



OBSERVATORY FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN

THE LIBYAN QUESTION

The point of departure. -

In the ten years since the ouster of Moammar Gadhafi, Libya has fractured into pieces, along tribal rivalries that were unleashed after Gadhafi's downfall.

In 2014, Libya had just a single government in Tripoli, the General National Congress (GNC), which was voted into power by popular election after the civil war ended. The GNC failed to hold elections before its term ended. Then his rival in the East, General Khalifa Haftar (also called Hifter, Hafter or Huftur) asked for its dismissal. The GNC persisted, and three months later, Haftar — backed by Egypt — launched what he called “Operation Dignity” to try to force it from power. The GNC then did hold elections, but turnout was low, and the Islamists backed by groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood were defeated. The low turnout led to claims that the elections lacked legitimacy. A coalition backed by Islamist militias and fighters from the powerful western city of Misrata formed “Dawn Movement”, that dislodged the newly elected government — the House of Representatives— which fled to Tobruk in Eastern Libya. The Misratan-Islamist coalition then restored the GNC's power in Tripoli, giving the country two governments.

In an attempt to piece Libya back together, outside powers intervened and even the United Nations struggled to resolve the Libyan conflict. In 2015, the U.N. brokered a unity agreement the -Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) — between the country's two existing rival governments: The General National Congress (GNC) in Tripoli and the House of Representatives in Tobruk. The GNC government almost dominated by the political Islamists was disbanded in 2015 and his president went into exile.

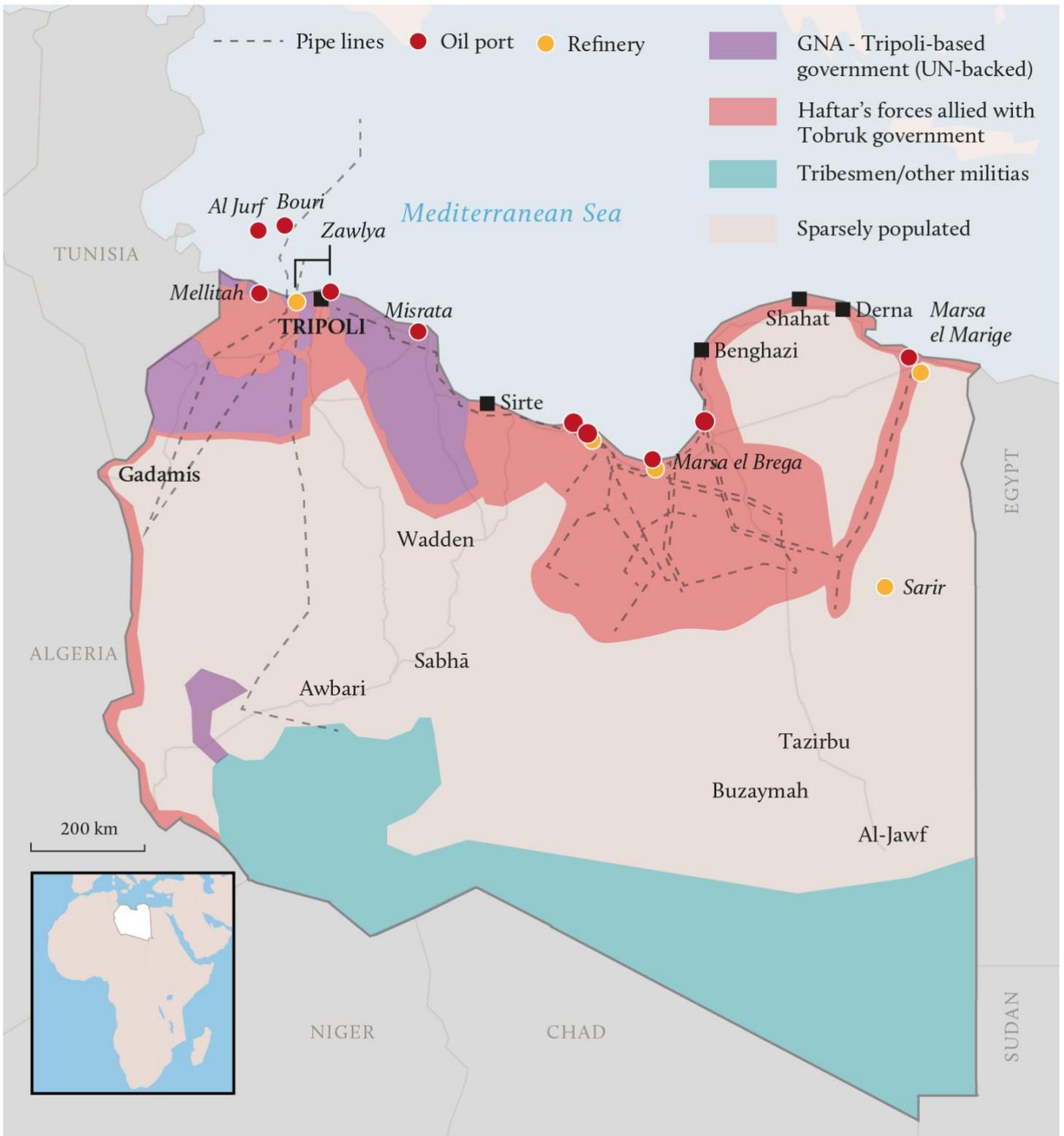
Five years after the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) proclaimed an ostensible unity deal, the war-torn North African country remains as divided as ever because the LPA, instead of unifying the country's governments and bridging its largely east-west rift, however, created a new third government, supported by the UN: the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli on top of the Council of State. The head of the State Council, which operates functionally as a parliament, is a member of the Justice and Construction Party (the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya).

A [report](#) by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in April 2018 wrote that: “the Council of State and the GNA have become a mere façade, behind which the armed groups and their associated interests are leading the policy”. Moreover, the question is that there is no end to the rivalries that have prevented the various factions from achieving a lasting political agreement.

A political and military actor supported the House of Representatives in Eastern Libya: the self-appointed Commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA) Marshall Khalifa Haftar. He had been waiting for the implementation of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) that should have allowed him to reach peacefully the power in Tripoli. Since this seemed to him too difficult to achieve, he launched his military offensive to conquer it in April 2019.

It seems that the reason behind this move by Haftar is that according to the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) of 2015, the president of the Government of National Agreement (GNA), al-Sarraj, should have been replaced in December 2017 at the expiration of its mandate. Since this has not happened and despite the Conference of Tunis in 2018, the LPA has not been amended to allow the replacement of al-Sarraj after the celebration of presidential and parliamentary elections. That might have facilitated the path to power for Haftar and his LNA. But with no democratic solution to the political conundrum, he has seen no alternative but to march towards Tripoli, considering himself like having a critical role in reshaping Libya.

The situation is that each government, the one in Tripoli (the GNA) and the one in Tobruk (the House of Representatives) are in two opposite sides in the Libyan political spectrum and their respective leaders, who fiercely oppose each other, have sought national and foreign support.



Source: Middle East Eye, Critical Threats, Reuters and Liveuamap

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middleeasteye.net

The intervention in Libya of foreign actors. -

Regional conflicts have also overlaid the split between the two rival governments and their respective military coalitions that have sought the support and help of foreign sponsors. The outcome is that the conflict's protagonists are no longer the GNA and armed groups in Tripoli fending off an assault by the LNA of Khalifa Haftar. Libya has become an arena where competing factions with the backing from foreign actors have been attracted since the fall of Gadhafi: foreign powers, Jihadists, Islamists, Salafists, militias and paramilitary groups.

Regarding this country we can say with Leon Carl Brown, writing in 1984, that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has always been a "penetrated system" where foreign powers' influence decisively impacted, when not actually drove domestic policies. Other scholars later echoed Brown's statement, outlining the exceptional porosity of the region. Across the MENA, more than in any other part of the world, global and regional actors have fought to gain political and economic influence transforming some countries into veritable battlefields, as the most recent cases of Syria and Libya demonstrate.

In the Libyan question the country has transformed itself in a chessboard for inter-imperial competitions between Western powers and among Islamic and Muslim countries. Therefore, the war in Libya, which loomed since the contested elections of 2014, has also become increasingly internationalised, reflecting geopolitical divides throughout the Middle East and beyond and risks getting worse in the coming months, as rival factions increasingly rely on foreign military backing to change the balance of power. The UAE, Russia and Turkey, for instance, have established to be instrumental actors on the ground.

The reasons and justification of the intervention of foreign powers are of several kinds and could also being explained by geopolitical goals.

The GNA in Tripoli receives the backing of Turkey and Qatar both financially and militarily and some diplomatic backing from Italy.

Turkey's open military support for the internationally recognized GNA, after the signing at the end of 2019 of several Memorandums of Understanding (MoU), is not new. In western Libya, Ankara began supporting militarily followers of political Islam and also revolutionary actors, including primarily those of Misrata, in the second half of 2014. Weapons shipments were nothing like what's being injected into Libya today. However, they did occur, particularly during the 2014–2017 war for Benghazi. In contravention of the United Nations' arms

embargo, ammunition and weapons flowed from Turkey into Misrata and then from there would be passed on to Islamist groups fighting Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's armed coalition in Benghazi. Even after Benghazi fell to Haftar's forces in late 2017, Turkish interference continued. All this is to say that Ankara, on a clandestine basis, has been propping up anti-Haftar groups militarily for over half a decade and today Ankara has an overt, official military presence in Tripoli.

It seems that the Turkish support has several reasons: commerce, maritime issues, and ideology.

Before 2011 already, as many as 25 percent of the Turkish citizens expatriated in the Arab world were living and working in Libya. Turkey is exporting more than \$1 billion in commercial goods to Libya annually. The number of Turkish contracts outstanding in Libya reaches 18 billion US \$. This represents an enormous volume of construction, infrastructure, trade and service business that would likely never be implemented and paid for if Haftar were to topple the GNA and take power. Indeed, the exclusionary vision of the Haftar faction and its Emirati sponsors means that Turkey should be stopped as a trading and business partner.

In the maritime sphere, because very large amounts of natural gas have been discovered across the eastern half of the Mediterranean over the last seven years, it has created a much higher level of solidarity among Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, and Greece, as well as France and to some extent Italy. Such increased geopolitical interconnection has curtailed Turkey's energy interests in those waters. To overcome this united front, Ankara feels it must ensure the survival of the GNA in Tripoli, the only Turkish-friendly government in the area.

By late November 2019, the GNA, to overcome Haftar and allies' military pressures, accepted Turkey's demands. The GNA subsequently signed two MoUs with Turkey on maritime borders and security cooperation, resulting in an Exclusive Economic Zone that creates a sea corridor between western Turkey and Eastern Libya. In doing so, Turkey absorbed a portion of Greece's perceived territorial waters, an act which had a negative effect on Libyan-related alignments and undermines Egyptian financial interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. The new Turkey's maritime border agreement with the Libyan GNA gives it a key ally in the eastern Mediterranean's competition for oil and natural gas.¹

¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/video/drilling-wars-mediterranean/explained>

In return, Ankara has increased the sending to Misrata and Tripoli of weapons, other military aid and fighters that are brought from the Syrian war, violating the UN embargo of arms. The GNA has started deploying up to 2,000 Syrian-Turkish rebels in the front. (As part of the agreement, the GNA is reportedly paying each mercenary a monthly salary of 2,000 US \$. These payments prove that oil exports are now directly funding the foreign mercenaries and Libyan militias in Tripoli and Misrata).

From an ideological perspective, the survival of political Islam in Tripoli holds immense value for Erdogan and his supporters. Moderate political Islam wielding some degree of power in a wealthy North African country represents an important symbol in which Muslim Brotherhood and non-Islamist politicians coexist. In this endeavour Qatar is in line with Ankara in Tripoli by helping political Islam. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Egypt are committed to eradicating that governance style, and indeed any form of pluralism, from the Arab Sunni universe.

From a geopolitical point of view Qatar cannot allow the UAE to expand its military strength in the Mediterranean. Besides, Qatar being a net exporter of natural gas cannot be absent from any dealings regarding the exploration and trade of natural gas in that area.

The LNA of Marshall Khalifa Haftar has always found support in Egypt and the UAE. In his latest offensive against the GNA in Tripoli in April 2019 has received again the military backing of Cairo, Abu Dhabi and also from Moscow coupled with the financial aid of Jeddah and of U.S. President, whose administration had supported the al-Sarraj government and the UN-backed peace process since coming to office. Nevertheless, he reversed course in April 2019, following a meeting with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, raising the stakes of an escalating proxy war on the Mediterranean.

Russia is making a powerful comeback in the Arab world. In its efforts to pursue such a return, after years of being side-lined by Western powers, it is also playing a larger role in Libya in support of Haftar's offensive as it has done in Syria backing Al-Assad regime.

By helping Haftar, Russia may once again successfully profit from the U.S. and European powers' [collective abandonment](#) of credible diplomacy. While Russia lacked the political capital to launch an Astana-like process in Libya during the January Conference in Moscow, its gamble on the inaction of its counterparts is granting Russia a position as a power broker.

The Russia's deployment of Wagner mercenaries has also given to Moscow the role of a primary player influencing the military landscape of Haftar's offensive, thereby also dictating the general's military and political relevance. This confluence of military and diplomatic efforts is currently working to Putin's advantage and provides Russia with great influence in the South

Mediterranean. Now, Russia can shape the contemporary military landscape in Tripoli's surroundings, sabotage the Berlin process, and determine Haftar's fate.

Algeria has tried to re-establish the country's bona fides as regional arbiter. In January 2020, it gathered [foreign ministers](#) from nations bordering Libya to discuss the situation. But the event was overshadowed by more meaningful Libya-related meetings in Moscow and Berlin.

Nigeria, Tunisia, Niger, Chad, Sudan, and Egypt, who all have interests in the Libyan landscape, have positioned themselves accordingly. The degree of their involvement in the Libyan conflict is dictated by the nature of the perceived threat from Libya to their national security, history, indigenous political developments, and regional alliances.

The EU and Libya. -

The EU and its member states have tried from several sides to develop an effective approach to the Libyan conflict.

One challenge is that different states support different sides: Competition among European powers in Libya — specifically France and Italy — will continue to undermine attempts to solve the country's political crises because Paris and Rome are backing different sides in the ongoing civil war, each competing to position itself as the "indispensable power" in the region. To this end, May 2019 saw a conference hosted by Emmanuel Macron in Paris — with the Italians cut out — while Italy held its own rival event in Palermo six months later. Neither produced anything concrete for Libyans.

Another challenge is that EU policy has tended to focus less on ending the conflict and more on reducing its impact on migration into Europe. Southern European countries, as well as migration hardliners like Austria and Hungary, have pushed the EU to invest more in technical assistance to stop migrant flows across the central Mediterranean, at the expense of focusing on finding a political solution to end the crisis. Despite the disparity in the way EU countries have been exposed to migration originating or transiting via Libya, the policy agreed upon has been to externalize borders. This has made Libya the route to Europe and a hub of the central Mediterranean migration. The blurred lines between armed groups, Libya's coast guard, and smugglers have allowed these networks to profit from managing illegal immigration.

The EU should focus on the operational issues so that it can maintain a meaningful naval presence in the Mediterranean as a deterrent against the flow of embargoed arms into Libya. The agreement reached in February 17th by the UE's Foreign Ministers to enforce the UN's arms embargo through a naval force goes in the right direction and might help the Berlin

process. But this agreement comes with a proviso: that these new forces replacing “Operation Sophia”, will avoid a “potential impact on migration flows” that might produce any call effect to illegal immigration.

The efforts for a peace process continue. -

The increasing intervention in the Libyan proxy war of foreign powers, mainly of Turkey and Russia, has produced another effort to bring peace to the country.

Germany with the support of the UN Special Representative launched the latest initiative for peace in September 2019: a conference to be convened in Berlin as a summit for intervening states where it would further seek their support in pushing Libyan allies to negotiate in earnest. This initiative was looking for an unconditional halting of the support to the warring parties in Libya as a way for renewing the UN-led political process.

On the surface, the Berlin conference that took place in January 2020 seemed like a success. The participants, including representatives from Algeria, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Turkey, the Republic of the Congo, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States, signed a program to reduce external influence in the conflict and facilitate a United Nations-led peace process. The plan contains promises by each country to respect the U.N. arms embargo and calls on the U.N. Security Council to impose sanctions on sides that violate the cease-fire agreement and arms embargo. This has never been implemented as the Deputy of the UN Representative for Libya acknowledged in the last Munich Conference on Security of February 2020 the “arms embargo has always been a joke” up to now.

The Berlin process was transformed into a platform through which some of Haftar’s backers—particularly France and Egypt—attempted to create a political, economic, and security landscape in favour of Haftar and his Libyan Armed Forces. Even in the Berlin 55-point plan, one of the paragraphs calling for the creation of a “new, representative and unified government” seems to imply that the GNA of al-Sarraj has its days coming to an end. The political aim of Haftar is to lift the international recognition of the GNA, supported by the UN, by leveraging the anti-Turkish sentiment and it is considering new approaches like the Arab League and the African Union to obtain his goal.

In Berlin there were also established follow-up committees, including a 10-person military committee shaped by representatives of the LNA and GNA to draft a more permanent cease-fire and a lasting truce. The first meeting of this committee in the third week of February 2020 was suspended and adjourned sine die because during the reunion the LNA shelled the port of Tripoli.

Despite all the international meetings to bring peace to Libya, neither the GNA nor the LNA has an incentive to sign a peace agreement at present. If Haftar and his foreign backers were

to accept any sort of a permanent cease-fire or peace process before he gains control of key parts of central Tripoli, it would be tantamount to admitting that the April offensive to take the city has been unsuccessful. Moreover, it would legitimize the GNA and those whom the LNA has portrayed as terrorists in talks. With Haftar and supporters such as Abu Dhabi keen to avoid such outcomes, they will passively agree to peace talks, although they do not want the negotiations to tie their hands unless the GNA agrees to the LNA's demands, which would include Haftar's appointment as national military chief and the institutionalization of the LNA.

Moreover, Turkey and GNA's actions have provoked several reactions. Among them France and Greece, both seeking to show their discontent into more antagonism for Turkey within the European Union. On the 24 of January 2020 Athens said that it will veto EU peace efforts in Libya if Tripoli and Ankara do not abandon the MoU delineating the territorial waters of both countries. This would involve the EU unilaterally condemning Ankara's role in Libya. In parallel, the pre-existing struggle between the Turks and the Cypriots in the Eastern Mediterranean also led the broader Cyprus-Egypt-Israel axis to [condemn](#) the Ankara and Tripoli maritime interaction. This geopolitical dynamic is compounded by the fact that Italian and French oil companies ENI and Total are conducting [offshore drilling](#) off the South-West coast of Cyprus.

In short, the Berlin process falls in the unending number of attempts to shape an intra-Libyan settlement.

Comments. -

With Europe more digressing from itself and the US disengaged, it may signal the end of the UN-led political process in the country. Moreover, the U.S. and European lack of initiatives opens the door to multipolarity in Libya, with Turkey and Russia filling the international vacuum.

For Ankara's aggressive foreign policy, Libya has emerged as a critical part of its regional strategy as Turkey seeks to play a larger role in the Muslim world and support Islamist groups that align with it ideologically. Besides, Turkey's maritime border agreement with the GNA gives it a key ally in the eastern Mediterranean's competition for oil and natural gas.

The deployment of Syrian fighters of Turkmen origin in Tripoli instead of Turkish combat troops is giving Ankara a layer of protection from the front-line battle and allows an indirect confrontation with Moscow that has only sent the Wagner mercenaries and advisers to fight along the LNA forces and militias but not combat troops. It can be considered this policy as a way to maintain the status quo between Moscow and Ankara in Syria.

The first aim of Russian presence in Libya is to capitalize it to establish a stronghold in the South of the Mediterranean as it has in its Eastern part with the bases in Syria. Unlike other

players in Libya, Russia is the only state with enough mercenary ground forces to decisively alter the outcome of Haftar's offensive.

Ideologically and [operationally](#), both Putin and Erdogan have [pre-existing areas of cooperation](#) that might continue in Libya. Much like Russia's control over Haftar's political legitimacy, the GNA's destiny is in Turkey's hands, with all other players gradually losing relevance. On the other hand, the backing of Haftar by France, the UAE, and Egypt's is de facto complementing Russia's military contribution on the ground and masking it with their diplomatic efforts. In this way, the Kremlin's interests are thus advanced at little cost.

Regarding the increasing Turkish involvement in Libya that encroaches with the policy of some European states, the EU might set up sanctions, but Ankara consider that its power to prevent or to allow the migration of Syrian refugees into Europe and its status as a key member of NATO is crucial to ward off any EU retribution. The White House's interest in keeping Turkey inside NATO has blocked congressional sanctions because of Ankara's close ties with Moscow in Syria.

In short, the intervention of foreign actors in Libya supporting one side of the warring parties, might lead to a stalemate in the civil war and the military conflict would set Libya's de facto partition, leaving a lot of oil in the LNA's hands. Moreover, this involvement will not be enough to temper the interference of other players, nor will it bring Libyans to the table.

Ambassador Mariano García Muñoz
Member of the Board Eurodefense-España

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