



A New Ceasefire in Libya: The Gamble for Sirte

As a tentative ceasefire is announced at central Sirte, the patience of civilians and the international community is beginning to fracture.

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Introduction:

Months since Khalifa Haftar's forces, the Libyan National Army (LNA), began their assault on Tripoli, they were pushed back towards the east of Libya by the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) following the intervention of Turkish affiliated militias. On a strategic level, focus has shifted once more to the central coastal town of Sirte, whose access to Libya's economically crucial oil fields, and geopolitical placement equidistant between Tripoli and Benghazi, has seen it receive a comparatively large amount of international interest. Sirte is no stranger to conflict, being the final outpost of former leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, as well as the center of the Libyan activities of the terror group Islamic State in 2014 and 2015.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A ceasefire agreement has been announced between the GNA and the House of Representatives which has been welcomed by key international players. Khalifa Haftar has rejected this ceasefire call.
- The announcement comes as many cities in western Libya are experiencing protests against the administration of the GNA.
- Aguila Saleh, speaker of the HoR, has proposed Sirte as the site of a new temporary government, though this has not been agreed to by all parties.
- Many outstanding issues and spoilers remain in the push for a permanent peace in Libya.

Divergence in Eastern Libya

With Haftar's forces on the retreat in the face of the Turkish-backed GNA, his international supporters have expressed alarm. The most prominent being neighboring Egypt, with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi stating¹ that the geographical boundary of Sirte southward to the town of Jufra was their "red line". If crossed, it would be the trigger for the intervention of the Egyptian military into the conflict.

There has been some respite in the fighting insofar as a new ceasefire² was agreed by the GNA and the political apparatus of the east of Libya, the House of Representatives (HoR). This agreement was welcomed³ by many members of the international community including Egypt, Turkey, the United Nations, and the European Union⁴. In the push for a ceasefire, the efforts of the HoR specifically are particularly noteworthy, for they represent a subtle, yet significant, policy divergence from the leadership of the LNA, who until now were somewhat fighting on their behalf. Regarding this new ceasefire, Haftar himself has publicly rejected these calls⁵. However, in doing so he has opposed the stated wishes of some of his key supporters, i.e. Egypt, as well as the political administration of the east of Libya, i.e. the HoR.

Some have speculated⁶ that the cause of this split is due to the rising prominence of Aguila Saleh, the Speaker of the HoR, and a key figure in the calls for this new ceasefire. On a strategic level, the failure of Haftar's military advance could give way to capitulation by the Turkish-backed GNA, as has been seen through the territorial gains made since January this year. Consequently, this new suggestion of a diplomatic solution is now in the best interests to those opposed to the GNA.

Cracks in Popular Support for the GNA

For their part, the GNA also faces great pressure to, at the earliest opportunity, seek a resolution to the stagnant conflict. After years of war, and the exacerbation of the global COVID-19 pandemic, there are signs that the weary local populations are beginning to lose patience. In recent days, protests over the crippling economic situation, as well as access to basic services and amenities such as water and electricity, have emerged in the western cities of Misrata and Tripoli⁷. These cities have supposedly had some of the staunchest anti-Haftar sentiments in the entire nation, yet frustration with the GNA's failure to meet basic needs has begun to spill over. Authorities there have used what Amnesty International⁸ call "unlawful force" to disperse protests, and the GNA's Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj⁹ condemned the protests as having "infiltrators trying to incite sedition and sabotage". However, following the violent response to these protests, GNA Interior Minister Fathi Bashaga was suspended pending an investigation into his "statements about the protests and incidents in Tripoli and other cities."¹⁰

The war-climate has made effective governance upon any part of Libya nigh-impossible for several years. One of the causes for the struggles of the GNA in recent years, prior to Turkey's intervention, was its inability to pay public employees. This was worsened by a seven-month oil blockade imposed by the LNA, which restricted the facilities of the Tripoli-based National Oil Corporation and consequently crippled the economy of western Libya. On the other hand, one of the most successful outcomes of the GNA's recent gains has been the partial lifting of this

¹ <https://apnews.com/849b1049742450459e04b4806f52a072>

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/libyas-tripoli-based-government-and-rival-parliament-take-steps-to-end-hostilities-idUSKBN25H1BG>

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/08/22/libya-declaration-by-the-high-representative-josep-borrell-on-behalf-of-european-union-on-the-political-announcements-by-the-libyan-presidency-council-and-the-libyan-house-of-representatives/>

⁵ <https://euobserver.com/tickers/149216>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/egypt-offers-new-libya-plan-as-haftar-offensive-collapses-idUSKBN23D0KK>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security/protesters-dispersed-by-gunfire-in-libyas-capital-idUSKBN25J0PE>

⁸ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/08/libya-heavy-weaponry-used-to-disperse-peaceful-protesters-demanding-economic-rights/>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1726591/middle-east>

blockade¹¹, and new proposals to deposit oil revenues in a shared bank account to be split evenly east and west.

Oil, the most important economic industry for Libya, will again be a key bargaining chip for peace negotiations. The GNA cannot afford to lose any more revenue due to the blockade and occupation of oil facilities by the LNA and will be a key motivation to continue forceful actions to regain operation. The LNA meanwhile needs to retain access to the oil facilities of the Sirte oil crescent to retain leverage for the east. Consequently, the proposals to share oil revenues is an important step in de-escalating the conflict and bringing parties to a peaceful resolution.

Sirte as a New Seat of Government?

While considered unthinkable some years ago, the recent proposals by Saleh¹² to operate a new temporary government for the entire Libyan nation from central Sirte maybe a good option to encourage peaceful de-escalation. Sirte's strategic positives, and relatively low political affiliation to the main players in the conflict, could be the symbolic gesture needed to look towards a fairer settlement. Having said this, the GNA has not made any commitment to this instead professing preference for new national elections in full.

There are still some roadblocks to de-escalation. A systematic demilitarization of the central region based around Sirte will need to take place, but the specifics of such an arrangement have not been agreed by all parties¹³. Another issue is a lack of unifying authority from any of the camps, not only the split between Haftar and the eastern political representation but also the militia umbrella of the GNA. We have seen in the past¹⁴ how a lack of clear structure and authority from the militia security instruments of the GNA has broken down into

infighting and violence, for any de-escalation it will require the buy-in by all.

This is not the first time that a ceasefire has supposedly been agreed in Libya, before disputed claims of violations have spiraled into further conflict¹⁵. Unfortunately, there are so many potential spoilers that it is likely that these initiatives will also fall. However, should this time be different the international community, particularly the key backers of the parties, should assert as much pressure as possible on combatants to make these beginning peaceful steps successful.

¹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-security-oil/libyas-noc-welcomes-oil-restart-proposal-calls-for-military-withdrawal-idUSKBN25H1QP>

¹² https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/libyas-warring-sides-once-again-declare-a-cease-fire-will-it-last-this-time/2020/08/21/7edfadec-e3eb-11ea-82d8-5e55d47e90ca_story.html

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/surge-in-fighting-among-libyas-super-militias-imperils-western-peace-efforts/2018/10/01/54969c5c-c0d0-11e8-9f4f-a1b7af255aa5_story.html

¹⁵ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/libyas-warring-sides-once-again-declare-a-cease-fire-will-it-last-this-time/2020/08/21/7edfadec-e3eb-11ea-82d8-5e55d47e90ca_story.html

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