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# Libya: Haftar's Crisis and the Politics of Restoration

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**The militias of the Libyan Government of National Unity (GNA) have made significant gains in terrain against the troops of the Libyan National Army (LNA) of Khalīfa Haftar over the past six weeks. On 5 June, they succeeded in capturing the small town of Tarhūna barely 95 km south-east of Tripoli. Has Haftar's power passed the zenith?**

## *Illusion of a success*

The Chairman of the Libyan Presidential Council Fāyez al-Sarrāj used his simultaneous visit to Ankara, where he met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to emphasise that a political solution with Haftar was out of question. In a joint press conference, al-Sarrāj stressed that his government's militias will try to take control of the entire country and "bring all criminals to justice". Al-Sarrāj made no secret of the fact that the military successes are due to Turkish support. He said Libya was "looking forward" to the return of Turkish companies to help with infrastructure and reconstruction projects in Libya. Turkey, for its part, would do everything in its power, Erdoğan said, to ensure that Haftar and the Tobruk government of the "House of Representatives" would not continue to market the oil. Several thousand people have meanwhile fled the combat zones south of Tripoli in the direction of Banī Walīd. Members of the Russian PMC Wagner group and Sudanese Janjawid-unites have also withdrawn to this area. The spokesman of the LNA, al-Mismārī, only indirectly confirmed the loss of territory and spoke of a tactical retreat. A "Turkish advance towards Banī Walīd" had been repulsed and the village Sūq al-Khamīs 40 km west of Tarhūna had been

reconquered according to al-Mismārī. The Russian government linked the success of the GNA militias with an increased presence of fighters of the Syrian Levant Liberation Organization (HTS) from Idlib.

If the militias of the GNA were able to establish themselves in Tarhūna, this would be more than just a prestigious success. From Tarhūna it is only about 100km to Banī Walīd, which has been under the control of a local tribal council of the Warfalla Federation for years. This federation is said to have about 1 million members. Together with the Magraha Federation, which is almost equally in number, they are said to have formed the backbone of the Gaddafi regime.

## *Tribal politics*

The alliance of these two federations with Haftar's militias does not lack a certain logic because of their former loyalty to the Gaddafi regime. However, there are cracks in this alliance. The Warfalla in Banī Walīd occupy the road to Tarhūna and protest against forced recruitment by Haftar's troops. Although they have now let the Wagner people and the Sudanese pass, this does not mean that they will maintain the alliance with Haftar. But Haftar's legitimacy is also at stake. In July 2017 Haftar had arrested the

Saiqa Special Forces Major, Mahmūd al-Warfallī, who was wanted for war crimes by the International Criminal Court in The Hague (ICC), but two years later, after his escape from custody, he disappeared into Banī Walīd. It is said that Haftar even promoted him to lieutenant colonel. The future of Haftar's alliance, especially with France, also depends on whether he can transfer al-Warfallī to the ICC.

Whoever gets the upper hand in southern Tripolitania, Turkey will be able to boast that it has significantly defended the UN-recognized GNA government. This will, it is hoped, strengthen its position in the conflict over the staking of claims on the continental shelf in the eastern Mediterranean. Even if the Memorandum of Understanding agreed between the Turkish government and the GNA regarding the continental shelf is considered by the US as "unhelpful-provocative" and not binding on third countries, any upgrading of the GNA means a stage victory for Turkey in the conflict over hegemony over the Eastern Mediterranean.

Accordingly, the Turkish media now celebrate the entry of the GNA militias in Tarhūna. The media of Haftar's Arab allies LNA announce that it is Turkish units that have taken Tarhūna. As usual, they are thus shifting the conflict from Libya to a regional political level and embedding it in the conflict between the Gulf States and Turkey.

However, there is more at stake for Turkey in Libya than for the Emirates, Saudi Arabia or Egypt. The GNA in Tripoli is Turkey's second last remaining ally in the Arab world. As late as 2012, it had appeared that Turkey would become the political, economic and cultural model of a fundamentally changing Arab world. Only the Emirate of Qatar has been loyal to Turkey.

#### *Arabism instead of Islamism*

The "alliance" of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Sudan as well as Khalīfa Haftar's Libya, which took firm forms in 2015/6 and which Saudi Arabia and the Emirates rival for its strategic orientation, had for a long time gained its legitimacy from the fight against terrorism of ultra-Islamic federations. Although the Alliance was indeed

involved in battles against ultra-Islamic federations such as the "Islamic State" or al-Qā'ida in Yemen, Libya and Egypt, its political struggle was primarily directed at the right-wing populist Muslim Brotherhoods. Their efforts to gain state sovereignty over society, using Islam as a stirrup, were seen by the Gulf States as mutiny. Almost ten years ago, the Gulf States went on the offensive against the Islamists. They financed the overthrow of the Egyptian president in 2013, declared the Muslim Brotherhoods and allied associations to be "terrorist organizations" that had conspired against the nation state, and intervened in the Yemeni war in 2015 as well as in the Libyan war in 2017.

Rhetoric was now clearly modified: in lieu of an Islamic discourse of justification, which for decades had had to defend the ruling order, an Arabism now took its place, which had to reinforce the separation of state and religion. This is not the militant left-wing nationalism that brought down countless Arab monarchies in the 1950s and 1960s, but a new Arabism that no longer encompasses a social utopia. It is not ideological but gains its legitimacy solely from the centrist defence of the state and its system of rule. This nationalism is restorative in that it seeks to protect the state from a new revolutionary uprising. At the same time, it empowers the state to be the patron of an Islam that renounces all participation in power.

#### *Restoration*

Restoration in Middle Eastern countries is thus much more than a conservative policy of maintaining power. It is also a policy of intervention reminiscent of the "Metternich system", based on alliances of interests. The aim is to prevent revolutions and uprisings by allowing alliances to intervene militarily and by means of a policing system even in the "forecourt of the powers". The "forecourts" are those countries in which mutiny has already spread far and wide and where there is a threat that it could spread to the Restoration states. Iraq is regarded as Iran's forecourt, Yemen as Saudi Arabia's and Syria as Turkey's. The Middle Eastern regimes secure their interventionism through foreign policy

alliances. These guarantee the possibility of intervening in other states in order to prevent the spark of a possible rebellion against the state from spreading. Here, some elements recall the period of European restoration after the Napoleonic wars. But in the Middle East, no single "Holy Alliance" was formed and no single Restoration policy emerged; instead, three alliances were formed, which today dominate the whole of the Middle East. Despite the profound antagonism, the big three Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, as the hegemonic powers of their respective alliances, agree on the overall goal: to prevent the emergence of a "revolutionary" mood. For most of the Middle Eastern states it was expedient to join one of these alliances. Only Kuwait and Oman have tried to form partnerships with both the Turkish and Saudi alliances.

### *Wars*

The belligerents in the conflicts in Syria, Libya and Yemen are also pursuing a policy of restoration and, to this end, are submitting to the logic of their alliance partners. In essence, they compete for the power of the state, which they determine as the representation of the nation, as if by consensus. The state is thus not necessarily related to existing social realities. If this were the case, the wars in these three countries would have to be pacified through a process of radical decentralization or through the secession of social and geographical spaces. But the belligerents demand that the subject community pay homage to the state as sovereign and to the person who sees himself appointed as a representative of that sovereignty. There is no room for more than one potentate in such a logic.

The newly inflamed Turkish nationalism, which is increasingly overshadowing the old Islamism of the AKP, thus only differs from the Arabism of the Gulf States in terms of interests. As Arab-

ism, it is part of a consensual conservative restoration. Haftar in Libya has committed himself to this restoration, as has done the Egyptian President al-Sīsī. However, he does not succeed in uniting the Libyan population in a single community of subjects. Not only the Turkish "Holy Alliance" counters this, but above all the social reality of an autonomy-oriented solidarity order of the major tribal federations. After all, Haftar had been working skilfully for almost two years on an alliance with the two largest federations in the country, the Warfalla and the Magraha, and had had to make some compromises in the process. But he never managed to integrate the mercenary militias, above all Russians, Sudanese and Chadians, into such an alliance system. When the mercenaries were withdrawn from the front lines off Tripoli a few weeks ago, the alliance with the tribal federations also cooled down. This caused the two supporting pillars of Haftar's LNA to falter. They have not yet fallen, but the slight wavering alone has made the advance of the GNA militias possible. Obviously, the robust Turkish support has also contributed to this.

### *The echo*

It is not yet clear whether and if so, what effects the withdrawal of the LNA will have on the rather filigree architecture of the Middle Eastern restoration order. However, since the war in Libya has long since mutated into a dispute over hegemony in a restoration order desired by all war parties, there will initially be no fundamental change. Only if secessionist forces prevail, as in Yemen, will restoration policy face new challenges. The restoration will succeed only as long as it can maintain the illusion of a united community of subjects upon which the state is founded. It may therefore be that a "Vormärz" is already slumbering in the Middle Eastern underground, bearing the seeds of a second and perhaps even more intense "spring".