



LIBYA: PRIOR WARNINGS, INTERNATIONAL INACTION, AND THE BATTLE FOR TRIPOLI

By **Ben Lowings**
Political Analyst for North Africa and UN Affairs

POLICY BRIEF
JUNE 2019

UNDERSTANDING
CONFLICT IN AFRICA
SERIES

INTRODUCTION

While the beginning of 2019 saw a perpetuation of the status quo in Libya, in March 2019 new violence erupted as Khalifa Haftar's forces of the east advanced on Tripoli against the various militias backing the UN-installed Government of National Accord (GNA). The recent events have shocked the world as Libya once again has been thrust into the international spotlight, with various international players scrambling to condemn, or exercise caution regarding the current fighting. Meanwhile, the UN, and the efforts of its Special Envoy Ghassan Salamé, has been left reeling as their much-lauded National Conference, originally planned for April 2019 in Ghadames, was inevitably scrapped amidst the violence. This Conference would have been the first step in a new process of national dialogue and reconciliation.

This article, in revisiting our last major publication "Libya: The Need for a New International Approach" (LNNIA)¹, argues that the warning signs for these developments were there, and ultimately it is a failure of the

AT A GLANCE

- *With the recent escalation in violence between militias supporting the Tripoli government, and the forces of Khalifa Haftar, there is reason to revisit our previous publication "Libya: The Need for a New International Approach" and assess what, if anything, has truly changed in Libya.*
- *Our research finds that there were warning signs of recent escalation- from the paralysis of the international community, to Haftar's own military gains in the south of Libya last autumn, and the decline in legitimacy regarding the Tripoli government to the internal fighting between militias last August.*
- *It is further stressed that the international community should urgently adapt to the empirical reality on the ground, as was originally recommended by BIC, in order to avoid further bloodshed.*

¹ Bern Lowings, "Libya: The Need for a New International Approach." Brussels International Center. 2019. Available at:

actors involved in being unable to adapt to the status quo that led to this situation. And with the growing concentration of power with Haftar, there seems to be a greater resignation that his role in Libya's future is now not merely possible, but perhaps inevitable.

2018: A YEAR OF DISTRACTIONS

Last year was a year of international dalliance, in which the majority of focus on Libya was on European conferences, namely in France and Italy, and an endless speculation regarding the feasibility of elections. This latter point seems extremely far off given current events. However, 2018 saw a different type of configuration; namely there were more instances of apparent engagement between Haftar and the head of the GNA, Fayez al-Serraj, at those various international meetings. The ever-present UN, and its Special Envoy, was certain to publicize and endorse the various conclusions no matter how unrealistic they were. For instance, in May 2018, the International Conference in Paris set a new, over-ambitious, timetable². This sought to impose constitutional reform by September 2018, a process entirely stagnated since the political schism between east and west in 2014, and elections by December 2018.

Meanwhile, the November 2018 Palermo International Conference sought to restart a new wave of UN-sponsored national dialogue through a National Conference set for January 2019. All timeframes and negotiated agreements in these conferences have failed. The reasons for this have been explored in greater detail elsewhere such as in LNNIA³, however their failure helped reinforce mistrust between actors, and, most importantly, towards the competence of the international process itself. Such a process was repeating past mistakes with international engagement with Libya by fostering unrealistic expectations that continued to

strengthen disenfranchisement with the presence of the international community in general.

In LNNIA⁴, it was argued that part of the failings of the international community in regards to Libya was an inability to adapt sufficiently to the changing realities on the ground. This was epitomized by the dogmatic reverence given to the 2015 Libyan Political Agreement (LPA), which outlined terms for a potential two-year transition period to reunite the split political factions. However, in nearly four years since its signing, there has only been marginal adaptations to the LPA, the most significant exception being Salamé's own Action Plan proposed in September 2017 to outline a new timetable for its implementation, with the UN instead preferring to try to renew their endorsement of the LPA beyond its initial two-year limit.

One of the warning signs to the current situation in Libya was Haftar's own public announcement on December 17, 2017, on the date of technical expiration of the LPA mandate, in which he said the LPA was "obsolete"⁵. There were concerns of possible military action by Haftar then, though at the time this did not materialize and the attention to Haftar's threat slipped in the meantime.

THE PRELUDE IN SABHA TO HAFTAR'S ADVANCE

However, Haftar was not static in 2018. His forces, collectively called the "Libyan National Army" (LNA), began a campaign in the autumn of 2018 in the south of Libya, in the desert region surrounding the oasis town of Sabha. This campaign was relatively understated compared to either his previous operation that removed belligerents from the city of Derna, or the current fighting in Tripoli. Both of these cases have attracted substantive international criticism.

The southern campaign was far more subtle, as Haftar's forces, along with their allies from the Tebu, which

² See: <https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/libyan-elections-horizon-step-too-far>

³ <https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/libya-need-new-international-approach>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/libyan-commander-haftar-walks-out-of-un-sponsored-political-deal-13389>

FUTURE PROSPECTS

borders with neighboring Chad and Niger, forced out their opponents, composed of a mixture of militias with allegiance to the GNA, and their allies from the Tuareg, situated on the Algerian border. The southern campaign, and its success for Haftar, represented a consolidation of his influence across nearly all of Libya, with the only notable exception being the northwestern cities of the Tripoli-area and neighboring Misrata, further east. The LNNIA⁶ suggested that the 2015 LPA worked only so far as it represented the conditions on the ground in 2015. Back then, there was a far more equal share of power, territory, and international influence between the east and west. However, Haftar's advance in late 2018 clearly demonstrated that one side was becoming significantly more powerful than the other.

The ideological battle for 'hearts and minds' also appeared to become more sympathetic towards Haftar. While the Derna campaign had attracted substantial criticism for purported human rights violations even from the UN Special Envoy⁷, by August 2018 Haftar was no longer the recipient of the majority of international concern. Instead, a spike in violence between the various militias controlling Tripoli prompted a wave of concern about the legitimacy of an administration, the GNA, that was using militias for security. Those same militias were implicated in a variety of other human rights abuses and controversies, for instance against displaced persons, migrants, and refugees detained in prisons near the Libyan capital. Further still, there was concern about why the UN was de facto supporting a government, the GNA, which needed those militias in order to function.

In September 2018, with the signing of a ceasefire between those militias in Tripoli, Serraj indicated that a reform of the capital's security would take place in order to make them more accountable. However, in relation to an opponent in Haftar, whose campaign for legitimacy has principally been centered on a fight for stability and against Islamist insurgency, the damage had been done. The GNA no longer commanded the automatic moral high ground, and would begin to be referenced by the UN themselves as needing to adapt.

In LNNIA⁸, it was urged for the international community to do more to adapt to the changing realities on ground, to engage with more international actors such as the suspiciously quiet EU, to posit a more positive vision for Libya, and, crucially in recognition of the empirical reality, to clearly provide a place for Haftar in Libya's future. Ultimately, the refusal to adapt, compromise, or innovate in the Libyan context has proven a severe blow to the international community in Libya. Haftar's advance on Tripoli was always a possibility. With the political turmoil in Algeria in February 2019, who had otherwise been a major critic of Haftar's influence and a key supporter of the GNA, there was an opportunity for a new assertion of power.

The current fighting has drastically raised the possibility of further chaos in Libya, from more deaths in combat, to the possibility of a political partition of the country. As of yet, the international community has been remarkably reluctant to take a unified stance on the current turmoil. This current crisis should be the motivation for players to finally accept the failings of the previous LPA, and instead look for a new negotiation that is fit for purpose in 2019. In calling for any potential ceasefire, they must also clearly negotiate with Haftar, and not duck the question of his place in a future Libya. This will not be straightforward, as now in May 2019 a political settlement seems further than it did during the publication of LNNIA. However, actors may find that in the event of no new engagement, Haftar may instead take a place for himself in a new Libya, and one in which he alone determines the entire configuration.

⁶ <https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/libya-need-new-international-approach>

⁷ Which in itself reveals the difficulty posed by the dual-role nature the UN in Libya as both negotiator and human rights

observer. This is further discussed in LNNIA.

⁸ <https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/libya-need-new-international-approach>

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.



**BRUSSELS
INTERNATIONAL
CENTER**

AUTHOR

Ben Lowings

Political Analyst for
North Africa and UN Affairs