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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Libya: Political Impasse and Deepening Rifts

Policy Analysis Unit | November 2016

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Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

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Introduction

Libya's Presidential Guard, a body normally tasked with the protection of sites of presidential power and state guest houses, announced on Tuesday, 18 October that it was splitting off from the State Council answerable to the Fayeze Sarraj-led Government of National Accord (GNA). This move, which immediately increased security tensions across the North African country, came only days after an announcement by the prime minister of the now-dissolved National Salvation Government, Khalifa Al Ghawil that his cabinet would be acting in open defiance of the Sarraj government. Ghawil had also declared the capture by forces loyal to him of the "High Council of State" in the center of Tripoli, part of a plan, he said, to "free the country from a hell of corruption and anarchy". The intensity of these disputes is a reflection of how far and deep the crippling conflict between various political and military forces in Libya has spread, with a wide number of political and military actors scrambling to further their own interests through the use of force. The evolution of these events has now jeopardized the pact signed by Libyan factions in the Moroccan city of Al Sukhairat, on December 17, 2015, threatening to take the country back to a civil war pitting a myriad of tribal and regional factions against each other, all of which are independently seeking their own sources of backing from regional and global players.

Libya: One Country, Three Governments

Three different governments operate within Libyan territory today, each of them claiming some measure of legitimacy. In the west of the country, the Al Ghawil-led National Salvation Government, formed by the National Congress, competes with the GNA, which was born of the Sukhairat Agreement and is sanctioned internationally in the form of UNSC Resolution 2259. A third, distinct government, headed by Abdullah Al Thani¹, is based in the east of the country and was born out of the House of Representatives, which had its temporary headquarters in Tobruk before being disbanded by order of the Constitutional Court. The court verdict, which came a mere five months after the body was elected in June 2014, was a punishment for the convening of the body outside of its base. Finally, Khalifa Haftar, although sometimes allied to the Al Thani government, is seen to lead a fourth political authority, also based in the east of Libya.

¹ No relation to the ruling family of Qatar.

The “Tobruk Parliament” has thus far failed to formally endorse the Sarraj-led government since the arrival of the latter in the capital, and the House of Representatives has thus far carried out its duties without the benefit of sanction of the GNA². Seeking to circumvent this lack of full backing, 103 members of the Tobruk Parliament broke ranks and endorsed the Sarraj-led government, declaring that the failure of the GNA to obtain the full backing of parliament did not necessarily exclude them from legitimacy. This move underscored a sharp division within the Tobruk Parliament itself: the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Uqaila Saleh, leads a faction which supports a government loyal to Khalifa Haftar, breaking ranks with the wider Libyan political consensus.

On the other side of the country, the two competing governments led by Al Thani and Ghawil continue to spar and attempt to impose their authority on the ground, oblivious to Western sanctions imposed on both Khalifa Ghawil and Uqaila Saleh for failing to uphold the terms of the Sukhairat Agreement³. The Sarraj-led GNA has been reduced to watching on the sidelines, powerless to put an end to the state of anarchy and wide-scale kidnapping and weapons ownership. The idea of a nationwide reconciliation, rooted in the Sukhairat Agreement, not to mention questions of economic improvements for Libyan nationals, now appears a distant dream.

In order to shore up both its national and global credibility, the GNA launched operations to oust ISIS forces from the areas joining Misrata and Sirte in May 2016. The military forces deployed by the Sarraj government, of which the Libya Dawn group made up the backbone, were remarkably successful, pushing ISIS into a few isolated districts within the city of Sirte. By August, the United States had weighed in as well, launching airstrikes from air fields located in Italy to attack ISIS positions in Sirte. This was perceived by many to be a form of foreign support for the GNA, and thus served to bolster the Sarraj faction in the face of the French and Emirati backed Haftar, the GNA’s most significant opponent in the east of Libya (the historical region of Cyrenaica). It is ironic that the one side in Libya which both enjoys international legitimacy and has proven its own ability to successfully combat ISIS has thus far not received significant political and media backing, or adequate military support. Khalifa Haftar, with the

² The original document is available on the website of the GNA website (Arabic): <https://goo.gl/y6tOfW>

³ See, “Treasury Designates Additional Libyan Political Obstructionist”, US Department of the Treasury Press Center, May 13, 2016, available online: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0454.aspx>

support of France and the United Arab Emirates, has in the meantime stayed busy by occupying oil installations along Libya's eastern coast.

Making Political Capital out of a Financial Crisis

Various forms of support for the Haftar forces from the international community have served to give the impression that the world is abandoning the GNA—this, despite the fact that the Sarraj government is itself the product of international diplomacy. The world community seems willing to help the GNA combat its enemies—provided that these are in the west of Libya. This allowed the presidential guard to take over the Supreme National Council, on the ulterior motive of demanding months' worth of salaries owed to them. The roots of the crisis extend to an earlier period, however, when the Higher National Council (HNC) took over the former headquarters of what was once the National Congress, a point at which the Chief of the Guard, Ali Ramali, flatly refused to follow the orders issued by the HNC. Abandoned by all but a small rump of the Presidential Guard, Abdulrahman Suweihli, Head of the HNC, responded by issuing a declaration dismissing Ramali from his position.

Before his dismissal, however, Ramali had been able to consolidate his hold on most of the Guard and the mechanisms by which its members were paid. This resulted in a situation where the pro-Ramali mutineers were able to continue drawing salaries, while those who opted to support the HNC were left in dire financial straits. The Ghawil government took the opportunity to call on all of the military units in the country to join together to "prepare to restore stability to Libya"⁴. Shortly thereafter, the Ghawil government announced that it had won control of the state-owned Guest House Complex, where it hosted a series of meetings with the rump of the National Congress. The Presidential Council within Sarraj's GNA retaliated by ordering the Ministry of Interior to coordinate the arrest of the individuals responsible for the violation of state buildings together with the Prosecutor's office. Sarraj warned that all groups which refused to acknowledge the authority of the GNA were standing in the way of the implementation of the internationally backed Sukhairat Agreement⁵.

⁴ "Communique by the National Salvation Government on the Security Situation in Tripoli", National Salvation Government Press Office, October 11, 2016, available online (Arabic): <https://goo.gl/3la5pD>

⁵ See a statement from the Presidential Council of the GNA, October 15, 2016, available online (Arabic): <http://goo.gl/I5m8Z4>

Rapid Developments, Countrywide Crisis

Developments within Libya have proceeded rapidly over the past two months. These developments were ushered in by the rushing of Haftar forces to grab as many oil installations as possible along the “Oil Crescent” running along the northeast of Libya, beginning on September 12. The United States, the United Kingdom and Spain all protested these moves, demanding that Haftar hand over the territories he conquered to the internationally legitimate GNA—but these protests never went beyond rhetoric. Haftar has been able to take hold of the most vitally important part of Libya. There appears to be no end in sight for Haftar’s ambitions, with the Chief of Staff of his armed forces claiming that tribal supports means they now control up to 80% of the country’s territories, ranging across the south, west and east of Libya.

Haftar decided to up the ante by inviting the Ghawil government to form a Government of National Unity together with the Al Thani government on October 14, following the capture of the state-controlled Guest Houses. Remarkably, the Ghawil government presented the proposal to the Tobruk Parliament for its consideration. In the face of this power grab by Haftar, the Misrata Municipal Council has been one rare group willing to openly denounce the attempts to sideline internationally legitimate bodies born of the Sukhairat Agreement.

Conclusion

Aside from the vast number of domestic political players, ranging from the GNA to the National Salvation Government and the vast number of militia and armed groups in the country, political developments in the country are also closely tied to the agendas of regional and global actors. Seeking to put the Sukhairat Agreement behind them, it is this constellation of non-Libyan forces which would sponsor any advance by Haftar’s troops on the former federal capital of Libya. This would bring Haftar into a direct conflict with a number of the rebel brigades which had first worked to unseat Gaddafi. This includes the Misrata Brigades, the most well trained and well equipped such group, which has already made huge sacrifices in the battle to liberate their city from ISIS. In other words, an internationally supported Haftar could drag Libya back to square one of the post-Gaddafi chaos.