



The EU and US must work together to end the siege of Tripoli

by Luigi Scazzieri

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The conflict in Libya is spiralling out of control despite the recent Berlin conference. Europeans need to work with the US to pressure regional powers to stop fuelling fighting.

The recent escalation of Libya's civil war has seen Europeans scrambling to regain the initiative. Following the 2011 NATO campaign led by France and the UK that removed Colonel Muammar Gaddafi from power, member-states tried but failed to stabilise Libya, and the country has been embroiled in civil strife since mid-2014. The conflict escalated as actors ranging from the UAE and Egypt to Russia and Turkey have become increasingly involved, while European efforts to broker peace have been incoherent and ineffective. The conflict now risks triggering a new wave of refugees and leading to a revival of the Islamic State.

The latest phase of the conflict began in early April 2019, when military commander Khalifa Haftar, whose power base is in eastern Libya, launched an offensive on Tripoli in an effort to unseat the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayez al-Sarraj. Europe had helped to set up the GNA in late 2015. The siege, which started while the UN Envoy to Libya Ghassan Salamé was in Tripoli, has [killed hundreds of civilians and displaced 140,000](#). Initially, the assault did not appear to be making headway, but in late 2019 Haftar made important gains, thanks to increased air support from the UAE and the assistance of [hundreds of mercenaries from the Wagner group](#), a private security company linked to the Russian government.

The GNA sought international assistance to defend itself, but was spurned by European countries and the US, both of which called for a halt to the fighting but took no further action to halt Haftar's offensive. The GNA then turned to Turkey for help – and in exchange for a controversial maritime agreement, Ankara began providing assistance in January, largely in the form of [around 2,000 Syrian mercenaries](#). The GNA's maritime boundary demarcation agreement with Ankara has [infuriated](#) many EU member-states, in particular Greece, as it includes parts of its designated Exclusive Economic Zone.

Seemingly stunned by the growing Russian and Turkish influence on its doorstep, Europeans sought to regain the initiative in Libya. Following an unsuccessful joint Turkish and Russian attempt to negotiate

a ceasefire on January 8th, which [was rejected by Haftar](#), German Chancellor Angela Merkel hosted an international conference in Berlin on January 19th which managed to bring together the key international actors involved in the conflict and to secure a promise that they would stop interfering. However, no formal ceasefire was agreed, and [the parties are not honouring their pledges](#), with more arms and troops pouring into Libya. Meanwhile, an EU plan to enforce the UN arms embargo on Libya by reviving the Union's naval Operation Sophia has stalled.

The key obstacle to a ceasefire is that Haftar has shown little willingness to end his assault on Tripoli. Instead, he has increased the pressure on the GNA by [blockading Libyan oil exports](#), which the GNA relies on for revenues. Haftar's behaviour suggests that he thinks he has the upper hand and is on the cusp of entering Tripoli. Regardless, he has little incentive to agree to a ceasefire as it would risk undermining his hold over the broad coalition of forces that supports him in the hope of receiving patronage once he gains power. Moreover, many of his foreign backers are so invested in his success that they are unwilling to push him to agree to a ceasefire. Russia tried to put pressure on him when he visited Moscow in early January, but it was unsuccessful as he still enjoys ample support from the UAE and Egypt.

The US has also been unwilling to apply pressure on Haftar, and even if the EU decided to restart Operation Sophia, this would not increase the chances of a stable ceasefire. A naval mission will not obstruct the UAE and Egypt's air support for Haftar's offensive. Moreover, the EU has been weak and divided: while Germany and Italy have sought to act as mediators, they have not been willing to exert pressure on Haftar's backers. France has always been ambiguous, seeing Haftar as a source of stability and a partner against terrorism in the Sahel, and has provided him with military assistance and diplomatic cover. And the GNA's maritime demarcation agreement with Turkey has pushed Greece and Cyprus closer to Haftar's camp, at least for the moment.

If Europeans want to shape events in Libya, they first need to agree on a shared strategy towards the conflict. While many member-states are furious with the GNA for its maritime agreement with Turkey, allowing Haftar to continue his offensive under the cover of protracted international talks is not a solution. If Haftar does not halt the siege of Tripoli, the conflict will continue to get worse. Turkey is likely to be drawn in further, prompting greater Emirati and Egyptian support for Haftar, leading to further escalation and greater humanitarian suffering. Even in the unlikely case that Haftar manages to take Tripoli, the conflict is unlikely to end, as many Libyans will continue to oppose him. Continued strife will open up space for the re-emergence of the Islamic State in Libya, where it was defeated by forces loyal to the GNA in 2016. As a ruler, Haftar is unlikely to be particularly friendly to European interests: it is far more likely that he will continue to maintain close links to the UAE, Egypt and Russia, and perhaps seek to build ones with China too. Finally, he is 76 years old, and couldn't be ruler for long.

Member-states should not treat the two sides as if they are equally responsible for the ongoing fighting: the GNA is defending itself, whereas Haftar is trying to take over Tripoli. Moreover, the GNA has shown it is willing to accept a ceasefire, even though the ensuing political process would lead to its eventual replacement, whereas Haftar has not. The right approach would be for Europe to redouble its efforts to end Haftar's offensive to conquer Tripoli and take power. However, this does not mean Europe needs to throw its lot in with the deeply flawed GNA: a ceasefire would only be the start of a political process leading to a new government that would piece the country back together. Restarting Operation Sophia would be an important step, but only a small one. Europe needs to be willing to condemn attacks on civilian areas, infrastructure and medical facilities; and to name, shame, and sanction all those

responsible. Member-states also need to pressure Haftar to cease his blockade, and allow oil production to resume – discussions on how to share the revenue can only take place after a ceasefire.

Europeans should work closely with the US, which seems to be paying more attention to Libya now that Russia and Turkey are playing a larger role there. They should in particular engage with Congress to build pressure on the White House to take action. Together, the US and Europe need to use their considerable influence to urge Haftar's international supporters, particularly the UAE, to reduce their military support for him and press him to halt his offensive. They should argue that, now Turkey is backing the GNA, Haftar will not be able to conquer Tripoli. It may be possible for the EU and US to cooperate with Russia. Moscow appears willing to de-escalate, in large part because it does not want to risk confrontation with Turkey, for fear of jeopardising their broader relationship. Moreover, Russia has always maintained links to both sides in the Libyan conflict, and is not fully invested in Haftar's success. On its part, Turkey has already shown willingness to push the GNA towards a ceasefire. Once the parties agree to a stable ceasefire, member-states should contribute to policing it. A mission need not be particularly large. Observers on the ground can make parties accountable and help ensure they respect their commitments. European nations could also back up a ceasefire observation mission on the ground by enforcing a no-fly zone to prevent further attacks on civilians.

If Europeans don't apply pressure to Haftar's backers to halt the fighting, the conflict will continue to escalate. Of course, a halt to the fighting would only be a first step, and Libya would probably remain divided between rival factions for a while. But a ceasefire would allow the resumption of UN-brokered political negotiations between Libyans, leading to the replacement of the GNA with a new government of national unity.

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