “Libya ... Africom Reveals New Information about Russian Aircraft and Mercenaries Withdrawing to the Central Region”, Al Jazeera Net, 27/5/2020, accessed 31/5/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2ZRju0f>.

4 “Russian Lawmaker Confirms Moscow Not to Send Military Personnel to Libya,” The New Arab 27/5/2020, accessed 31/5/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2XhjKUM>.



to stabilize these field gains by resolving the military situation south of the capital and in Tarhuna, pending the clarification of the extent and depth of direct Russian military intervention, and the repercussions it will have on the conflict, which appears to be heading towards a major regional and international confrontation. The only guaranteed way to stop this is to politically marginalize Haftar and end the war. Politicians in the eastern and western regions have reached a political solution through which a unified national army means that no party needs international powers to support it in the national conflict.