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Libya: a war lying in wait

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For nearly seven weeks, militias and mercenary troops of the Tripoli government of National Concord (GNA) under Fāyiz Sarrāj and the Libyan National Army (LNA) under Khalīfa Haftar have been menacing each other outside the central Libyan city of Sirte (Syrtē). There is an undeclared ceasefire at the front.

Haftar's militias had succeeded in stopping the advance of GNA units at the beginning of June. It was clear to Haftar's allies that if Sirte fell into the hands of the GNA units, the way to the oil production areas in the east and the five large loading terminals, among others in Rās Lānūf and Brēga would be open to them. On 10 June Haftar's allies, the governments of Russia and Egypt, had declared the front line in front of Sirte to be a red line up to 250km south to Waddān. Should GNA militias cross it, this would inevitably lead to a direct military deployment of the Egyptian armed forces.

The Egyptian intervention

Even the strong militia from Misrāta, which form the core of the LNA units, decided not to try again to take Sirte. Nevertheless, they strengthened their positions 20 km west of the city, whereupon the Egyptian side intensified its verbal attacks. President al-Sīsī repeated his threat several times and had the Egyptian parliament unanimously give him *carte blanche* for a military mission. The President was authorized "to send units of the Egyptian army on combat missions outside the borders of the Egyptian state to defend Egypt's national security". Previously, the Eastern Libyan government of the "House of Representatives" (HoR), to which the LNA is nominally subordinate, had submitted a request for assistance to the Egyptian government.

Similarly, al-Sīsī showed up at a meeting with tribal leaders from Eastern Libya, which took place in Cairo under the motto "Egypt and Libya - one people, one destiny" to coincide with the parliamentary decision. The tribal representatives hoped to receive direct military aid from Egypt. In a highly symbolic act, they invited Hāfiz Khattāb, one of the ruling sheikhs of the Eastern Libyan al-Manafa tribe and grandson of 'Umar al-Mukhtār, the Libyan resistance hero against Italian colonialism who had been executed in 1931. Khattāb proclaimed, "We will drive the colonial Turks out of Libya, just as 'Umar al-Mukhtār had driven out the Italians." However, the Egyptian government refuses to arm the tribes. Only when they place their fighters under the LNA command could they expect to receive arms assistance. Al-Sīsī apparently wants to prevent the tribes from acting as independent actors, knowing full well that the Eastern Libyan tribes are quite capable of mobilizing their factions living in Egypt. This had already been the case several times and had caused massive problems for previous Egyptian governments.

The Arab-Turkish Cold War

The impending Egyptian combat mission in Libya could therefore also aim at averting the danger of tribal separatism in Eastern Libya. The Egyptian regime interprets Libya as its front

yard, where it is important to prevent any sign of an Islamist or separatist mood spreading to Egypt in the germ. To this end, Egypt must find ways and means of breaking the alliance between the Tripoli government and Turkey.

The means of choice at the moment is to stir up anti-Turkish sentiment in the Arab world. The aim of Egypt's policy is to contain Turkey, whose regional policy is interpreted as neo-Ottoman colonialism and Turkish imperialism. This deepens the rift between Turkey and most Arab countries that has opened up since 2012/3. Rhetorically, both camps are already in a state of war. The Egyptian press calls the Turkish president a terrorist devil, who wants to colonize the Arab world in alliance with the "terror prince" Bin Hamad, the Emir of Qatar, and the apostate "terrorists" in Tripoli and wants to establish the rule of the "Devil's Brothers", meaning the Muslim Brothers. The Turkish side simply calls al-Sīsī a "tyrant" who is a puppet of the dark terrorist powers Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Turkish press commented on the sharp criticism of the governments in Cairo, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi for the renewed use of the Hagia Sophia as a mosque with the words: "These countries have left the civilized world."

The block formation is reminiscent of the Arab Cold War, which dominated the Middle East from 1956 to 1979. The Turkish media never tires of calling al-Sīsī the new version of the Egyptian President Nasser; the Egyptians, for their part, portray Erdoğan as a revival of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Bannā. The block formation is increasingly acquiring a considerable neo-nationalist profile. This time the Arab alliance even unites the two arch-rivals from the time of the first Arab Cold War, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Their political justification scheme is no longer ideological, but is based on a consensus on the need for a restorative national policy to prevent any form of rebellion or revolt against the state. To this end, Islam must be banned from the political public sphere. The Arab Alliance hopes in this way to deprive the fire of a possible new Arab rebellion of its food.

Opponents are primarily the two patrons of political Islam, the Turkish government and the Emirate of Qatar. They construct their nationalisms with considerable reference to Islam. For them, Islam forms the powerful framework order that gives the nation a moral identity. By assigning the nation to Islam, the titular nations gain at the same time in prestige. The Turks are seen as guarantors of an Islamic identity to which other ethnic communities should also assign themselves. Even non-Muslim communities, for example the Armenians, should recognize the advantage of being subjects of a Turkish nation represented by Islam.

This Turkish nation, which has little to do with the nation Atatürk had dreamed of, needs the Ottoman history to justify itself historically. It interprets Turkish nationalism in a cosmopolitanism inherited from the Ottoman Empire. By integrating Ottomanism into the nationalist world of imagination, Turkey gains a platform that points far beyond the geographical area of the Turkish state. Turkey's sphere of action will be the entire eastern Mediterranean region, where it is no coincidence that large oil and gas production areas are being explored more or less successfully. And it is no coincidence that Turkey is tying in with old allies who played a decisive role in the renaissance of the Ottoman Sultanate during the reform processes of the Tanzimat period in the 19th century, among them families with non-Arab Ottoman ancestors, above all in the urban communities in Libyan Tripolitania and in Syria. It is not yet clear whether Ottomanism will also take hold among the Egyptian elites. After all, there is still an upper class in Egypt today that sees itself as the heirs of an Ottoman cosmopolitanism.

An Iranian-Turkish alliance?

The neo-Ottoman alliance led by Turkey is experimenting with the idea of entering into a strategic partnership with Iran and even improving relations with Russia. The Turkish press reported with satisfaction that the Iranian government has called the reopening of the Hagia Sophia as a mosque the most important event of this century and that the ongoing consultations between Russia and Turkey on Libya and Syria

are bearing fruit. If an Iranian-Turkish rapprochement does indeed take place, it would have far-reaching consequences for the war alliances in Syria. Russia and Iran would move away from the al-Asad regime in Damascus, which in turn would develop its already good relations with the United Arab Emirates and return to the Arab League. Syrian mercenaries in the service of the Damascus regime have already intervened on the LNA side in the fighting in Libya. Al-Asad would have many advantages from this alliance. For example, he could have access to the "Arab alliance" gilded with financial aid from the Gulf states.

Turkey will know that in the long run it cannot take the risk of a double front against Iran (in Syria and Iraq) and against Saudi Arabia (in Libya). It is no secret that Russia increasingly sees the current allies al-Asad and Haftar as a burden. And the Iranian government will weigh up which of the existing front lines is most likely to be abandoned. The existing territories of Iranian or Iran-friendly militias and parties in the Fertile Crescent and Yemen would not be affected, so that Iran could maintain its position of power there. And as for proof, the Muslim Brothers are already testing a positive attitude towards the Shiite tradition. The Emirate of Qatar supports this, because its relations with Iran have improved considerably since the beginning of the Saudi blockade in June 2017.

All this is speculation. In the meantime, rearmament continues on the inner Libyan border. The GNA, which sees the decision of the Egyptian parliament as a declaration of war, has sent new troops to the front. The LNA has deployed missile defence systems around the Sirte. Turkish weapons, Turkish military personnel, and military personnel of Arab states are already facing each other.

The Libyan internal oil boycott

However, after the verbal arguments of the last weeks, it has become strangely quiet. The LNA is increasingly struggling with internal problems. In the loading ports of Brēga and Rās Lānūf, militias of the LNA have been competing for supremacy for more than two days. The LNA had begun an oil blockade in mid-January 2020,

which reduced oil production to a minimum and resulted in a loss of more than \$6.5 billion in revenue. The National Oil Corporation, based in Tripoli, is currently responsible for oil production in Libya, while the central bank, also based in Tripoli, is responsible for oil revenues. Both institutions are de facto subordinate to the GNA. Haftar's attempt to set up his own state bank with Russian help and to provide it with the income from the sale of oil has failed. "The ports and oil fields will remain closed until the demands and orders of the Libyan people are implemented," said the LNA spokesman, Ahmad al-Mismārī in a statement broadcast on July 11. This would remain so until the LNA's three demands are met: Opening a special account for oil revenues in a nameless country outside of Libya, through which the revenues would be distributed "fairly", preventing the financing of "terrorism and mercenaries" from the oil revenues, and a review of the central bank's expenditures paid from the oil revenue accounts in recent years.

The GNA now wants to put an end to this and exercise military control over the oil production sites east of Sirte. If it succeeds, Haftar's LNA would be thrown back to the East: it would only have those positions it already held in August 2015. Haftar's hopes of gaining control over oil revenues have evaporated. His supposed charisma has suffered massively as a result. The clashes between the hard-fought Petroleum Facilities Guard, which has been watching over the ports in the Gulf of Sirte since 2017, and the Sā'iqā militia, which is commanded by Maḥmūd al-Warfallī and is considered a follower of the ultra-orthodox Islamic Madkhalīs, show that Haftar's power of command is crumbling. The International Criminal Court had issued an arrest warrant against him in August 2017 on the charge of having ordered extrajudicial executions in connection with the death of 33 people in 2016/7. This is apparently also about controlling the smuggling of oil, which has increased considerably with the boycott.

Haftar has apparently passed the zenith of his power. Now it will be a matter of building a credible alternative. The aim would be to consolidate

the LNA's military power in the east of the country and to transform the LNA militias into armed forces under a unified command. But this would mean a far-reaching restructuring of the social foundations of the power relations in the east of the country.

Will there be war?

No one can predict with any certainty what will happen if, intentionally or accidentally, a shot is

fired at the front of Sirte. Should the Misrāta militias of the GNA dare to advance eastwards, Egyptian troops will land at Sirte and intervene in the fighting. Without such an intervention, the LNA militias, which are largely made up of mercenary units, would hardly have been able to cope with the Tripolitarians and Turkish supporters. Both sides will thus try to delay the confrontation as long as possible. However, postponed is not dissolved.