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HOW LIBYA IMPACTS NORTH AFRICA

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The power games being played in Libya complicate any possible solution to the crisis.

However, Algeria's re-entry into the regional diplomatic and security fray, and its stance that conflicts should be resolved regionally, would appear welcome in western Libya and Tripoli; it certainly is in Tunisia.

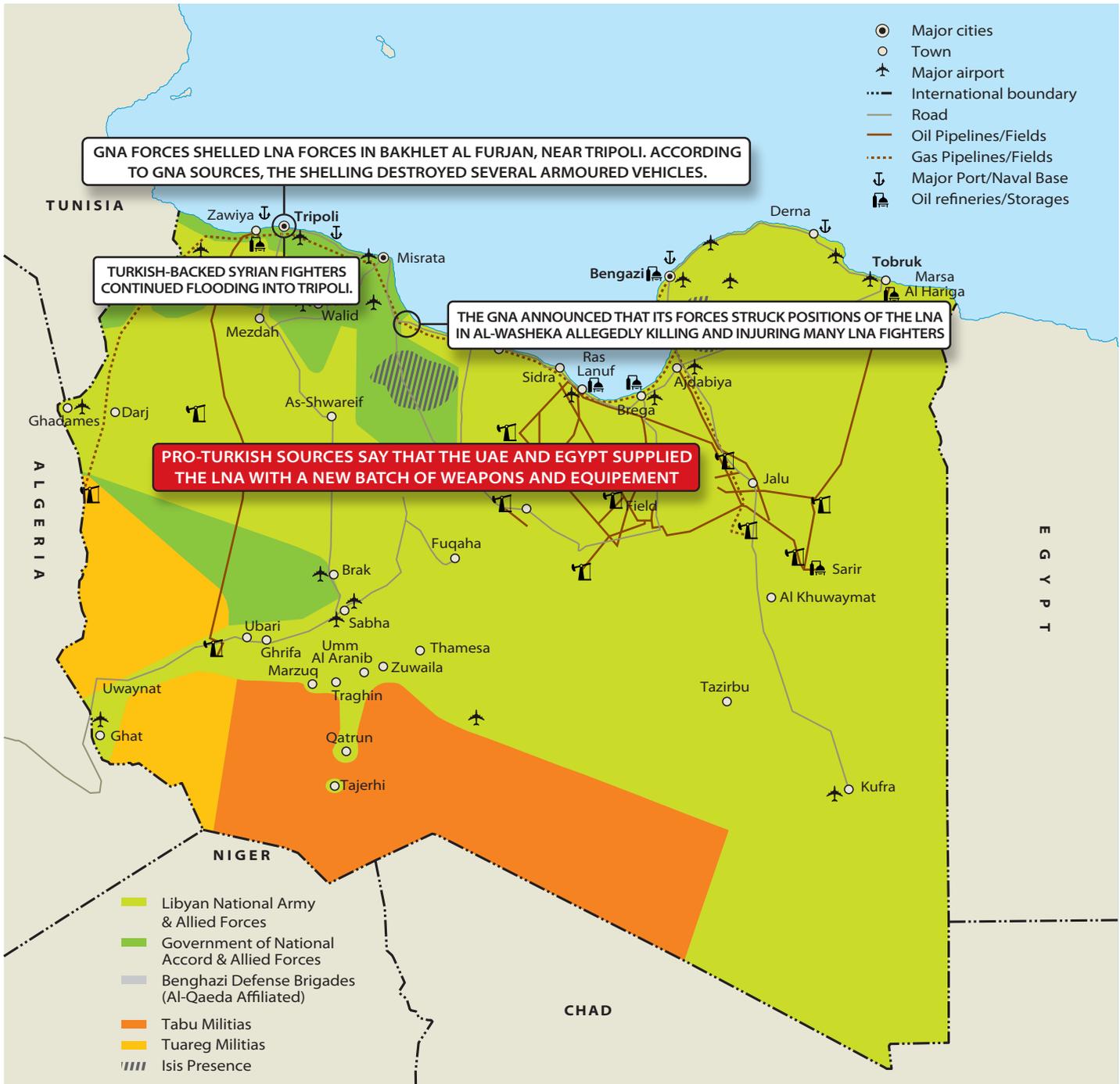
Algeria is looking to play a leading role in the Libyan political process. It is too far from the combat zone to be directly threatened but it remains very alert to the security risks a major conflagration in Tripoli might pose in Tunisia, whose stability it considers as vital for its own.

Tunisia shares a 1010 km frontier with Algeria and a 454 km one with Libya. Stopping the flow of weapons from Libya is thus essential for the security of both, Tunisia and Algeria.

When the strongman of eastern Libya, Marshal Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive against the oasis of Sebha in the southern Libyan province of Fezzan on 13 January last year, neither the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli nor the United Nations seemed very worried. The taking of Sebha by the Libyan Nation Army (LNA), Salafi brigades from Cyrenaica and a smaller group from Umm al-Arnab (southern Fezzan) and other non-Salafi mercenaries from eastern Libya and Soudan (Darfur), was viewed as a useful mopping up operation which would bring more order to the lawless south. Sebha was controlled by militias which were ethnically Toubou but infested with militias which originated from the western Soudan province of Darfur. To the west of Sebha lies a vast area controlled by the Berber Touareg tribes but also the two most important oil fields of Al Fil and Sharara where multinational companies extract oil and gas for the National Oil Company, which is answerable to the government in Tripoli.

Strong backing from the United Arab Emirates and Egypt ensured a level of armament which allowed Haftar's forces to secure Sebha by the end of January 2019. The Toubou fled south to the Tibesti Mountains and neighbouring Chad. By April of that year, the LNA controlled 80% of Libyan territory but countries like Italy and Algeria, and the UN, which support the GNA were under the impression that Haftar's intervention would help relaunch the agreement reached in Abu Dhabi on 28 February 2019 which aimed to bring the Touareg tribes back to

Military Situation Map of Libya – 3 February 2020



Source: https://southfront.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/3feb_Libyan_War_Map.jpg

the negotiating table and rid Libya of foreign mercenaries, notably from Sudan. In December 2018-January 2019, Algerian leaders had assumed that if Haftar was reasonable in the Fezzan, he would be even more diplomatic in Tripoli. “That illusion lasted until the start of the demonstrations in Algeria on 22 February 2019” according to a seasoned observer of Libyan affairs, Jalel Harchaoui, research fellow at the Clingendael Institute in The Hague.

Algerian leaders were all taken by surprise when Haftar launched his attack on Tripoli, taking the cap-

ital’s out of commission international airport in April but never the operational one, Mitiga. That reduced the GNA’s hold to 10% of Libyan territory, albeit containing 40% of the population. Since then, the war – if that is the right word - has stabilised along a 25 km front (with a depth of no more than 5 km) around Tripoli. Not coincidentally, Haftar’s offensive occurred during the moment when, after six weeks of massive demonstrations, Algerians forced Abdelaziz Bouteflika to renounce standing for a fifth mandate as president. Furthermore, the chief of staff, General Ahmed Gaid Salah had strong links with the United Arab Emirates

and deliberately chose not to oppose Haftar publicly. This was not necessarily in the best interests of Algeria but then neither Bouteflika during his two decade-long presidency (1999-2019) nor Gaid Salah, during his nine month de facto rule of Algeria to December 2019 paid much attention to the interest of the country they controlled. Personal whim and economic interests weighed more than well balanced strategic considerations. Neither sought the advice of Algerian diplomats who are respected at home and abroad.

Algeria is by far the best armed country in North Africa, with well-trained troops and officers and a reputation to match. But its leaders have, since 2011, played a rather clumsy game in Libya. Throughout 2011 Algerian diplomats warned Paris, London and Washington, in private, that the destruction of the Libyan regime would spell disaster for the region – they were dismissed out of hand in the first two capitals whose leaders, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron, were no great practitioners of international affairs. Barack Obama listened more carefully but his war-like Secretary of State Hillary Clinton prevailed: she famously said “we came, we saw, we killed” when Muammar Gaddafi was murdered, aping the famous “veni, vidi, vici” of Roman times. Bouteflika gave arms-length support to the erstwhile Libyan dictator, using throughout the Tunisian Muslim Brotherhood leader Rachid Ghanouchi as negotiator with Tripoli, to the utter dismay of Algerian diplomats and the very shrewd minister of Foreign Affairs, Ramtane Lamamra. Had he so wished, he could have forestalled the NATO and UN backed No Fly Zone policy over Benghazi in February 2011 in concert with the Egyptian leaders. The opportunity of keeping the conflict in regional hands was lost, once and for all.

After his cerebral accident in 2013, Bouteflika was no longer in a position to play any role and Algerian diplomats were reduced to clamouring their country’s neutrality. That had zero effect of how events evolved on the ground in Libya. The country’s army was meanwhile redeployed from the Western to the Eastern boarder following the unprecedented attack against the Algerian gas field of Tiguentourine in January 2013. After the attack billions of dollars were spent to securitise its 982 km frontier with Libya which runs through very rugged mountains indeed. Algeria had a chance to weigh in before 12 January 2019 and ensure that the internal lines in Libya remained where they had historically been – Cyrenaica to the East, Fezzan to the South and Tripolitania to the West. That would have given the country some leeway in any future peace negotiations.

Algeria is not happy about the intervention of foreign forces in Libya but its inept policy has allowed Sudanese and Russian (Wagner Group) mercenaries to work with Haftar. The GNA meanwhile has recruited mercenaries, notably air pilots from South America and even the US. Following Turkey’s decision to send troops to back the GNA, the new president of Algeria, Abdelmadjid Tebboune and the new chief of staff, General Said Chengriha appear to want to shake Algerian diplomacy out of its torpor and, more broadly, to reaffirm Algeria’s voice in North African affairs. During a surprise visit to Tunis on 25 December, President Erdogan tried to strong-arm the recently elected Tunisian president, Kais Saied, to grant Turkey a base in Matmata, close to North Africa’s smallest country boarder with Libya. Having granted the Tunisian army a \$200m line of credit which allows for the training of Tunisian officers and offering Tunisia the possibility of buying Turkish weapons, Mr Erdogan thought he was in position to win such a concession. Kais Saied resisted however and when Algeria discovered Erdogan’s game, it invited him to Algiers. The Turkish head of state was told in no uncertain terms to keep his hands off Tunisia. Algeria thus confirmed its role as the key guarantor of Tunisian security since the fall of Ben Ali in 2011, a role which is not sufficiently appreciated internationally. Tunisia shares a 1010 km frontier

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with Algeria and a 454 km one with Libya. Stopping the flow of weapons from Libya is thus essential for the security of both, Tunisia and Algeria. On 17 February, the European Union agreed to launch a new operation with naval ships, planes and satellites in order to enforce the UN arms embargo on Libya. Just a few hours earlier, the UN deputy special envoy for Libya, Stephanie Williams, had complain at the Munich security conference that the arms embargo had become “a joke” because there were violations “by land, sea and air”.

Before Erdogan’s visit to Algiers on 26 January, Tebboune swung into full gear. On 7 January he told Fayez al-Sarraj, the head of the GNA who was visiting Algiers that he considered Tripoli “a red line no one should cross”. On 22 January Algeria hosted foreign affairs ministers from six north and sub-Saharan African countries to discuss the conflict in Libya. The GNA was not best pleased as representatives from eastern Libya were invited. Hard on the heels of the Berlin conference, the new Algerian foreign minister visited Benghazi to hold talks with Haftar but more surprisingly with the unrecognised eastern based government. This strongly

suggests that Algeria is attempting to seize the initiative post-Berlin, convinced as the country has always been that the Libyan conflict stands a better chance to be resolved regionally than internationally. The Algerians did not appreciate that they were only invited to Berlin at the last minute, after France brought pressure to bear on Berlin to invite Tunisia – whose president refused, and Algeria. The latter were genuinely irritated that the invitation was simply to endorse a text that Europeans, the UAE and Egypt had drafted without them.

Turkey for its part has been sending weapons to Tripoli in violation of UN agreements, but then the UAE, Egypt and Jordan, not to mention France have been arming Haftar. The troops Erdogan is sending to Tripoli however are Syrian Turkmens and not Turkish soldiers, at least to date. Such Turkish assertiveness might help to stabilise the front in Tripoli but so far does not upset the balance of forces regionally. Turkey's daring decision to sign an agreement with the GNA is an attempt to redefine continental shelf demarcations in the central and eastern Mediterranean, but no more than Israel, Cyprus and Egypt trying to impose their manner of attempting to drill gas offshore from Cyprus, contested maritime waters if ever there were.

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Tunisia's refusal to grant Turkey a base in its territory limits the risks of the conflict in Libya spreading. The GNA has a symbolic presence at the frontier post of Ben Guerdane between Libya and Tunisia but the latter has a lot to lose from an escalation of fighting in Tripoli. More refugees would not be welcome. The economic consequences of the situation are difficult to read however. While the GNA is running out of money following the curtailing of exports of Libyan oil and gas since late last autumn, the living of an estimated 3 million Tunisians depends on Libya, either from remittances, working there or in black market operations in the frontier zone. Three years ago, [a World Bank report analysed](#) in detail the extraordinary imbrication of the economies of Tunisia and Libya – nothing much has changed since then. The one dangerous element in this grey economy is weapons as the Tunisians will do everything to stop a bigger flow of arms into their country. Tunisia has been more or less free of serious terrorist attacks recently despite the persistence of jihadi guerrillas in the central mountain range of Jebel Chambi near the Algerian boarder. The 9 million tourists who visited the country in 2019 are vital

to its economy and preventing terrorist attacks, such as those that occurred in 2015 is therefore essential.

Algeria for its part is too far from the combat zone in Libya to be directly threatened but it remains very alert to the security risks a major conflagration in Tripoli might pose in Tunisia, whose stability it considers as vital for its own. The security and army leaders of both countries maintain close lines of communications and have operated together within the frontiers of Tunisia when necessary ever since 2011. The EU might have been expected to play a role in Libyan affairs but two of its leading countries, Italy and France, have been at loggerheads for years, the former supporting the GNA the latter Marshall Haftar. Neither the UK nor the US have major oil interests in Libya and appear somewhat disengaged. New actors meanwhile have entered the fray. The UAE followed more recently by Russia which is asserting its presence in the Mediterranean an Africa more forcefully than at any time since the 1990 and Turkey. Whether Mr Erdogan's increasing assertive policy in the Mediterranean comes unstuck or not is impossible to say but the hypocrisy of those in Europe and the Arab world who decry the Turkish president's policies is ironic: France led the pack in Libya in 2011, with disastrous consequences there and in the Sahel belt of Africa. As for those Arabs who deplore Turkish neo-Ottomanism, the question is simply: what is a Gulf state doing so far from its home base?

The power games being played in Libya complicate any possible solution to the crisis. Unlike Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria, Libya was always more three regions than a state. Forty odd years of Gaddafi rule simply compounded an earlier problem. Algeria's re-entry into the regional diplomatic and security fray is to be welcomed because the country's leaders are surely right to point out that conflicts should, where at all possible, be resolved regionally. But with so many cooks, it is impossible to guess what the Libyan national dish will taste like once it is cooked.

Algeria is looking to play a leading role in the Libyan political process, not just a spoiling game. Its leaders might also think for more Machiavellian reasons that it distracts public opinion from the Hirak and weekly demonstrations but, on the Libyan issue, all Algerians agree whatever their political hue. They are fiercely opposed to Gulf countries and Turkey stepping into their neighbourhood and suspect French motives for backing Haftar. It does not openly oppose the support Ankara is giving Tripoli but attempts to act as a referee by thwarting Turkey's ambition to wage full scale war in Libya. Algerian leaders hope that this policy can help consolidate a ceasefire, stop the transfer of weapons from abroad into Libya and revive the Abu Dhabi agen-

da which envisaged elections in Libya. A month after the summit in Berlin elicited promises from the UAE, Turkey and Russia to end their supply of arms and the flows of mercenaries to Libya, the war has become more intractable – the key reason being their neither European nor American leaders in attendance agreed to any sanctions to compel respect for a UN arms embargo. This toothlessness suggests that Berlin was viewed in Abu Dabi and Ankara as a paper tiger.

The next challenge as Algeria sees it is to build an international force which can keep Libya's enemy brothers apart. Their moves might look somewhat scattered, as if they are acting first and searching for a strategy second. Their re-entry into the Libya fray, however, would appear welcome in western Libya and Tripoli; it certainly is in Tunisia. They do not have to worry about any opposition to their policy at home, a key factor at a time when the new president and the recently formed government are finding their feet. But, so long as Libya's fate remains under the control of at least six powers which seek to mould the country's future to their own geopolitical ends, so long as the violators of the arms embargo are not shamed for their role in the conflict, the future of Libya looks bleak indeed.

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