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# Libyan Divorce

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Only three months ago, Khalīfa Haftar's militia alliance, the Libyan National Army (LNA), appeared to be gaining supremacy in Tripolitania as part of its spring offensive. However, since the end of April 2020, the military situation has dramatically shifted in favour of the militias of the Government of National Concord (GNA) in Tripoli, and since 19 May, the LNA militias have been on the defensive. Beside important local communities in Tripolitania leaving the alliance with Haftar, highly equipped mercenary troops withdrawing from the combat zones, the increase of Turkish logistical support of the GNA - weapon supplies, the use of drones and a probable deployment of military personnel paved the way. Whether or not and to what extent Turkey also deploys mercenaries in Libya as well is uncertain, but quite likely.

## *The Red Line*

The advance of the GNA troops has now reached the town of Sirte, which has been largely destroyed by earlier various acts of war. Sirte, home of the Gaddafi clan, lies on the border between Tripolitania and the Libyan East. In the course of the Libyan wars, the sovereignty over the city changed four times, the most notorious being the rule of the so-called "Islamic State" in the city from February 2015 to September 2016. In January 2020, units of the LNA conquered the city. After local notables had declared their willingness to form an alliance with the GNA, militias from Misrāta tried to establish themselves in the town. The LNA's fierce resistance, however, forced them to retreat to positions about 20 km west of the town.

A second combat zone is developing in the southwest of the country. Armed groups led by Muhammad Khalīfa, the head of the so-called Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG), stormed the oil field al-Sharāra in Fezzan (southwest Libya) ordering to stop production. Fezzan's main town, Sabhā, is still under LNA control, but will most likely not prevail against the almost 30,000

men of the PFG. In alliance with the government in Tripoli, the PFG commanders may be tempted to attack the al-Jufra airbase, located about 260 km south of Sirte. If the advance were to succeed, the front line would probably be marking the future division of Libya.

## *Sirte*

"There will be political negotiations with the East," the GNA Minister of the Interior, Fathī Bāshāghā, was quoted in Arab Weekly, "but Sirte and al-Jufra must first be reconquered... We must prevent Russia from establishing bases in Sirte and al-Jufra". Bāshāghā, a hardliner of the Tripoli Muslim Brotherhood, originating from Misrāta, leaves no doubt about his position. In his opinion, Sirte, al-Jufra with the nearby town Hūn and the oil production areas in Fezzan form part of Tripolitania. But, as far as Sirte and al-Jufra are concerned, other members of the GNA are less determined.

For Haftar, Sirte belongs to the sphere of power of the LNA and the government of the House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk. He is sup-

ported in particular by those parts of the population of Sirte who identify themselves with the tribal federation Firjān. Sirte is one of the urban centres of Firjān, another one is the city of Ajdabīya, located 400km to the east. Ajdabīya is Khalīfa Haftar's hometown, being himself member of the Firjān. His brother is the chief of Benghāzī Firjān. From Haftar's point of view, Sirte is therefore not part of Tripolitania, but belongs to the sphere of power of Barqa (Cyrenaica), the Libyan East. The Tripolitans can argue that in the 19th and 20th centuries Ottomans, Italians and, from 1951 to 1963, the Libyan Kingdom had always placed the city and region of Sirte under the administration of Tripoli.

A conquest of Sirte by the Misrāta militias would therefore be an irreplaceable loss of prestige for Haftar. For his allies, a loss of al-Jufra and the extraction sites in Fezzan would be just as threatening. Therefore, the Russian and Egyptian governments let it be known that a red line has been drawn off Sirte and al-Jufra, which the militias of GNA should not cross under any circumstances. News confirming that the Egyptian army has moved troops along the border with Libya and that Russia has now replaced outdated LNA war material with new weapons and equipment show their determination.

Whether under these circumstances the GNA will dare to launch another attack on Sirte is open to speculations. Rather moderate forces within the GNA will agree to make the future status of Sirte the subject of political negotiations.

### *The logic of the Libyan divide*

Evidence suggests that the partition of Libya is seen as inevitable by all conflict parties. For some, such as the PFG, this division has even become a political agenda. In fact, it corresponds far more to the social reality in the country than the attempt to cling to the idea of a unified Libyan nation. In Libya, there had never been a social place of such a Libyan nation. It was always represented solely by the discourse of power. Even the Gaddafi regime had to make concessions to this. After the crisis in 1986, the tribal federations were massively upgraded to social pillars of the ruling order. This resulted in

a double structure of rule: the centralist state apparatus, in which certain parts of the population (mostly members of tribal federations from the region around Sirte, Hūn and Banī Walīd) were privileged, and regional versus local solidarity alliances, which often identified themselves as tribes. The latter's power had been strengthened to such an extent that Gaddafi could only give the appearance of an absolute ruler. His way out was to present himself as the patron of both the state and the tribes. Therefore, after 1979 officially no longer holding a political mandate, he defined himself as the "Brotherly Leader and Guide of the Revolution of Libya".

In the meantime, however, these two powers have largely become independent. Libya as a sovereign state now exists only in a few fields such as disease control. In contrast, regional forms of statehood are becoming increasingly important; tribes gained considerable influence among the local police and security forces. In political geography, they are increasingly oriented towards collective traditions of the pre-colonial era. Tripolitania now appears as a landscape of autonomous cities and municipalities that are interlinked by kinship, origin and social fields. For example, the ethnically diverse Fezzan region to the south, with its main town Sabhā, is drawing back on a trans-Saharan identity and communality. The East, called Barqa or Cyrenaica, is the landscape of Libya, where state power and tribal authority were closely intertwined and where, as in Saudi Arabia, the Islamic tradition was an important resource for the formation of a community of subjects. The fault line between Barqa and Tripolitania forms one of the oldest cleavages in North Africa, marking the border between the Arab East (Mashreq) and the Arab West (Maghreb).

### *One last (?) attempt to save Libya*

The partition of Libya has yet to be decided. On 6 June, Egypt's President 'Abdalfattāh al-Sīsī had tried to force a ceasefire by what he termed an initiative. "This initiative calls for compliance with all international efforts and initiatives by declaring a ceasefire on Monday, 8 June 2020, starting at 18:00 [17:00 CET]," al-Sīsī said at a press conference on 6 June. He also called on

the UN "to invite the rival Libyan governments to talks." Yet al-Sīsī made it quite clear to whom his support is directed. He specified that the initiative calls for "the dismantling of the militias and the handover of their weapons so that the Libyan National Army [i.e. the LNA of Haftar] can fulfil its military and security tasks and duties". In other words, pacification would be achieved by bringing together the governing powers of Tripoli and the House of Representatives in Tobruk in the form of "an elected presidential council" and placing it under the protection of the LNA. This means that Haftar, as he has always sought, would be made Lord of Libya and representatives of both governments would be appointed as his executive.

In al-Sīsī's logic, the military should be the sole guarantor of state power. And since the LNA Haftar's claims to be the "Libyan army", this would raise him to a certain extent above the state executive, just as the ex-General al-Sīsī sees himself as the patron of the government,

indeed as the supreme father of the Egyptian state and thus of the Egyptian nation.

Al-Sīsī will therefore certainly come to Haftar rescue, should the military situation in Sirte become a threat to the LNA, it is to be feared that the Egyptian army will intervene.

*Is the chance for peace increasing?*

The conflicts over Sirte offer the chance to finally start negotiations for a "divorce". But that would presuppose all sides renouncing their claim to hegemony over an imagined Libyan nation. In recent years, structures and institutions have emerged in the countries of Libya that can function as future pillars of state power, and the remnants of a civil society can serve as nuclei of a pluralistic democratic order. Divorce thus offers a chance for social and political reconciliation between the lands of Libya as the only way to achieve lasting peace.