

The Haftar factor in Libya's puzzle

General Khalifa Haftar does not yet formally control power in all of Libya, but he possesses some of the hallmarks of a real Arab ruler. Despite enjoying no official international support, Haftar controls his self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) and through that holds almost total political power in the part of Libya under his control – Cyrenaica, in the country's East. In fact, much like elsewhere in the region, in Haftar's part of Libya the civilian government of Abdullah al Thinni is subordinate to the military and the same can be said of many economic institutions. Like other Arab leaders, Haftar has a powerful son, named Saddam, who was recently promoted to higher levels of the military and is said to be a key factor in his father's international relations.

Haftar's web of relations is a good example of the increasing convergence of some regional and international powers: a longstanding proxy of Egypt, Haftar has always received a great deal of support from the UAE and is now part of the renewed alliance between Saudi Arabia, the Gulf countries and the US. According to many officials, while being largely disinterested in Libya, the Trump administration has delivered a clear message to the Libyan general: play ball with whatever strategy comes out of Cairo and Abu Dhabi. In the last year, Haftar has built up good relations with Russia, which has been reciprocated, although not as much as he would have wanted: Libya is not Syria for Moscow and Haftar is unlikely to get the support that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is getting. In the meantime, Haftar has enjoyed increasing sympathy among many European policy-makers who see him as the only partner for counter-terrorism, a sentiment that could grow even further in the aftermath of the attack in the UK city of Manchester on May 22.

Haftar's official position is Commander of the Libyan National Army. He was appointed by the House of Representatives (HoR) in early 2015. The HoR is the internationally-recognised parliament, although it is effectively a rump legislature with only about half of its members still attending regularly. The speaker of the HoR, Aghila Saleh, is mostly loyal to Haftar and has blocked any attempt to remove the general who he promoted to Field Marshall earlier this year.

Haftar's power structure is interesting. There are formal "political branches" with a parliament and a government but the real decision-making centre is in Haftar's military headquarters in Marj, in eastern Libya. His son Saddam plays an increasingly important role, both domestically and internationally, while the Libyan ambassador to Riyadh, Abdul Basit al Badri, is Haftar's de facto special envoy, particularly with the Russians. Haftar increasingly relies on Salafists as the "political police" that holds his part of Libya together. During the summer of 2016, military governors replaced elected mayors throughout eastern Libya.

Haftar's popularity, particularly but not exclusively in the east, is due to a combination of different factors. First of all, he is seen as the embodiment of the idea of a single national army that fights and overcomes the myriad militias now creating chaos and violence. Secondly, his programme to eradicate political Islam and its armed groups can count on widespread distrust, when not hatred, for Islamists. Thirdly, Haftar is seen as a man of law and order in an increasingly lawless country. The more anarchy there is, the higher his political fortunes. Last but not least, being a man of Western Libya (his Ferjan tribe stretches between Sirte and the outskirts of Tripoli), Haftar managed to become the champion of Cyrenaica, the eastern part of Libya that was marginalised under Muammar

Gaddafi, and fears a similar marginalisation after him.

It is also true that Haftar gives rise to much opposition from other armed groups and distrust from many civilian stakeholders, particularly in western and southern Libya, which do not share his zero-sum game military logic. Whereas his supporters see him as the champion of a national army, his opponents feel the return of an authoritarian military rule and one-man power, a feeling that is often fed by pro-Haftar propaganda echoing the style of the Gaddafi regime.

Indeed, Haftar was part of the regime in the early years. He headed the Libyan army in its disastrous war against Chad in the 1980s and then felt betrayed by Gaddafi when the dictator disowned him after he was captured by the Chadians. Once liberated, he defected from the regime and moved to the US, where he lived in Langley, not far from the CIA headquarters. He returned to Libya in 2011 to fight against the regime but like most of the former army officers, he felt marginalised by the young “revolutionaries”. Instead of relying on people like Haftar, the post-Gaddafi rulers created a “hybrid” security sector based mostly on anti-Gaddafi militias and only marginally including the parts of the old army that had defected to the rebels. Meanwhile, a campaign of targeted killings left dozens dead in Benghazi and elsewhere, with victims including civil society activists alongside elements considered as members of the old regime.

Building on these feelings of increased insecurity among the population and marginalisation of army officers, Haftar attempted a military coup in Tripoli on Valentine's Day in 2014. After the failure of this coup, he moved to eastern Libya, where he built a much more solid position, and launched “Operation Dignity” in mid-May 2014. In parallel with the operation, he created the Libyan National Army. But three years later this is still neither properly an army (most of its members are civilians with no proper training) nor is it national as most military officers in the west of Libya still reject Haftar's command.

After an opposition coalition called Libya Dawn was formed, the government headed by Abdullah al Thinni fled Tripoli in the summer of 2014 and established itself in the eastern city of Beyda, where it still is. A few weeks later, a rival National Salvation Government was formed by Libya Dawn. Initially acting through intermediaries, Haftar was finally appointed as head of the armed forces by the HoR in January 2015. His appointment coincided with the launch of the UN-led political process which aimed to reconcile the two rival governments but ended up creating a third one, the Government of National Accord headed by Faiez Serraj and based in Tripoli. Until last month, Haftar had largely refused to engage with the political process, claiming that his priority was the military eradication of Islamists and extremists.

Yet his first military steps were not necessarily a success. Dignity-aligned armed groups lost control of Tripoli a few weeks after the launch of the operation and then Haftar's LNA did not have control of most of Benghazi for the first year and a half. By the time of the signing of the UN-led Libyan Political Agreement in Skhirat (Morocco) in December 2015, his trajectory seemed to be downward, so much so that the agreement included an article that allowed the government to fire him. February 2016 marked the beginning of his comeback. Backed by Egypt and France, Haftar captured most of Benghazi and gradually extended his control over vast parts of eastern Libya. By mid-2016, Western foreign ministers, one after the other, started saying that Haftar had to be part of the solution in Libya, while the UN-backed government struggled in Tripoli.

Since early May of this year, Haftar has changed his tactics without moving an inch on his political strategy. His new tactic is to be part of an Egyptian and UAE-

led political dialogue, and so he agreed to meet Fayez al-Sarraj, the prime minister of Libya's UN-backed government, in Abu Dhabi on 2 May. But the dialogue has to satisfy his demands, which are essentially two: no subordination of the military to the civilian authorities and presidential elections to be held early in 2018. Needless to say, he would run in those elections and counts on winning them. Meanwhile, he hopes that armed groups in Western Libya and particularly in Tripoli will fight against each other, which would only strengthen the domestic and international perception of him as the sole man of law and order in Libya.

What the future holds for Haftar is unclear but he looks increasingly as the potential beneficiary of a new US-Egyptian-Emirati convergence, as emerged from the Riyadh summit of May 21-22: a return of almost unconditional US support for the status quo in the Sunni countries in the name of the fight against extremism, whether in the form of Iran or in the form of political Islam. It is unclear if Haftar will be able to capitalise on this new alignment as it is also unclear how Europeans would stand to benefit from his design for Libya.