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# Will the Defeat of Haftar in the West of Libya Lead to Reviving the Political Process?

Unit for Political Studies

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### Unit for Political Studies

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## Introduction

The forces of the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya and the military factions allied to it launched a surprise offensive last week, enabling it to extend its control over a number of Libyan cities west of the capital, Tripoli: Sabratha, Sorman, Al-Ajilat, Al-Jameel, Rikdalin, and Zelten and expel the forces of retired Major General Khalifa Haftar. This attack comes in response to Haftar's forces continued bombardment of the capital's suburbs, despite calls made by many international bodies to halt fighting and focus on confronting the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Tripoli Campaign Failure

Since Haftar's forces began their attack on the capital in April 2019, they have failed to gain control and resolve the conflict in their favour through military force. This failure reflects a great miscalculation by Haftar and his allies regarding the strength of the GNA, the military components fighting alongside it, and the support it receives from its allies. Haftar seems to have based his military calculations on his experiences in Eastern Libya, where he succeeded in seizing control of Benghazi, Derna and the "Oil Crescent," by punishing the local communities and pressuring the fighters by besieging them; by taking advantage of extensive Emirati, Saudi and Egyptian military, financial and political support; and by building tribal-regional alliances that facilitated his control of some areas, such as the Oil Crescent.

But the military scene in Tripoli was different, where the GNA forces in the capital and its suburbs were able to unite ranks, resist the military attack, and move from a defensive to an offensive position. The city of Gharyan, about 75 kilometres from the capital, was subsequently retrieved. It also compensated for the lack of international support it by building political and military alliances with active forces in the region to enable it to repel the attack on Tripoli, seeking Turkish assistance.

The Turkish Parliament voted in favour of the decision to send Turkish forces to Libya on 2 January 2020,<sup>(1)</sup> after Turkish and Libyan parties signed a Memorandum of Understanding specifying the maritime areas in the Mediterranean. This measure contributed to strengthening the resolve of the GNA forces and their ability to protect the capital and Turkey justified its military presence by answering the request of the internationally recognized legitimate government in Libya, and its need to protect its interests in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced at the time that his country's support for the GNA would give it the ability to restore balance in the face of Haftar's UAE and Egypt backed forces.<sup>(2)</sup>

1 "Turkish Parliament Passes Libya Deployment Bill, But Troops Unlikely for Now," *Reuters*, 2/1/2020, accessed on 17/4/2020, at: <https://reut.rs/3esaTWM>.

2 "Turkey's Growing Role in Libya: Motives, Background and Response," Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 7/1/2019, accessed on 17/4/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/3av1QkU>.



## The Failure of Diplomatic Efforts to Stop the Attack on the Capital

All diplomatic efforts led by the United Nations Support Mission in Libya were unsuccessful in putting a ceasefire into action and the United Nations Secretary-General's envoy in Libya, Ghassan Salameh, resigned on 2 March 2020 via twitter as the battles raged around Tripoli.<sup>(3)</sup> The Berlin conference, held in January 2020, had previously failed to achieve a ceasefire and find a solution to the Libyan crisis. Despite bringing together countries with direct influence on the parties to the Libyan conflict, the results did not differ from previous conferences held in European cities (Paris, Palermo, and London) to discuss the Libyan crisis. The conference simply stated its hopes for a peaceful non-military solution the internal conflict, and its respect for the United Nations arms embargo imposed on Libya since 2011. Most of the countries that have financed and provided equipment for the conflict participated in the Berlin conference (Egypt, UAE, Turkey, Italy, and France) however and have not heeded recommendations to stop and respect the UN resolution banning the supply of arms to Libya.<sup>(4)</sup>

### Haftar's Retreat

As a result of this failure, the battles continued during the past months between GNA and Haftar's forces in several hotspots south of Tripoli, but the GNA made sudden shock in the course of these battles. It managed to extended its influence over six cities that had been under the control of Haftar's forces: Sabratha, Sorman, Al-Ajilat, Al-Jameel, Rikdalin, and Zelten, which are located along the western coastal strip that links Tripoli with the Tunisian border by about 150 km (see map).

The successes achieved by the GNA forces and its allied militias are a major blow to Haftar's military ambitions to seize control of the capital, and it is also a major blow to his regional allies, as the GNA forces have taken control over large quantities of weapons, ammunition, and armored vehicles sent by the Emirates to support Haftar.<sup>(5)</sup> It became clear to some of these allies, especially Russia, that their bet on Haftar had failed, and that he had squandered unlimited support received from the UAE and Egypt, despite the participation of hundreds of mercenaries from the Russian Wagner security company fighting alongside him, along with the elements of the Sudanese Rapid Support Forces of Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti).<sup>(6)</sup>

In this way, the GNA managed to secure its western borders by extending its influence over areas that supplying Haftar with a reservoir of fighters, a starting point for the movement of its forces from the west towards Tripoli, thereby reducing the importance of the Watyah military base controlled

3 See Ghassan Salama's tweet on his personal account on Twitter, accessed on 17/4/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3crFmIU>. See also: "Highlights of the Berlin Summit press conference on Libya", Al-Wasat, 19/1/2020, accessed on 17/4/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3cp1FJ2>.

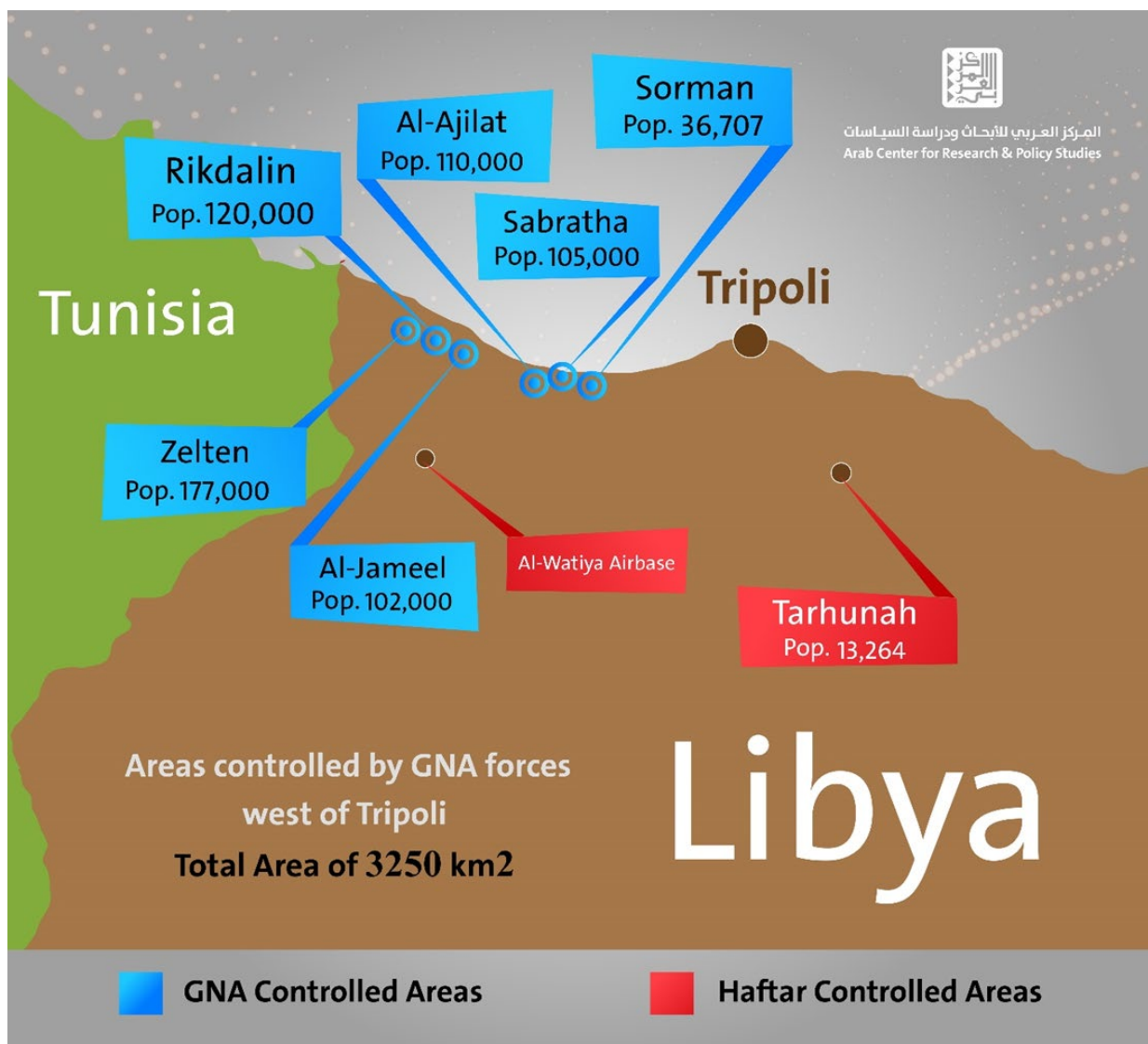
4 "Highlights of the Berlin Summit press conference on Libya", Al-Wasat, 19/1/2020, accessed on 17/4/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3cp1FJ2>.

5 "Undersecretary of the Ministry of Defense, Salah Al-Namroush: Sabratha and Sarman are completely under the control of our forces", Libya Al-Ahrar TV, 13/4/2020, accessed on 17/4/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2XKxRCr>.

6 "Letter Dated 29 November 2019 from the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011) Addressed to the President of the Security Council," United Nations Digital Library, 6/12/2019, accessed on 16/4/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2RPPQ70>

by Haftar, and cutting supplies to his forces there. Economically, the GNA's extension of its influence over those areas would remove all obstacles facing trade with Tunisia and contribute to restoring trade relations to normal levels. This would reduce the economic pressures faced by the government of reconciliation, especially after the decline in crude oil exports from the ports of Brega, Ras Lanuf, Hariga, Zueitina and Sidra in the east of the country. Haftar loyalists stormed those ports in January 2020, which dealt great losses to the energy sector in a country whose public budget is mainly dependent on oil revenues.

**Map of areas controlled by GNA forces west of Tripoli**



Source: Prepared by the Political Studies Unit based on the Media Center of the Burkan Alghadab Operation Twitter Account, accessed on 4/18/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2VJQ6FA>



## Conclusion

Despite the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, calling for a ceasefire in conflicts around the world and to develop a standard approach to counter the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, Haftar continued his offense on Tripoli and its suburbs. He sought to exploit the global preoccupation with combating the spread of the novel corona virus, especially the neighbouring countries, to extend his influence in Libya. But not only did he fail to make any progress, his forces also suffered their biggest military defeat in years, when the GNA managed to extend their influence over all the coastal cities west of the capital to the Tunisian border. This result represents a major gain for the GNA and a shift in the course of the conflict, as control of Tripoli is the ultimate goal for Haftar and his allies. This may represent an opportunity to return to the attempt to find a political solution, an option that Haftar and his allies have persistently rejected, based on confidence in their ability to resolve the conflict by force. It appears that the results of recent battles may lead them to rethink their rationale and nudge them in this direction.