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SOME INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS HAVE A STRATEGY IN LIBYA, OTHERS NOT

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Nine years after removing Muammar Gaddafi different regional strategies converge in Libya:

The EU has been reduced to the role of bystander, paralysed by the conflict between Italy and France which support opposite sides in Libya. France, long a major player, has been side-lined by Russia and Turkey.

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Algeria already missed the opportunity to influence events in Libya at the very start of the conflict. Today, the Algerian senior military brass is busy fighting its own people's aspiration towards democracy and less corruption.

Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron did a brilliant job removing Muammar Gaddafi and left a Libya size hole for Islamists, Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS, Salafists and assorted “democrats” to fill. That is the inevitable consequence having created a power vacuum and believing, or pretending to believe, that democracy will emerge out of nowhere. Nine years into the Libya conflict, three facts stand out that deserve closer analysis.

One can list any number of things that emanate from Libya which present a challenge to Europe, starting with the pressure of uncontrolled migration, going through Russia and Turkey's presence and the destabilising effects on the wider region, not least Tunisia. Paralysed by the conflict between Italy and France which support opposite sides in Libya and its discomfort at Turkey's expanding influence, the EU has been reduced to the role of bystander. France, long a major player, has been side-lined by Russia and Turkey.

Through its Blue Homeland (Mavi Vatan) policy, launched in 2006, Turkey has strongly asserted its influence in the eastern and central Mediterranean, by giving military support to the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli at the turn of the year, when it was being pressed very hard by the leader of of the Libyan National Army (LNA), self-styled Marshall Khalifa Haftar, whose political base is in the eastern city of Benghazi, the capital of Cyrenaica.

On the EU's irrelevance, France has a lot to answer for to its fellow European nations, especially Italy. It claims it is trying to bring the two sides together in

Libya but has, all along, supported Khalifa Haftar. It believes the chaos in Libya is a major stimulant to illegal immigration in Europe and feeds the spread of jihadism but did little to help Italy when the latter faced a wave of illegal migrants from Libya in 2015. It worries about the spread of jihadism but has never uttered a single word against the huge impact of Saudi cash disbursed over a generation until for that very same purpose across North West Africa. Such funding was only cut back recently but the damage had been done.

A third aspect is Algeria's absence from the Libya conflict which is seldom discussed. A country which was, arguably, the major military player has lost much of the influence it once yielded in the region, other than its role of guaranteeing the security of Tunisia. The Algerian senior military brass is busy fighting its own people's aspiration towards democracy and less corruption. Nor has it been capable of rethinking a strategic doctrine which is out of date as we enter the third decade of the XXI century. Algeria is faced with a sharp decline in foreign revenue, 95% of which derives from exports of oil and gas; the lack of a well thought out blueprint on economic reforms and a president whose recent election is viewed as lacking in legitimacy by millions of Algerians.

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Turkey pursuing an ambitious regional policy

To the dismay of many of its European partners, Turkey is engaging in an ever more ambitious regional policy which pits it against many of its NATO allies, Russia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt. The latter three back Khalifa Haftar. Russia, through the private mercenary Wagner Group supports the master of Benghazi. So does France. However, the French government has seen its influence in Libya virtually disappear, while Germany and Italy back the GNA and president Fayeze al-Sarraj. Ever since Nicolas Sarkozy took the lead in topping Gaddafi in 2011, Italy has deeply resented the manner in which France has attempted to strong arm it out of its former colony. Turkey for its part is mindful of Italian interests in Libya, notably its special links with the town of Misrata and its interests the Green Stream pipeline that runs through Western Libya to Italy.

When he intervened decisively to support the GNA militarily last winter, president Recep Tayyip Erdogan played a deft set of cards. Beyond looking to recoup billions of dollars of contracts unfinished under Gaddafi and getting in first when it comes to the reconstruction needed after the fighting, he signed a new agreement

on maritime boundaries in the central Mediterranean, which is based on *fait accompli* and cuts through Greek waters around Cyprus and Crete. The EU has threatened new sanctions over Turkish drilling operations but in the event of the Turkey-Libya deal being thrown out by international courts, the pending legal battle will delay exploration by Turkey's rivals. There is no shortage of gas for export in the Mediterranean in the years ahead so Turkey is, essentially, projecting political power.

Nor can Mr Erdogan resist provocation *vis a vis* Greece. Last month a small group of Turkish soldiers shepherded refugees towards the border with Greece. When Greek guards pushed them back, the Turkish Interior Ministry labelled the Greek government as "Nazis". Turkish officials and media have repeatedly insulted Emmanuel Macron and depicted the EU as a failed organisation incapable, in their eyes, of dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. Megaphone diplomacy is Mr Erdogan's speciality but it does little to promote rational debate.

Turkey has deployed an estimated 7000 Arab and Turkmen mercenaries on the ground in Libya since last January, backed by high altitude long-endurance drones and anti-aircraft batteries. As a result, the GAN retook the air base on Al Watya, south of Tripoli, on 18 May and forced Russian mercenaries to be evacuated to Al Jufra military base, 650km south east of Tripoli, where Russia has stationed Mig29 and Su24 fighter jets.

Khalifa Haftar has reopened the Libya embassy in Damascus which was closed in 2012 and contracted fighters from Bashar al Assad's militias. The Syrian conflict has been exported to Libya, complete with militias of Syrian origin and a Turkish-Russian standoff. The US withdrawal from the conflict is accelerating despite warnings to Russia from the US military command in Africa, Africom. Combined with European internal divisions, this has allowed President Erdogan to pursue his neo-ottoman ambitions, and Russia increasingly act as a referee for Mediterranean conflicts.

Whether Turkey gains more influence in Tunisia and Algeria in the long term is an open question. It already is the second largest foreign direct investor in Algeria, after China and ahead of the EU. In Tunisia, a dysfunctional system of government offers opportunity for Turkish meddling. President Kais Saïd is quite ignorant of international affairs and uninterested in regional developments. The government is weak and has its hands full with the economic and social crisis. This gives Rachid Ghannouchi, the leader of the Islamist Nahda, who presides the national assembly in Tunis, undue influence in diplomatic affairs. Ghannouchi is very close to Erdogan and his

party is alleged to have received funds from Turkey. The prime minister Elyes Fakhfakh cannot alienate Nahda which is part of the ruling coalition. Turkey put pressure on Tunisia last winter to allow it to use a military base in the south of the country to help with its operation in Libya. Tunisian leaders refused and were backed by Algeria.

The broader Turkish domestic political scene must never be forgotten, what the French historian of the Mediterranean, Fernand Braudel, called *le temps long*. A presidential election is due in June 2023, followed four months later by the celebration of the centenary of the foundation of the Turkish Republic. In Mr Erdogan's vision, Turkey must be seen as embodying modernity and having restored its influence in once held Ottoman lands. The country's conflicted relations with all its immediate neighbours is however a factor which might catch up with Mr Erdogan. Time will tell whether he succeeds in rewriting history.

France plays by the old imperial rule book

Nothing meanwhile suggests Emmanuel Macron has any overarching strategy. He seems to be following in the footsteps of his two immediate predecessors and playing out of the old imperial rule book, be it in the Sahel or in North Africa. Long gone is the wisdom of Jacques Chirac who refused to join the US and the UK in invading Iraq and smashing the Iraqi state.

France is neck deep secretly in Libya. In 2016, three French soldiers died there; just before it asked Algerian special forces to ex-filtrate a French commando which had fallen into enemy hands in Cyrenaica; last year French Javelin missiles were discovered with Khalifa Haftar's forces.

The French claim they are trying to conciliate the two sides but favour Marshall Haftar, for whom the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, has never hidden his admiration, even when he was Minister of Defence of François Hollande. He has long believed the Marshall is the right strong man for Libya. When pressed in private a French diplomat conceded that the value of lucrative French arms contracts with the UAE and Saudi Arabia had a major bearing on French policy.

Emmanuel Macron is meanwhile pressing Algeria to put "boots" on the ground to help him fight insurgents in Mali. To date, the Algerian top brass has resisted such requests. But for how long? Most Algerians opposed to such a move.

The conflicts which bedevil the Sahel region have deep political, tribal and climatic roots some of which can be traced back to the policy known as "Françafrique", a short hand for the web of what its critics view as neo-colonial agreements which France signed with its former west African colonies after they became independent sixty years ago. Most observers agree that Françafrique has done little to promote good governance.

A recent amendment to the draft new Algerian constitution will specifically allow the Algerian army to intervene abroad if the country's leaders decide it is necessary. Why this "new" article is being inserted is anybody's guess as the army has already intervened abroad, notably in Egypt in 1967 and 1973. So have the special services on many occasions in Libya, Lebanon and elsewhere. Early on in the Libya conflict, an Algerian special forces commando successfully extricated a French commando from the clutches of an Islamist group in eastern Libya.

Many of the issues the EU faces in its relations with Turkey in the Mediterranean loop back to the Cyprus question. Will the EU accept that Turkey is the new boy on the block and, irrespective of its unhappiness with Mr Erdogan's domestic and foreign policy agendas, ig-

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nore what many Turks see as their country's broader strategic interests? It is not easy to decide whether it is worth trying to negotiate with a very authoritarian ruler, who might lose power one day, or wait for better days. The voice of the EU is very weak. That weakness goes back to the EU's incapacity to influence the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Its lack of support for the Palestinians long ago started eroding Europe's Mediterranean policy.

The EU is paying the price of its disunity, of the arrogant behaviour of two of its leading members, France and until recently the UK, who were its more important military powers and still fancy themselves as major players on the world stage. The EU's latest policy of maritime arms embargo to Libya is not only ineffective but likely to favour Khalifa Haftar who gets much of his military resources overland or by air. It is hard to see how it can have some bearing on the outcome of the conflict.

In a broader historical perspective, the EU's minor role in the Libya conflict mirrors its disappearance from Syria. So long as its leading powers pursue independent policies, so long as France and the UK follow neo-

imperialist instincts, the EU and the US will continue to lose out to more ruthless and determined powers such as Turkey and Russia. Having failed to realise, in the late XXth century, that European and US interests in the Mediterranean were diverging, the EU is left with a threadbare policy. Worse, the West's broader Libya policy is strengthening its adversaries. How will Europe react if Khalifa Haftar cuts a deal with Moscow and allows a permanent base in Eastern Libya and the hole of southern Europe is squeezed by Russia's military threat? Why did Europe not ask Egypt and Algeria to act as guarantors of peace in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania and Fezzan respectively?

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Algeria can not pretend to a useful role in Libya

Algeria for its part missed the opportunity to influence events in Libya at the very start of the conflict when Gaddafi was threatening Benghazi with fire and brimstone. This is a little noticed aspect of the conflict but of interest if only because of Algeria's long standing security and economic (oil and gas) interests in the region. The country's leaders have long fought to keep outside powers away from the region and, on the whole been reluctant to interfere overtly in their neighbour's affairs.

Back in 2011, Algerian security had very good intelligence in western Libya, a powerful army and no particularly lost love for the then Libyan leader. Had they pre-empted Nicolas Sarkozy, they might have been able to stop Gaddafi. In the years that followed, president Abdelaziz Bouteflika side-lined Algerian security chiefs and diplomats, indulging in personal diplomacy which proved misguided. After he sacked the powerful head of the intelligence service, General Tewfik Mediene, in the wake of the terrorist attack on the gas field of in Amenas by a terrorist group based in Libya in 2013 and continued his long game of appointing officers devoted to his family's interests to key posts in the army, he tied the hands of the Foreign Affairs minister, Ramtane Lamamra.

Lamamra is arguably one of the most knowledgeable international diplomats on Africa. The US and the United Arab Emirates veto to his appointment as special UN envoy to Libya symbolises Algeria's present weakness. It also suggests none of the key international players in Libya are intent on finding a solution and happy to continue playing proxy wars as they did in Syria, irrespective of the risks of the conflict spilling into Tunisia.

Algeria's army is 150,000 strong and boast 2000 tanks, 2000 armoured vehicles, 300 helicopters, 250 combat planes including Sukhois, 30 military vessels and six submarines. Its main supplier is Russia followed by Germany. Defence and security expenditure account for an estimated 25% of the budget, 6% of GDP. The civilian part of the budget has been slashed by half but one unanswered question is whether military expenditure will be ring-fenced.

The legacy of two decades of Bouteflika rule are massive corruption which witnessed the flight of tens of billions of dollars and a destruction, for want of a better word, of the senior cadre of Algerian civil servants of the state in key ministries, not least that of energy. Allegations of corruptions have dogged the state oil company Sonatrach two of whose former CEOs, Chakib Khelil and Abdelmoumen Ould Kaddour have fled into exile. The demoralisation of the senior civil service runs deep.

What Algeria needs is an intelligent conversation on economic reforms. Unlike the period a generation ago when the presidency encouraged a thorough analysis of the ills affecting economic management and allowed the publication of the report known as Les Cahiers de la Réforme in 1989, senior civil servants today are a pale shadow of their predecessors. The Foreign Affairs ministry today is threadbare compared with the 1970s and the 1980s. True there is talent in Algeria but outside the circles of power. President Abdelmadjid Tebboune does not want to turn to the IMF, recalling that it imposed a program of austerity ill suited to Algeria's needs back in 1994. He rules out recourse to foreign debt. At the same time, he turns his back on economists and other professionals who are outside the ruling nomenclatura. Furthermore he has had more journalists and independent bloggers arrested under cover of Covid-19 curfew. Seasoned observer of Algeria's recent past agree that economic reform today is unlikely to work if it is not matched with serious political reform.

Dog eats dog prevails in the top military and security ranks. As senior officers busy fighting each other, they are in no position to defend the interests of Algeria which require a deep rethinking of the world around them. Some Algerians are deeply suspicious of French intentions but the more senior officials fight among themselves, the more France and other foreign powers will meddle. The danger tomorrow is that infighting at the top spills into provocation in the streets if the Hirak protest movement, forced indoors by the Covid-19 pandemic starts afresh. Algerian security is brilliant at provocation, not at bringing Algerians together.

The last thing North Africa needs is Algeria descending into violent turmoil. It would help regional stabil-

ity were Algeria able to broker peace with that other regional power which borders Libya to its East, Egypt, a peace which was neither pro-Turkish, nor pro-Haftar nor indeed pro-Russian. Egypt however is a shadow of its former self, too beholden to Gulf and Saudi money to have any real independent policy. It distrusts its own people.

Algerian leaders, though less harshly repressive than the Egyptian president, are well and truly at war with their own people. The days of Gamal Abdel Nasser are gone and Egypt's regional influence with it. President Abdelmadjid Tebboune is a pale shadow of some of his predecessors. Neither he, nor his minister of Foreign Affairs nor the chief of staff can pretend to play the role on the international stage former presidents Houari Boumediene and Chadli Bendjedid did a generation ago. The confusion in Libya is such today that Algeria's weakness, which keeps it out of the Libyan Quagmire might turn out to be a blessing in disguise.

Algeria continues to devour its children, to the greater detriment of its role in the broader North West African region. Because of its divisions, Europe and NATO seem intent on strengthening their adversaries in Libya. Ruthless outsiders meanwhile - Turkey, Russia and the UAE, play proxy war games which are a direct threat to southern European and neighbouring Maghreb countries.