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# “This War is Out of Our Hands”

## The Internationalization of Libya’s Post-2011 Conflicts From Proxies to Boots on the Ground

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## Executive Summary

For almost a decade, Libya has been riven by increasingly internationalized conflicts, stemming from local and regional fissures during the 2011 anti-Qadhafi revolution and the NATO-led intervention. In the wake of that conflict, foreign missteps and the failures of Libyan elites to produce political unity and workable institutions opened the field for an escalating proxy war.

Beginning in 2014, Libya's internecine struggle became militarized, first in Benghazi and then in Tripoli, with a significant uptick in foreign weapons shipments to two opposing constellations of armed groups and political factions. The first was the eastern-based "Operation Dignity" camp, led by General Khalifa Haftar and supported by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and France. The second was the anti-Haftar "Libya Dawn" coalition in Tripolitania and its militia allies in Benghazi and Derna, backed by Turkey, Qatar, and Sudan. Though outside forces intervened directly with airstrikes and limited raids by special operations forces, Libyans still carried out the actual combat. Starting with Haftar's attack on Tripoli in 2019, the international actors themselves have assumed a greater prominence in the conflict over local Libyan proxies, via foreign mercenaries, foreign-piloted aircraft, and other forms of interference.

A number of factors have driven the internationalization of Libya's wars: global disorder and the weakening of multilateral norms and institutions, American ambivalence and mixed signals on Libya, European paralysis, military adventurism by regional powers, and Russian opportunism. However, Libyan elites and local actors themselves also played a key role in internationalizing the conflict by soliciting and manipulating foreign support for self-serving ends.

Amplifying these geopolitical and economic aspects is the convergence of military and technological innovations in the Libyan conflict, especially the widespread use of armed drones and foreign mercenaries. Beyond this kinetic dimension, outside actors have waged a war for public opinion in traditional and social media spaces, often through disinformation tactics that conceal the foreigners' influence. Even so, notions of a high-tech, sanitized, science-fiction war in which the human (and Libyan) role is absent are misplaced. The fighting remains highly personal for Libyans, who will bear its devastating costs for years to come.

### Key Findings:

- **Libya's post-2011 civil wars are a casualty of a broader global disorder and the deterioration of multilateral institutions and norms, as evidenced by divisions and paralysis within the United Nations Security Council.** Compounding these trends are American

retrenchment and mixed signals, European disunity and partisanship, military assertiveness and hegemonic aspirations by rival Middle Eastern powers, and Russian opportunism. A mix of ideological motives, economic interests, leadership ambitions, and geopolitics has informed the actions of Libya's foreign interveners.

- **In addition to ideological competition and geopolitics, Libya's oil wealth indirectly drives outside intervention, fragmentation, and conflict prolongation.** Libya's hydrocarbon resources have long been an incentive for international involvement, though it was often not the main motivation for foreign meddling. Access to this wealth became a zero sum prize between competing Libyan factions, who wield it to gain domestic support and entice foreign sponsors. This marketplace dimension, while hardly the sole or even primary conflict driver, differentiates Libya from the Middle East's other proxy wars.
- **The increasing convergence of military and technological innovations has shaped the kinetic and informational war in Libya.** Foreigner interveners in Libya have relied extensively on cheap armed drones, which helps mitigate risks to their personnel and evade outside scrutiny—an evasion that is also made possible by international divisions and, in the case of the United Arab Emirates, Western diplomatic protection. In addition, foreign mercenaries and auxiliaries have been used by both Libyan factions and their foreign patrons, reflecting a global trend toward the outsourcing of extraterritorial military force driven partly by the availability of itinerant, pay-for-hire fighters from failed revolutions and civil wars in Africa and the Middle East and the growth of private military companies. In tandem, outside states are using traditional media outlets, social media trolls and Twitter “bots,” co-opted journalists and commentators, lobby organizations, and agents provocateurs to wage a sophisticated war for public opinion in which the foreign hand is often obscured.
- **Despite the war's internationalization, Libyans play a vital role as intermediaries, brokers, and fixers for foreign powers.** Bereft of institutions, Libya's fragmented and hyperlocalized landscape has been dominated by Libyan political elites, armed group leaders, and foreign-based brokers who've solicited outside patronage to bolster their own power and agendas. Adding an unpredictable layer of arbitration to foreign influence, these brokers have competed with one another and sometimes defected or switched sides, diluting foreign control over local proxies. A net result of this individual, transnational activism has been an attenuation of Libyan sovereignty and a prolongation of the conflict.

## Introduction

One snowy morning in February 2020, in the small Russian hamlet of Akbulak, near the Kazakh border, a line of funeral mourners filed into a movie theater to bid farewell to one of the village's sons. The body of the deceased, a 27-year-old man named Gleb Mostov, had rested in a casket all through the night in the modest house of his father. Bereaved for his son, the father politely turned away reporters. "Sorry, guys," he told them, "I'm dealing with my grief here."

Far less polite, however, were the plainclothes Russian security officers and soldiers who'd cordoned off the theater and prohibited the press from entering. The circumstances of Mostov's death had remained a mystery until his parents disclosed the truth to a local newspaper: he'd been an officer in the Russian army, a trained sniper, who'd been killed on the battlefield in faraway Libya.<sup>1</sup> For some of the mourners, the news hardly came as a shock. "First, Afghanistan, then Chechnya, Ukraine, and now Syria and Libya. Why are you surprised?" a woman asked her husband as they entered the cinema.

We don't know exactly how or where Gleb Mostov died in Libya, though it was likely on the frontlines just a short drive south of the capital of Tripoli. There, from the fall of 2019 until early 2020, roughly a thousand Russian paramilitary fighters from the so-called Wagner Group and some regular personnel fought alongside Libyan rebels led by a septuagenarian warlord named Khalifa Haftar in an effort to topple the internationally recognized government in Tripoli. This government, the Government of National Accord or GNA, has itself relied on foreigners to bolster its ranks, most recently in the form of thousands of militia fighters from Syria, including veterans of the years-long war against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.<sup>2</sup> Added to the mix are Sudanese and Chadian gunmen, fighting mostly on Haftar's side, as well as pro-Assad Syrian fighters.

Foreign belligerents in Libya are not only on the ground. High above the mercenaries, fleets of cheap but lethal drones and foreign fixed wing aircraft have filled Libya's skies, piloted by personnel from the United Arab Emirates (backing Haftar) and Turkey (backing the Tripoli government), as well as Russian aviators and mercenary pilots from other countries.<sup>3</sup> In total, there are at least 10 foreign states that are militarily contributing to the current Libyan conflict.<sup>4</sup>

For many Libyans, the presence of these foreign combatants outside the capital and across the country have come as a shock. They are the most visible confirmation that the struggle for Libya's future is being dictated not by Libyans, but by powerful outside states. "This war is out of our hands," a Libyan aid worker lamented to the author in January 2020.<sup>5</sup> A sense of weary resignation accompanies this observation. After all, Libyans point out, predatory colonial powers in the last century jostled for influence over the territory that comprises

the modern state of Libya—and this current conflict is also hardly the first time foreigners have used Libyan soil and Libya proxies to wage war on one another.<sup>6</sup>

The story of how the post-2011 Libyan civil war reached this state of internationalization contains multiple chapters. First and foremost, the political and social fissures catalyzed by the country's 2011 revolution saw outside powers, some of them geopolitical rivals, lend military support to locally-based armed groups and factions. Many of these forces were deeply suspicious of one another but united to topple dictator Muammar Qadhafi.<sup>7</sup> These fissures and competing narratives about the revolution contributed to Libyan elites' failure to build inclusive political institutions and formal security organizations after Qadhafi's death.<sup>8</sup>

The eruption of armed civil war in the summer of 2014, first in Benghazi and then in Tripoli, saw the foreign struggle for Libya move to a new level of militarization and violence, with a significant uptick in weapons shipments to two loosely-constituted factions. The first was the eastern-based "Operation Dignity" faction, led by General Haftar and backed by the Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and France. Opposing this camp was the Libya Dawn coalition based in western Libya and its militia allies in Benghazi, which was backed by Turkey, Qatar, and Sudan. An array of locally based conflicts and rivalries permeated this conflict, presenting foreign actors further openings to exploit.

Though outside forces intervened directly with airstrikes and some limited raids by special operations forces, Libyans still waged the actual combat. Foreigners intervened according to the traditional definition of a proxy or surrogate war: funneling materiel, intelligence, training, and media support to Libyan military and political actors—many of them highly localized and acting through networks of foreign-based Libyan intermediaries.<sup>9</sup> The underlying driver for outside intervention during this phase was ideological—a struggle over Islamists' place in Libya's political order, though it also centered on control of economic resources and how much of the old Qadhafi-led order to preserve.<sup>10</sup>

In April 2019, with the attack of Haftar's forces on the outskirts of the Libyan capital, the mask of Libyan ownership of the conflict fell away. Though they continued to work through Libyan armed proxies and intermediaries, foreign states committed more of their own combat forces on the ground and in the air. By the end of the year, Tripoli and the western region were flooded with thousands of foreign fighters from Eurasia, Africa, and the Middle East and hundreds of sorties by foreign-piloted drones and fixed-wing aircraft, whose strikes incurred mounting civilian deaths. This phase also saw growth in the sophistication of the information war, led by foreign states in conjunction with Libyan actors or on their behalf.<sup>11</sup> The ideological component, while still a motive for the Emiratis and Haftar's other backers, was accompanied by a fiercer geopolitical power struggle overlaid with a contest for economic spoils.

At the broadest level, Libya's post-2011 civil wars have been facilitated by a breakdown in global multilateral norms, the diminished authority of the United Nations, American ambivalence and retrenchment, European discord and deadlock, and Russian opportunism. The mounting disorder has been on display most starkly in the UN Security Council's repeated failures to enact a meaningful ceasefire resolution and foreign states' continuing contempt for a longstanding UN arms embargo on Libya, with key members on the council working in opposition to the UN Secretary General's representative in Libya.<sup>12</sup> All of this stands in marked contrast to the relative diplomatic unanimity that defined the international response to the 2011 revolution.

Post-Arab Spring strategic rivalries compounded these trends in Libya. Though much attention—especially in the United States—has been focused on Moscow's designs in Libya, the role of two Middle Eastern powers, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey, has arguably been more consequential for the fate of the country. Abu Dhabi's policies have been especially decisive at numerous junctures, reflecting a trend of Emirati military adventurism and economic expansion in the region, fueled in part by a "zero tolerance" approach to Islamists and political pluralism more broadly.<sup>13</sup> Turkey's intervention in Libya, in turn, is also part of a bigger push for leadership in the Mediterranean by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that has deeper domestic, ideological, and economic roots.<sup>14</sup>

Both countries' hegemonic aspirations have been enabled partly by the vacuum of American leadership in Libya and also a degree of backing and acquiescence from Washington, given these states' longstanding roles as U.S. partners in the Middle East. Beyond this, Libya's geographic position on the margins of America's core security and economic concerns in the Middle East means that Washington has been unwilling to invest significant resources, either in Libya directly or in dissuading its regional allies from meddling. This diplomatic absence, along with mixed signals on Libya and a markedly pro-Emirati stance under the Trump administration, has fueled the conflict. It has also contributed to European paralysis and invited Russia's opportunistic intervention.

Despite the active role of foreign actors, Libyans themselves have been essential in internationalizing the conflict. Bereft of institutions, Libya's fragmented landscape has been dominated by Libyan elites, many of whom solicited foreign patronage to bolster their position against rivals. One outcome of this personalized transnational activism has been the erosion of Libyan sovereignty—a recurring facet of Libya's modern history that has precedent in Libyan elites' collaboration with the Ottomans, Italians, French and British.<sup>15</sup> In the post-2011 period, this personalization of the foreign proxy war has been exacerbated by Libya's fragmentation but also Libyans residing overseas in Doha, Istanbul, Abu Dhabi, Amman, and other foreign metropolises. Acting as power brokers and fixers for the flows of arms, money, and media support, these individuals complicated the principal-agent dynamic by inserting a layer of arbitration that

introduced the possibility of miscalculation, errors, or outright defections. This high-risk, multi-level chain of command, combined with the multiplicity of Libyan and outside actors more broadly, has protracted Libya's chaos.

Added to this, Libya's hydrocarbon resources have long been a magnet for international involvement and predation.<sup>16</sup> In the wake of the Arab Spring, control over this wealth became a prize between competing Libyan factions, disincentivizing the forging of durable truces and also enabling local actors to solicit outside aid with promises of contracts and payments. Relatedly, Libyan political elites and armed group leaders have parked oil-derived wealth in European and Middle Eastern banks and real estate, often cementing foreign partisanship, but also handing a degree of leverage to foreign actors in the form of asset freezes and sanctions.<sup>17</sup> The economic incentives wielded by local Libyan proxies, though not uniform across the country, differentiate Libya's war from the Middle East's other proxy conflicts, like Lebanon and Syria, where foreign states provide funding to local allies. Commenting on the differences with Lebanon, the former UN envoy to Libya Ghassan Salamé controversially asserted, "the truth is that Libya can pay for its own suicide."<sup>18</sup> Yet the inability of a single Libyan faction to achieve territorial or political dominance and—especially in the case of eastern Libya—international norms against the illicit export of oil have meant that local Libyan actors have often failed to meet the economic expectations of their outside patrons.<sup>19</sup>

Seasoned observers of Libya have argued that Libya's civil war, especially its post-2019 phase, embodies the intersection of several military and technological trends with potentially far-reaching consequences.<sup>20</sup> The nature of these shifts, combined with the multipolarity mentioned above, has given foreign competition in Libya a distinctive character marked by opacity, lethality, and toxicity. The widespread deployment of armed drones, which mitigates personnel risks to interveners and affords a degree of clandestinity, is the result of the proliferation of these weapons across the Middle East from foreign suppliers, namely China, and indigenous manufacturing advances, in the case of Turkey. Airstrikes in Libya from these craft, and also fixed-wing airplanes, have been insulated from serious scrutiny because of the aforementioned international disorder and scorning of embargo norms, but more importantly Western diplomatic protection of the most egregious of the violators, the United Arab Emirates.

In addition, all sides in Libya's war have relied upon foreign contract fighters, mercenaries and—in the case of Russian and even Turkish involvement—"semi-state" auxiliaries.<sup>21</sup> This is reflective of a broader, global trend of privatizing and outsourcing expeditionary military force, driven in part by the lucrative rise of private military companies and availability of recyclable, pay-for-hire fighters from poorer, conflict-wracked states in Africa and the Middle East.<sup>22</sup> While generally exhibiting low combat proficiency, the impact of these foreign ground

and air forces on battlefield developments in Libya has arguably been more decisive than that of foreign combatants in the Middle East's other proxy wars, in Syria and Yemen.<sup>23</sup>

On top of these military developments, Libya has seen an increasingly sophisticated informational battle for public opinion, waged by foreign states through traditional and social media channels, foreign lobby firms, and co-opted journalists, in which foreign influence is often difficult to discern. This disinformation war is another means for outside actors to shape the Libyan conflict with minimal blowback or penalties.<sup>24</sup>

The rest of this report is divided into four sections, examining the Libyan war chronologically to recount its history and draw out the above themes. The first addresses how foreign intervention and rivalries played out during the 2011 revolution and the post-revolutionary period until 2014. The second section addresses the proxy war in the context of the Dignity versus Dawn civil war and its aftermath until 2019, and the third section examines the battle for Tripoli and the post-2019 phase, characterized by increasingly direct intervention by foreign powers. The fourth and concluding section offers scenarios for the future of international involvement in Libya and provides lessons from Libya's experience of proxy warfare.

## The Backdrop: Proxy Rivalries Within a Revolution and Political Contestation, 2011-2014

The foreign military rivalries unfolding in Libya today stem back nearly a decade, to the 2011 revolution and the NATO-led intervention. That military conflict was hardly the binary rebels versus regime struggle that media portrayals suggested—in many senses, it was a civil war with some towns and communities arrayed in support of the regime and multiple local conflicts existing under the superficial rubric of a popular uprising.

Similarly, the NATO-led coalition patrolling the skies was also riven with competing agendas. Tensions were especially visible among countries that put boots on the ground, i.e. intelligence and special operations personnel who managed the flow of weapons shipments, provided training in some instances, and coordinated airstrikes on behalf of local Libya armed groups. The armed groups became, in effect, local proxies for foreign powers, most notably the Emirates (joined by France) and Qatar, who carried out their rivalry in the form of competing “operations rooms” through which information, requests for weapons, and intelligence coordination flowed.<sup>25</sup> Sudanese forces also played a role on both sides of the conflict: Libyan Islamists leveraged historic connections with Sudan to solicit help from Khartoum in the form of arms shipments and drones.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, fighters from a Sudanese opposition group, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), fought for the Qadhafi regime.<sup>27</sup>

Among these players, Qatar proved the most assertive, sending senior officers and special operations forces across Libya. French and Emirati personnel were also involved, and British special operations forces were especially present in the city of Misrata. Here, they were establishing operational linkages that would be reactivated during the battle against the Islamic State five years later, most significantly with the Misratan businessman and current GNA Minister of Interior Fathi Bashagha.<sup>28</sup> For their part, Libyan revolutionary leaders buttressed their authority and attracted fighters by demonstrating their access to outside arms streams. “Because there was no formal chain of command, the Libyan commanders had to establish power... and if you had access to Western (or foreign) arms or attention, you got power,” noted one U.S. military officer liaising with the Libyan revolutionary groups at the time.<sup>29</sup>

The competition started within weeks of the revolution’s uprising in Benghazi and eastern Libya and quickly spread to other theaters. Yet it was not predetermined, nor was it constructed along secular and Islamist lines; among the revolutionary armed groups, divisions between Islamists and anti-Islamists gradually sharpened and crystallized partly due to Emirati and Qatari intervention. They also overlapped with a complex set of town- and region-based networks and elites inside Libya, as well as Libyan intermediaries residing in Abu

Dhabi or Doha who often exerted a significant influence on where the arms went and shaped the preferences of outside patrons.<sup>30</sup> The outlines of this conflict and, in some cases, its personalities continue into Libya's contemporary civil war.

### **The U.S. Policy of "No Ownership"**

The United States, with intelligence personnel and special operations forces across the country during 2011, was cognizant of these burgeoning divisions. It was not in a position, however, to temper or mitigate them during the revolution especially after the fall of Qadhafi, when its diplomatic footprint was reduced and the Obama administration adopted a policy of having no military personnel on the ground. Crucially, this approach arose from the administration's preference to avoid an Iraq-like quagmire but also in response to firm opposition from Libya's transitional authorities to having any foreign armed personnel on the country's soil. More specifically, with the experience of Iraq on their minds, Libyan officials forbade any armed private military contractors from entering Libya—an ironic prohibition, given the massive influx of mercenaries into Libya in the coming years.<sup>31</sup>

Washington's ceding of the post-conflict transition to Libyans, backed by the United Nations and the Europeans—what one White House official called a policy of “no ownership”—had profound implications for U.S. leverage on what followed.<sup>32</sup> “If we had had more assets and advisors on the ground, perhaps we could've shaped the outcome after the revolution,” lamented another White House official.<sup>33</sup> This was especially evident as the fissures that permeated the 2011 revolution sharpened and widened after Qadhafi's fall.

Much of the U.S. military and intelligence community's initial outreach went through a constellation of defected army officers centered around Colonel Abd al-Salam al-Hasi, a close confidant of the defected Libyan special forces commander Abd al-Fatah Younis. Initially, these defected officers worked closely, if uneasily, with other revolutionary armed groups. But the distrust between the groups widened, partially due to Qatari arms shipments that were routed to Islamist-leaning groups. The rivalries burst into open violence with the shadowy assassination of Abd al-Fatah Younis, allegedly by Islamists as payback for the general's role in carrying out Qadhafi-era repression. The splits would continue to haunt Libya's post-2011 transition and partly explain the eruption of civil war in 2014.<sup>34</sup>

Contrary to common assumptions, Doha did not back these groups solely because of their Islamist credentials, but because it assessed them to be among the more cohesive and militarily-competent factions (they included veterans of foreign battlefields).<sup>35</sup> Moreover, they were more hardline in their intention to remake the post-Qadhafi political order, which Qatar saw as playing to its advantage. Throughout the revolution, Qatar's rise as the most effective foreign

sponsor was occasioned by the outsized influence of Libyan power brokers, especially Doha-based cleric Ali Sallabi. Sallabi proved instrumental in steering Qatari aid away from the Younis network, aligned politically with the Libyan technocrat Mahmud Jibril and a Libyan theologian-turned-businessman named Aref al-Nayed, and routing it to Islamist-leaning revolutionary armed groups in eastern and western Libya. From their perspective, the Qataris tilted toward Sallabi's network partly because of concerns about the leadership effectiveness and stalwartness of Abd al-Fatah al-Younis and his allies.<sup>36</sup> In response, the Younis-Jibril camp leaned more heavily on Emirati and French support, using the Emirates-based al-Nayed as a broker.<sup>37</sup>

The fissures gradually afflicted nearly every corner of the conflict. The UAE established an operations room and channeled support to the town of Zintan, a tribal stronghold in the western Nafusa mountains. At the same time, Qatar favored another Nafusa town, Nalut, because of the presence of fighters from the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), led by Abd al-Hakim Bilhaj.<sup>38</sup> French military aid also shaped local power relations; the French were initially drawn to Qatar (and actually sympathetic to the Islamists) but tilted to the Emirates' side during the summer of 2011, solidifying links to Zintani armed groups through training and air dropped weapons.<sup>39</sup>

The tensions culminated in competing designs for the liberation and stabilization of Tripoli, with the Emirati- and Qatari-backed Libyan factions each presenting their plans. The August 2011 uprising and attack on the capital proceeded pell-mell, with locally-based Libyan armed groups enjoying various levels of loosely-coordinated external support. This marked another major turning point: During the fall of Tripoli, armed groups attached to towns and neighborhoods and commanded by ambitious personalities seized strategic assets like airports, armories, ports, and ministries, which they tried to convert into political leverage.<sup>40</sup>

In the ensuing years, from late 2011 to 2014, these networks continued to operate as channels for political influence within the fractured National Transitional Council and its successors.<sup>41</sup> The lack of a strong arbiter among these various foreign interests was arguably a pivotal driver for Libya's subsequent descent into chaos. This was especially true in the absence of an institutionalized, formal security sector. Mandated, organized, and staffed as a political mission, the UN Support Mission in Libya or UNSMIL, by its own admission, initially neglected dealing with the burgeoning militia problem or trying to build security institutions, focusing in instead on shepherding the country toward its first elections in more than 40 years.<sup>42</sup> Multiple foreign countries that had backed Libyan armed groups during the revolution capitalized on those ties to build political clout.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, successive heads of the UNSMIL complained about foreign states quietly working at cross-purposes with the UN's mandate of

institutional development, especially on the security sector—a frustration that would only grow as the proxy war intensified.<sup>44</sup>

Foreign rivalries played out first as a modest contest to shape the 2012 elections for Libya's legislature, General National Congress (GNC). Turkey's Islamist government adopted friendly but largely passive relations with the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated party, the Justice and Construction Party (JCP), though these ties with the Brotherhood and other Islamists would later coalesce into more robust financial support and safe-haven networks.<sup>45</sup> Mahmud Jibril's National Forces Alliance (NFA) claimed attention from the Emirates, the United States, and Western media outlets, on the basis of its purported secularist credentials—though the NFA included many religiously conservative Libyans and Jibril himself had stated that Libya's legal codes should be based on sharia (Islamic law).<sup>46</sup>

Qatar proved especially assertive during the elections, funding a prominent political party Al-Watan (The Nation), which ultimately failed to gain a single seat—partly because of perceptions about its links with Doha. The aftermath of the elections saw increased public animosity against Qatar for its alleged links with Libyan Islamists, especially during the GNC's passage of the controversial Political Isolation Law, which called for broad lustration, barring future government employment to Libyans who participated even minimally in the Qadhafi regime. Protests in Tripoli against the law and militias that backed it carried derisive depictions of the Qatari flag.<sup>47</sup>

The rivalry between Qatar and the Emirates and, concurrently, the contest between Libyan Islamists and their opponents, escalated in the summer of 2013 with the Egyptian military's ejection of Mohamed Morsi from Egypt's presidency, orchestrated by the Emirates and Saudi Arabia and large swathes of Egyptian society. The seismic regional event reverberated across the Libyan political spectrum and heightened tensions between Libyan Islamists and anti-Islamists in an already tense environment.<sup>48</sup> More radical wings within Libya's Islamist milieu were strengthened, arguing against disarming on the basis that they needed to prevent violent repression by their Libyan opponents, along the lines of the Egyptian military's massacre of Morsi supporters at Rabaa al Adawiyaa Square in 2013.<sup>49</sup> For their part, anti-Islamists in Libya and abroad felt emboldened by the change of power in Cairo; Qadhafists in particular found a welcoming haven in the Egyptian capital and set up their own media platforms.<sup>50</sup> During this period, some anti-Islamist Libyans in the east went so far as to say, "We need a Sisi here."<sup>51</sup>

Throughout all of this, the U.S. embassy played a supportive role, backing municipal and national elections, encouraging the growth of civil society, and bolstering the media and education sector.<sup>52</sup> On the security front, the United States began its own effort to create a local surrogate force by training a Libya special operations unit, at a disused military camp west of Tripoli, known as

Camp 27 or Camp Younis.<sup>53</sup> The program, which began in May 2012, was plagued with problems from the beginning: the majority of Libyan recruits to the 800-strong Libyan unit hailed from western towns and especially Zintan.<sup>54</sup> As a result, according to its U.S. trainer, the program was essentially training a Zintani militia, whose definition of “terrorists” included Libyan political Islamists.<sup>55</sup> The effort collapsed altogether in the summer of 2013 when a rival Libyan militia, tipped off by insiders, stormed the camp and absconded with high-tech, American-provided equipment. The raid and the ensuing collapse partly stemmed from the camp’s location on the fault-line between two tribes, which the Americans’ Libyan interlocutor, Colonel Abd al-Salam al-Hasi, failed to disclose.<sup>56</sup>

The entire episode demonstrates the hazards of relying on indigenous intermediaries in a fractured landscape and, especially, of identifying local proxies, even for discrete counter-terrorism missions. Such errors were repeated in 2013 when the United States, Britain, Turkey, and Italy agreed to train a much larger Libya conventional force—the so-called “general purpose force,” under then-Prime Minister Ali Zeidan—which fell apart from the lack of Libyan political consensus about its goals and scope, opposition from Islamists, poor vetting, and the absence of an institutional structure for the Libyan trainees to join.<sup>57</sup>

Taken in sum, these converging trend lines—polarization between Islamists and their opponents, worsening rivalries across the Middle East in the aftermath of the Sisi coup in Egypt, the growing power and politicization of Libyan militias, grievances over the distribution of Libya’s wealth and elite corruption, and mounting insecurity in Benghazi—would conspire to produce the Libyan civil war of 2014. Yet it is important to note that while foreign powers contributed to Libya’s tensions through media and political narratives and, in the case of the United States and its allies, through aborted security sector initiatives, foreign military interference did not occur at significant levels during most of 2012 to late 2013. If anything, during this period, oil-rich Libya was itself a military intervener in foreign proxy wars, sending money, weapons and Libyan fighters to Syria, Mali and other conflicts, according to the United Nations.<sup>58</sup> This outward direction of arms flow would be quickly reversed with the eruption of civil war on Libyan soil in the summer of 2014.<sup>59</sup>

## Militarizing the Proxy Struggle: Foreign Actors in the Civil War of 2014 to 2019

External military support was not a significant factor in sparking the Libyan civil war that erupted with the launch of Haftar's Operation Dignity in Benghazi in the summer of 2014.<sup>60</sup> Haftar's attack on Benghazi militia bases on May 16th was executed by locally-recruited Libyan forces drawn from Qadhafi-era military units, a meager air wing of aging MiG fighter-bombers, and, later that summer and fall, more defecting army units and neighborhood paramilitaries known as "support forces"—all loosely constituted as the Libyan National Army (later designated the Libyan Arab Armed Forces or LAAF).<sup>61</sup> By that summer, his operation had attracted more substantial foreign military support from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates with airstrikes and special operations raids in Benghazi and Derna, and the funneling of materiel, weapons and advisors to the LAAF.<sup>62</sup>

The influx of Emirati arms—or rather alarm over this influx—proved critical to the spread of the civil war to the Tripoli region.<sup>63</sup> In July 2014, anti-Haftar Libyan armed groups from Tripoli and its environs attacked the Tripoli International Airport. According to its commanders and Western diplomats, the militia-led attack, later dubbed "Libya Dawn," was partly spurred by the perception among Tripolitanian factions that Haftar's militia allies from the western town of Zintan, who controlled the airport, were receiving weapons shipments from the Emirates in preparation to assist Haftar's move on the capital.<sup>64</sup> Partly as a result of the July attack, Libya split into two loosely-constituted camps: one was the Libya Dawn coalition in the west, represented by the National Salvation Government in Tripoli. The other was Haftar's Operation Dignity in the east, linked politically to an "interim government" in the eastern town of al-Bayda and the House of Representatives (HOR) in Tobruk (anti-Haftar members of the HOR boycotted this move to the east and remained in the west).<sup>65</sup>

As the political gulf widened, foreign intervention escalated. In late August, the Emirati Mirage aircraft, flying from Egypt, conducted a long-range strike on Dawn-aligned militia positions in Tripoli using American-made laser-guided munitions. American officials had tried to warn them off, but to no avail. The result was a public leak from the Pentagon and private opprobrium from Obama administration officials.<sup>66</sup> The Emirati strike was a significant escalation in foreign military intervention in Libya since 2011, but it also illustrated the unintended consequences, in Libya and beyond, of America's policy of empowering and deferring to its Gulf ally. Washington had long supplied the Emirates with military training and technology, especially in the aerial realm, as part of a building partner capacity initiative to advance American interests in the broader Middle East. But Abu Dhabi's adventurism in Libya showed that Washington could not control how and where that capacity was employed. Moreover, America's dependence on the Emirates for other files in the Middle

East like Israel/Palestine and Iran would limit Washington's willingness to penalize its Gulf partner.

On top of the strikes, this period of the civil war was also defined by an intensification of the war of narratives waged by outside powers. Satellite television outlets, funded and directed by foreign states, played a key role. So too did Libyan power brokers based abroad. Among them, the aforementioned Islamic scholar-businessman Aref al-Nayed, now serving as Libyan ambassador to the UAE, and the tycoon Hasan Tatanaki, who leveraged longstanding ties in Egypt and the Emirates, but who later turned on Haftar, were the most important in backing the Dignity side with their own media platforms, financial aid, and personal diplomacy.<sup>67</sup> Backing the Dawn faction was Ali Sallabi, another pivotal broker in the 2011 revolution, who assumed control of a satellite television station in Doha from a former information minister in the 2011 transitional government; he went to Cairo to set up a pro-Haftar website.<sup>68</sup> The outsized role of these Libyan brokers, and their jostling and defections, underscores how intermediaries simultaneously bolster and complicate foreign state intervention in Libya.

In the social media realm, armies of Twitter trolls and “bots,” often from the Gulf, deployed a witches’ brew of fake news, slander, and hate speech—a trend that would intensify with the next phase of fighting in 2019.<sup>69</sup> This output was in turn amplified by partisan Libyan media platforms that were themselves influenced by or directed from foreign states, including the Emirates, Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Russia.<sup>70</sup> The battle for public opinion increasingly relied on disinformation, such as recycled old photos or fake Western news pieces, which, combined with restrictions on foreign and Libyan journalists by both camps, resulted in a severely polarized environment.<sup>71</sup>

Common themes in the Egyptian and Emirati media portrayed Operation Dignity as a war on terrorism. The war of narratives echoed the broader split in the region between the Emirates-led bloc and Qatar/Turkey, with the media offensive increasingly highlighting the themes of Cyrenaican distinctiveness and Arab authenticity. In Libya, this manifested itself as a nativist demonization of Haftar’s Libyan opponents, who were painted as ghuraba or outsiders—hailing from western Libya—or of Turkish rather than Arab origin. Both these labels were, of course, spurious and often loosely based on family ancestry dating back centuries. Meanwhile, eastern tribes and federalists deployed an anti-Italian and anti-Turkish narrative that evoked these countries’ former colonial presence in what is now Libya.<sup>72</sup>

There were also more concrete expressions of these narratives. In June 2014, for example, Haftar announced the expulsion of Turkish citizens from Libya, accusing them of being agents of Islamists.<sup>73</sup> The ensuing tit-for-tat cycle of expulsions and arrests reverberated far beyond Libya’s borders. The Emirati security services detained and tortured at least ten Libyan nationals residing in

the UAE on the pretense of support to radicals inside Libya, i.e. alleged financial links to Benghazi-based anti-Haftar militias.<sup>74</sup>

This period also saw the increasing use of African mercenaries by both sides in various Libyan theaters. This was fueled partly by the pull of payment from Libya's oil wealth or foreign patrons, but also the push factor of failing conflict-racked African states to the south and southeast of Libya, which produced a pool of itinerant pay-for-hire gunmen.<sup>75</sup> Chiefly, Haftar's LAAF started recruiting Chadian and Darfurian fighters for combat in Benghazi, the oil crescent, Kufra, and especially in the Fezzan, where pro-Dignity factions from the Tabu battled Tuareg (aligned with Misrata and Libya Dawn) in the town of Ubari, strategically situated next to the Sharara oil field.<sup>76</sup> Misratan forces also hosted Chadian groups in Sabha and the anti-Haftar Benghazi Defense Brigades militia deployed Chadians in 2017.<sup>77</sup> The Emirati-Qatari rivalry also played out on this Saharan battlefield: The Emirates flew in weapons to Tabu fighters and reportedly started paying Chadian opposition groups. For its part, Qatari mediation and cash proved instrumental in brokering an end to the fighting in Ubari in early 2016.<sup>78</sup>

Continued Emirati and Qatari involvement in Libya had prompted a mild scolding by President Obama at a meeting of Gulf leaders at Camp David in late 2015 which, according to one former diplomat, did in fact induce the Emiratis to stand down on airstrikes, at least in western Libya.<sup>79</sup> In Benghazi, however, the presence of designated terrorist entities among Haftar's opponents, including individuals suspected of participating in the attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi in September 2012, resulted in a more tolerant stance toward Haftar's operation by some elements in Washington and even some tacit acceptance of Emirati and Egyptian support.<sup>80</sup>

The Benghazi-based terrorist groups, namely Ansar al-Sharia and later the Islamic State, fought alongside a broader constellation of local and Islamist militias fighting Haftar, some grouped into the Benghazi Revolutionaries' Shura Council (BRSC), which enjoyed separate foreign backing. Those streams of materiel and weapons came principally from Qatar, Turkey, and Sudan were overseen by some of the very same Libyan intermediaries that had funneled weapons during the 2011 revolution.<sup>81</sup> Sudanese support was especially vital. As noted, Libyan Islamists had a longstanding connection to the east African country dating back to the Qadhafi years which they used in 2011 and, in the wake of the 2014 civil war, they reactivated these networks to ship weapons overland into Benghazi or to the western coastal city of Misrata.<sup>82</sup>

Misrata in particular emerged as an important way station for military and medical support to Benghazi-based fighters, principally through maritime convoys of small fishing boats.<sup>83</sup> Yet this provision of aid became increasingly contentious within Misratan circles, especially as the presence of Islamic State fighters sharing the Benghazi frontlines with the BRSC and other anti-Haftar forces increased. Misratans who supported the arms shipments to Benghazi were

adamant that the aid was only going to revolutionaries, i.e. non-jihadist, anti-Haftar groups, excluding Ansar al-Sharia and the Islamic State.<sup>84</sup> Of course, once the weapons arrived in Benghazi, there was little way to control their distribution across the front.<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, some Misratan figures decried the growing role of Qatar and Turkey in empowering rival political factions in Misrata and the capital.<sup>86</sup>

For Haftar's ground forces, blocking the Misratan-channeled aid meant seizing the strategic port of Mraysa in southern Benghazi, which the BRSC had refurbished with a stone jetty to receive heavier loads.<sup>87</sup> But successive attempts to do this were thwarted by the entrenchment of the BRSC and other anti-Haftar forces' and the Dignity forces' capacity shortfalls, especially in mobility, artillery, and armor.<sup>88</sup> However, in early and mid-2016, this changed with an injection of military aid from the UAE and France.<sup>89</sup>

Their intervention came on the heels of UN-brokered negotiations among Libya's two camps which produced a unity government in Tripoli in late 2015, the GNA. Almost immediately, this new government confronted an array of obstacles, especially opposition from eastern factions affiliated with Haftar and criticism for its reliance on powerful Tripoli militias for security.<sup>90</sup> It also faced suspicions from some Libyans that it was essentially a handmaiden for Western powers who needed political cover and official authorization to channel assistance to Tripolitanian proxy militias involved in countering irregular migrant flows across the Mediterranean (in the case of Italy and the EU) and the Islamic State (in the case of the United States and Britain). The EU's and especially Italy's form of proxy warfare against migrants has been widely criticized for paying and empowering unscrupulous Libyan militias and human traffickers disguised as police and coast guard, especially along the seaboard west of Tripoli.<sup>91</sup> On the counterterrorism front, several pro-GNA Tripoli armed groups used their efforts against the Islamic State as a means to curry favor with foreign powers. Among the most powerful of these was the Special Deterrence Force, which broke up Islamic State cells in the capital and housed Islamic State militants in its sprawling prison at Tripoli's Matiga airport.<sup>92</sup>

The GNA's arrival in Tripoli coincided with a gradual but significant diminution in the level of Qatari and Turkish support to anti-Haftar forces.<sup>93</sup> But in Haftar's eastern camp, Emirati, French, and Egyptian support continued, enabling the LAAF's military gains in Benghazi, which Haftar then converted into political clout to oppose the GNA. The Emirates' assistance in particular was pivotal. Emirati-provided armored personnel carriers afforded Haftar's forces mobility and protection as they pushed into Benghazi's dense urban areas.<sup>94</sup> By 2017, Emirati close-air support in the form of air-tractor attack aircraft<sup>95</sup>—converted U.S.-manufactured AT-802 crop-dusters—as well as Chinese-made Wing Loong drones, helped Haftar's forces to defeat remaining militant pockets in seaside Benghazi neighborhoods—an offensive that was marked by widespread human

rights abuses.<sup>96</sup> Aside from its effect on the battlefield, foreign and, particularly, Emirati aid was critical to Haftar's consolidation of political power, especially through his familial support base. His sons solicited much of the foreign assistance, stirring resentment among senior LAAF officers about Haftar's nepotism.<sup>97</sup> This trend continued with the Emirati provision of weapons to an elite LAAF unit, the 106th, informally headed by one of Haftar's sons.<sup>98</sup>

French aid was similarly vital and decisive in Haftar's battlefield victory. It principally came in the form of personnel from the paramilitary arm of the French Directorate-General for External Security (DGSE) whose presence in eastern Libya was not officially acknowledged by Paris until three DGSE officers were killed in the downing of an LAAF helicopter by an anti-Haftar militia in 2016.<sup>99</sup> According to UN security sources, dozens of French DGSE officers accompanied LAAF forces on frontline missions and acted as forward spotters for mortars and artillery. Most importantly, they conducted clandestine reconnaissance for counter-sniper missions.<sup>100</sup> What is remarkable about this policy, run from the presidency and through the DGSE, is its occurrence alongside professed French diplomatic support for the GNA, which Haftar opposed, and with the French knowing full well that Haftar had national ambitions for power that extended well beyond the battle in Benghazi.<sup>101</sup>

Around this time, Western diplomatic sources and local contacts were reporting an array of foreign military and intelligence cadres at the LAAF-controlled Banina Air Base in Benghazi, involved in varying levels of observation, liaison, and active support.<sup>102</sup> Among them were Russian personnel.

Russian intervention in Libya since the 2011 revolution until this point had been largely opportunistic, driven by the promise of energy control and arms and infrastructure deals—and enabled by the American leadership vacuum and European disarray. In the informational realm, Russian propaganda highlighted the worsening post-Qadhafi chaos as a product of NATO's fecklessness during the 2011 intervention.<sup>103</sup> In tandem, Russian officials and businessmen began engaging Libyan political figures and armed group leaders. One of the latter reportedly included Ibrahim al-Jathran, a former anti-Qadhafi rebel who controlled Libya's central petroleum facilities, whom Russian officials had offered to arm in 2014 in exchange for Russia's marketing of the oil. Though the deal fell through, the episode underscores how individual Libyans have tried to leverage their access to the country's resources to amass military and political power via outside patrons—but also their fickleness as reliable allies.<sup>104</sup>

With the rise of Haftar in eastern Libya in early- and mid-2014, Russia found a new ally, even though it kept channels open to other actors. By late 2014 and early 2015, Russia was working with the United Arab Emirates and Egypt to send weapons, spare parts and medical care to Haftar, as well as technicians, logisticians, advisors, and intelligence personnel.<sup>105</sup> Moscow also printed dinars for the Haftar-aligned, unrecognized Central Bank in eastern Libya, bolstering

this parallel administration's solvency.<sup>106</sup> One of most public expressions of Russia's support to Haftar occurred in early 2017 when the Russian aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov entered Libyan waters and hosted the Libyan commander for a tour and a video conference meeting with senior Russian military officials.<sup>107</sup> Building on this, in the coming months and years, Russia state media and other propaganda outlets would support Haftar's rise with a sophisticated information campaign.<sup>108</sup>

In late 2015, U.S. special operations forces and intelligence personnel arrived in Haftar-controlled Benghazi to monitor and meet with Haftar's LAAF. U.S. law enforcement personnel were also working through his forces to apprehend and prosecute Libyan militants wanted in the 2012 terrorist attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi.<sup>109</sup> But, as noted, the Obama administration prohibited U.S. military forces on the ground in eastern Libya from actively aiding Haftar, unless he subordinated himself to a centrally-controlled and civilian-led government. This imperative for Haftar to join the national government grew all the more important as U.S. officials sought to encourage the LAAF to participate in a combined, east-west Libyan assault on the Islamic State's stronghold in the city of Sirte, located in Libya's central coastal region.<sup>110</sup> When it became clear that Haftar wouldn't participate—mostly for political reasons, but also because his lines of supply would be stretched, U.S. forces curtailed their engagement with Haftar.

The Islamic State had slowly embedded itself in Sirte in 2013 and 2014 by exploiting pre-existing jihadist networks, political fissures, and social tensions. Foreign fighters also played a significant role in bolstering its rank-and-file and filling out its leadership cadres.<sup>111</sup> But more importantly, the terrorist group instrumentalized the fact that Sirte sat on the fault-line between the Haftar's Dignity camp in the east and the opposing, Tripoli-based Dawn faction in the west.<sup>112</sup> In the latter camp, the city of Misrata and its militias were particularly well-positioned to attack the Islamic State and forestall its expansion. Yet Misratan notables and armed group leaders feared that any commitment of resources against the terrorist group would distract from Misrata's more existential battle with Haftar.<sup>113</sup>

By mid- and late-2015, however, U.S. intelligence and special operations forces were meeting with Misrata-based political leaders and militia leaders for this assault, even as they simultaneously engaged Haftar's LAAF.<sup>114</sup> By early 2016, the Misrata leaders were reportedly lobbying for greater counterterrorism support from the United States and, to a lesser extent, Britain.<sup>115</sup> In May 2016, they finally launched an attack on the terrorist group in Sirte after it had encroached on a crucial checkpoint outside Misrata that threatened to cut off Misrata's supply lines with southern Libya. As it became clear that the fight against ISIS in Sirte would be a Misratan-led battle, U.S. special operations forces liaising with Haftar in Benghazi decreased their presence and the United States threw its intelligence

and airpower resources behind the Misrata-led operation, dubbed, “Bunyan al-Marsus” or “The Solid Foundation.”<sup>116</sup>

During the months-long war against the Islamic State in Sirte in 2016, American and British special operations forces channeled assistance to Misratan proxy militias while being mindful of the implications of this military support for the broader political conflict. The aid, mostly intelligence, was task-specific, limited in duration, and did not include lethal capabilities that could be deployed later against Haftar’s forces. For example, a Misratan militia leader accompanying British special operations forces to the site of a recently-bombed Islamic State camp south of Sirte was given night-vision goggles—which were then promptly taken back once the mission had concluded.<sup>117</sup>

At its successful conclusion in December 2016, the anti-Islamic State campaign in Sirte was lauded in Washington as a counterterrorism template to be applied elsewhere—special operations forces working with indigenous proxies loosely tethered to a recognized political authority, backed by precision airstrikes. As a national diplomatic strategy, however, the U.S.-backed operation failed: U.S. diplomats and military officials had hoped to use the Sirte campaign to unite the disparate Dawn and Dignity factions against a common enemy. But the two camps continued to regard the other as the more pressing threat. These unresolved fissures and continued foreign backing to each side for a variety of counterterrorism goals (defined more broadly and ideologically in the case of the Emirates and the French), contributed to the outbreak of another round of civil war in April 2019.

### **The Interregnum: A Clandestine Proxy Buildup, 2018-2019**

With defeat of the Islamic State and, more importantly, Haftar’s defeat of Islamist and allied militias in Benghazi and Derna in 2018, the civil war in Libya entered a cooling period that shifted, again, to behind-the-scenes jockeying and political competition from 2018 to early 2019. The foreign balance of power shifted as the hardline Islamist component in Misrata and Tripoli diminished significantly through a combination of attrition, exile and imprisonment in 2017. And, as mentioned previously, Turkish and Qatari military meddling had also declined after the arrival of the GNA in late 2015.<sup>118</sup> In contrast, Emirati aid to Haftar’s forces accelerated, in the form weapons, intelligence, and training, especially to elite LAAF units like the 101st and the 106th Brigades.<sup>119</sup>

Importantly, pro-Haftar foreign support increasingly shifted to clandestine influence, diplomacy, and military operations aimed at controlling or influencing the disposition of Libya’s vital financial organs: namely the facilities in the oil crescent and the Tripoli-based Central Bank of Libya.<sup>120</sup> Reforming the Central Bank and removing its powerful governor Sadiq al-Kabir proved an especially contentious issue; the nominally pro-GNA militias who dominated in the capital

had long been pillaging its funds through fraudulent letters of credit and other schemes, which contributed to serious outbreak of inter-militia fighting in the fall of 2018.<sup>121</sup> Ending this predation, improving the transparency and accountability of the bank, unifying its western and eastern branches, and rationalizing Libya's distributive system thus became a core focus of United Nations and international diplomacy in late 2018, at the expense, some critics allege, of a more concerted effort to deter interference by outside powers, especially the Emirates.<sup>122</sup>

By late 2018 and early 2019, the Emiratis embarked on a strategy of engaging with and trying to co-opt armed group leaders inside Tripoli whom they perceived to be anti-Muslim Brotherhood, allegedly Haytham Tajuri and Abdelraouf Kara.<sup>123</sup> In pursuing these activities, the Emirati narrative shifted: anti-Islamism still existed as a reference point, but was gradually emphasized in Emirati and pro-Haftar media outlets as a battle against corruption and the uneven distribution of Libya's oil wealth, which the Emirates realized would gain greater traction in Western capitals.

Alongside France, the Emirates backed Haftar's advance into the oil crescent and westward across the Fezzan region from mid-2018 to early 2019.<sup>124</sup> Deploying Emirati cash and the promise of goods and weapons, Haftar's LAAF loosely subsumed local militias across the Fezzan into its orbit. The Emirates and France framed the operation as restoring order, eliminating criminal gangs, and denying safe haven in Libya to transnational rebel groups based in Chad.<sup>125</sup> In addition, the GNA's longstanding neglect and failed promises to southern communities in the Fezzan provided a pool of discontent for Haftar and his backers to exploit. But Haftar's operation was hardly a panacea; in a number of southern towns, LAAF rule ended up stoking communal tensions and violence.<sup>126</sup> Moreover, Haftar's goal in the Fezzan all along was to seize power in Tripoli, partly to get access to the Central Bank and alleviate a worsening financial crisis within his eastern power base.<sup>127</sup>

International support and appeasement proved crucial in Haftar's encroachment toward Tripoli. As noted, Haftar believed that Emirati clandestine diplomacy and money had induced some pro-GNA Tripoli militias, namely the powerful Tripoli Revolutionaries Brigade, to flip to his side.<sup>128</sup> But beyond this Emirati campaign, Tripolitanian actors, including Haftar's erstwhile foes, showed some receptiveness to the general's advances. Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha, for example, acknowledged in a February 2019 interview that Haftar was providing much-needed law and order in the Fezzan and would be welcomed into a power-sharing deal, provided he subordinate himself to a civilian authority.<sup>129</sup>

In addition, some Salafi factions in and around the capital, known as "Madkhalis" because of their reverence for an influential Saudi-based cleric named Rabi bin Hadi al-Madkhali, supported Haftar's advance on Tripoli, driven mostly by self-serving calculations but also previous pro-Operation Dignity statements from al-Madkhali.<sup>130</sup> Yet the notion of these Libyan Salafis acting in

lock-step as proxies for the Saudi government does not accord with their actions on the ground or their relationship with foreign clerical authorities: The Libyan Madkhali current has been riven by personality conflicts and local agendas, and Madkhalis sometimes ignored Rabi's statements or adapted them to suit their own political aims.<sup>131</sup> That said, the Saudi government did back Haftar's Tripoli operation by reportedly promising him cash at a meeting before his assault, followed by supportive Twitter campaigns and favorable coverage on Saudi satellite television outlets.<sup>132</sup>

Underpinning all of this was international appeasement of Haftar and acquiescence in his advance to Tripoli's environs. Starting in mid-2018, U.S. and Western diplomats expressed confidence that Haftar would agree to a power-sharing formula and eventual elections.<sup>133</sup> By early 2019, this confidence expressed itself as tacit support for his Fezzan operation as a way to jolt the moribund GNA into relinquishing power and set the stage for a more legitimate and inclusive government in Tripoli.<sup>134</sup> Such a path, they believed, would occur through a UN-brokered plan for a national conference and elections, to which Haftar had vaguely agreed (his backers in Abu Dhabi also, in theory, supported the plan).

Emirati support for the plan seemed to be reflected in a much-vaunted diplomatic meeting in Abu Dhabi between GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj and Haftar, which secured verbal commitments from both leaders to work toward peaceful compromise via the UN process. There were conflicting accounts of the meeting's discussions. Senior UN officials at the time expressed optimism that they had obtained a good-faith pledge from the Emirates to rein-in Haftar and dissuade him from further military advances into the capital region by cutting off his cash flow.<sup>135</sup> U.S. officials were similarly appreciative of the Emirati role in brokering what appeared to be a de-escalation from a mounting crisis.<sup>136</sup>

## Foreign “Boots on the Ground”: The 2019 Battle for Tripoli and Beyond

In early April, weeks away from the UN-brokered national conference, Haftar launched a surprise assault on Tripoli, starting on the town of Gharyan on Tripoli’s outskirts.<sup>137</sup> The shock of the advance was such that Libyans in Tripoli and some outside analysts still believed that this was just muscle-flexing to bolster Haftar’s negotiating position ahead of the conference.<sup>138</sup> Haftar’s disregard for that meeting and contempt for the UN’s authority more generally became fully apparent when he intensified his assault on April 5, the very same day the UN Secretary General had flown to Benghazi to meet the Libyan commander in a futile attempt to prevent a war.

Longstanding Emirati support to Haftar’s campaigns in the east and the south was a crucial precursor to the attack, though the Emirates maintained to diplomats and stated publicly that they had not sanctioned the actual assault on the capital. At the very least, they may have given Haftar mixed signals or Haftar may have misinterpreted the signals. Once the attack started, however, the Emirati—and Saudi—hand became starkly apparent with the mobilization of pro-Haftar Twitter hashtags, amplified by bots and traditional media outlets, in what appeared to be a coordinated campaign by Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, with participation from Cairo.<sup>139</sup> Egypt had initially opposed the Tripoli campaign but had reportedly been pressured by the Emirates into backing it diplomatically, militarily, and in the informational realm.<sup>140</sup> And, as noted, France’s longtime accommodation of and clandestine support for Haftar’s ambitions was a key enabler as well.

Aside from these states’ varying degrees of backing, the explicit approval that Haftar received from Washington, D.C. was perhaps the most significant boost. A day before the attack, Haftar spoke on the phone with then-U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton who reportedly urged the Libyan commander to “do it quickly.”<sup>141</sup> This was followed weeks later by President Trump’s phone call to Haftar, which praised the Tripoli attack as a counterterrorism operation.

It is important to note that this was not the first time Haftar had sought American approval for a seizure of power in Tripoli: In late 2016, the final months of the Obama presidency, he’d dispatched a delegation to Washington announcing his willingness to implement military rule. The response was a firm rebuke from senior State Department officials.<sup>142</sup> U.S. resolve and diplomatic leadership also proved crucial in preventing Haftar from illegally exporting oil and establishing a parallel oil administration in the east. But under the Trump administration, this pressure was exerted not necessarily to protect the GNA or prevent a Libyan conflict, but out of concern for the effect of Libya’s turmoil on global oil production.<sup>143</sup> And, by late 2018 and 2019, the thinking in Washington toward

Libya changed considerably, not only in the Trump administration, but among professional diplomats within the State Department, who evinced a cooler stance toward the GNA, while welcoming Haftar's participation in a political process.

After the Trump phone call, which reportedly occurred at the encouragement of the Emirates and the Egyptians, Haftar received further support at the UN Security Council, where the United States joined Russia and France in blocking a British-sponsored resolution for a ceasefire.<sup>144</sup> It would be nearly a year before the United States finally singled out Haftar by name in its pronouncements on the conflict. These dynamics all played to Haftar's favor in the initial stages of his assault, offering a clear illustration of how much the global order had split since the last phase of Libya's civil war in 2014 and especially since the relative diplomatic consensus which underpinned the NATO-led intervention in 2011.

On the ground, the conflict quickly internationalized, with great powers, regional powers, and poorer neighboring states all contributing militarily.<sup>145</sup> This was initially evident in the air with the widespread use of combat drones.<sup>146</sup> Soon after, ground-based foreign mercenaries played a major role. Importantly, because European states and America did not deploy military assets or fighters of their own in support of Libya's warring protagonists, they effectively ceded political leverage to those outside states that did. Reflecting on this reluctance to play by the rules of this new game, a European diplomat lamented, "we are relying on words, just words. These other countries have arms and fighters."<sup>147</sup>

The United Arab Emirates was the most significant foreign intervener early on, especially in the air. Chinese-made Wing Loong drones, piloted by Emirati personnel and stationed at LAAF bases in western and eastern Libya (and possibly in the United Arab Emirates itself), struck GNA artillery, ammunition depots, and vehicles.<sup>148</sup> The Emirates also conducted fixed-wing strikes using French Mirages. These strikes, along with those carried out by drones, incurred mounting civilian casualties in and around Tripoli, exemplified most notably by the July 2 bombing by an Emirati Mirage of a migrant detention center in Tajura, which killed 53 people.<sup>149</sup> Yet international condemnation of this and other incidents has been stymied by international divisions and especially diplomatic protection of the Emirates by the United States and France; UN reports on the strikes rarely singled out the Emirates by name.<sup>150</sup>

Yet the provision of Emirati aerial support, along with Emirati-supplied Tiger armored vehicles, still wasn't enough for Haftar's forces to break the stalemate or compensate for the LAAF's lack of manpower. Compounding this shortcoming, Haftar and his foreign backers, namely the Emirates, had hoped to flip GNA-aligned militias in and around Tripoli to his side through financial inducements.<sup>151</sup> But the defections failed to materialize and rival armed groups in and around the capital shelved their differences and offered up stiff resistance.<sup>152</sup>

By May, Turkey joined the war on the side of the GNA, though its military support in this phase was unannounced and clandestine. It principally consisted of armed drones—“Bayraktar” TB2s, manufactured by a company belonging to Turkish President Erdoğan’s son-in-law—along with “Kirpi” mine-resistant armored personnel carriers.<sup>153</sup> The net effect of this equipment on the battle was limited. To be sure, the Turkish-piloted drones did prove useful in some close-air-support engagements, against infantry and armored vehicles.<sup>154</sup> And Turkish support helped the GNA seize a strategic LAAF base at Gharyan in June. But overall, Turkish aid was not as decisive nor as substantial as the GNA might’ve hoped. Emirati drones outclassed the Turkish Bayraktars in performance and lethality, and by the late summer of 2019 they had destroyed most of the Turkish craft on the ground.<sup>155</sup> Similarly, the Turkish Kirpi vehicles did not have an appreciable effect on battlefield outcomes; their value was mostly a “morale booster,” according to one senior GNA official.<sup>156</sup>

Aside from this muted impact on the battlefield, Turkish support also opened up rifts within the GNA’s political coalition. The initial GNA outreach to Turkey was stymied by competition among Libyan intermediaries who jostled for access and influence. The more dominant of these networks had previously channeled Turkish—and Qatari—assistance to Libya during past rounds of conflict and were affiliated with or sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>157</sup> Their outreach stirred resentment among anti-Brotherhood elements within the GNA coalition, especially from Misrata and also, reportedly, opposition from Turkish intelligence itself. By late 2019, these Libyan individuals had been removed from their roles as intermediaries.<sup>158</sup> The task of procuring Turkish support then fell to the increasingly powerful GNA interior minister, Fathi Bashagha, though the perception that Turkish assistance was buoying the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood remained.<sup>159</sup>

By the fall of 2019, diminishing Turkish support—mostly the result of battlefield attrition of Turkish drones—had shifted the momentum to the LAAF. Much of this was due to a redoubling of Emirati support after the fall of Gharyan, but also the arrival of yet another foreign meddler to the frontlines. In September, hundreds of Russian paramilitary fighters from the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group, arrived at the LAAF frontlines outside Tripoli, soon joined by a stream of hundreds of others.<sup>160</sup>

A notionally private paramilitary group tied to Russian businessman Yevgeniy Prigozhin, a close associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Wagner Group is in fact a clandestine arm of Russian “gray zone” power projection.<sup>161</sup> It has deployed to conflict-wracked states in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe with mixed results.<sup>162</sup> In Libya, the Wagner Group fighters took on an increasingly active role in the LAAF advance on the capital, abetted by the United Arab Emirates, which reportedly paid the salaries of their fighters and put its drones and logistics assets at their disposal.<sup>163</sup> But pushing

Haftar into power through a brute-force military victory in Tripoli was probably not Moscow's ultimate goal.

Mindful of Haftar's advancing age and poor health, contemptuous of his military competence, and suspicious about his historical ties to Washington via the CIA in the 1980s, Russia sought to use his assault on Tripoli as a means to an end. By nudging Haftar into a stronger battlefield position, Russia would be able to mediate a diplomatic outcome that played to its favor and that would cement a prominent political role for the Qadhafists, who would re-open trade, infrastructure, and arms links between Russia and Libya.<sup>164</sup> Here, Qadhafi's son Saif al-Islam, wanted by the International Criminal Court and reportedly in hiding in Zintan, was an object of Russian attention. In the summer of 2019, GNA intelligence personnel captured two Prigozhin-linked Russian operatives in Tripoli who were trying to liaise with Saif al-Qadhafi and, according to the GNA interior minister, also reconnoitering targets in Tripoli for LAAF airstrikes and seeking to influence the Libyan municipal council elections.<sup>165</sup> Russian interest in both Saif and Haftar was evident in a broadcast and online media campaign run in support of the two Libyan figures by Prigozhin media firms, which used local content creators to obscure the Russian hand—part of a broader Prigozhin strategy of propaganda franchising that is evident across Africa.<sup>166</sup>

Economic considerations were also important in Russia's diversified portfolio of pursuing channels of influence with multiple Libyan actors.<sup>167</sup> Even as it was sending Wagner personnel to assist LAAF forces, it continued to engage GNA. In late 2019, for example, the Russian oil company Tatneft conducted exploration activities in the GNA-controlled Ghadames Basin.<sup>168</sup> Wagner Group fighters were thus a cheap, flimsily deniable, and flexible means to accomplish these goals, without completely sacrificing Moscow's ties with the GNA.<sup>169</sup>

The Wagner intervention in Libya, while hardly an exemplar of expeditionary warfare, was enough to make a difference in the context of Libya's rudimentary militia fighting. Wagner personnel conducted frontline reconnaissance for mortars, artillery, and Emirati drones, as well as sniping. By December, they seemed to be moving from a purely advising and assisting role to exerting a degree of command over LAAF fighters. They reportedly directed the LAAF's frontline forces in flanking maneuvers, hitherto unseen on the Libyan battlefield, but a hallmark of Wagner's Syrian engagement.<sup>170</sup> And, according to Western diplomats, they tried to change the composition of LAAF units by requesting that Haftar send more fighters from eastern Libya to the Tripoli front—reportedly because they were displeased with the performance of the LAAF's Tarhuna-based combatants.<sup>171</sup>

Buoyed by this support, the LAAF steadily gained territory in late 2019, especially on the disputed Salahaddin front. But the more profound effect of the Wagner Group's arrival on the battlefield was a sharp decline in GNA morale. Sniper shots from the LAAF side became far more lethal, with one GNA commander reporting

that they now accounted for up to thirty percent of the losses in his unit. The volleys of LAAF mortars became more intense and precise, aided by drones.<sup>172</sup> GNA commanders also reported that the Russians had brought in laser-guided artillery munitions, which struck their field headquarters with a newfound accuracy.<sup>173</sup> Bereft of their own armed drones, or even surveillance variants, the GNA was left increasingly blind and exposed to LAAF airstrikes and mortars. Crucially, GNA commanders could no longer count on artillery support of their own. Young GNA fighters, already incensed at the government's uneven payment of salaries and medical care, started leaving the front. For the first time since the start of the 2019 war, the prospect of an LAAF push into central Tripoli, while still remote and complicated by the capital's dense urban terrain and the LAAF's lack of sufficient manpower, appeared as a possibility.<sup>174</sup>

But in facilitating these advances, the Wagner Group had inadvertently spurred another round of foreign military intervention, arguably the most consequential and far-reaching since 2011.

### **Turkey's Intervention Changes the Game, November 2019**

Fearing a potential collapse of its cordon outside Tripoli, the GNA in the late fall of 2019 turned again to Turkey, its only substantive military patron. On November 27, the GNA and the Turkish government signed a deal on an exclusive economic zone in the eastern Mediterranean that would grant Turkish exploration and drilling rights to offshore hydrocarbon resources. In return, President Erdoğan promised to send military support to the GNA, subject to Turkish parliamentary approval.<sup>175</sup>

With a stroke of a pen, the agreement irrevocably transformed the Libyan war. Turkish military support to the GNA, always ambivalent and clandestine, suddenly became overt and more robust.<sup>176</sup> Geopolitically, the maritime deal worsened tensions with the European Union and infringed on the hydrocarbon and territorial claims of Turkey's longtime rival Greece and other Mediterranean states.<sup>177</sup> Erdoğan's agreement with Libya was thus a major power play, part of a broader pattern of adventurism and militarization in Turkish foreign policy whose roots are partially domestic. It also aligned with Turkish strategic aspirations in the Mediterranean—the so-called “Blue Homeland” doctrine—as well as Turkey's economic penetration into Africa. In Libya, Ankara hoped to secure infrastructure projects, contracts for arms and training, access to banking, a market for Turkish goods, and, especially, to recoup economic losses incurred by the 2011 revolution.<sup>178</sup>

Outside of geopolitics and economics, the arrival of Turkish forces to Libyan soil had a resounding effect on the Libyan war of narratives and disinformation. Erdoğan's speeches and propaganda were tinged with evocations of Turkey's Ottoman heritage and historical ties to Libya—and Ankara's duty to protect the

Turkish diaspora in Libya.<sup>179</sup> While not the primary drivers of Turkey's deployment, these linkages were nonetheless seized upon and exaggerated by Haftar's camp and his regional backers. On satellite television, in press conferences, and on social media, Haftar and his foreign supporters in Cairo, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh painted Erdoğan's intervention as a redux of Turkey's imperial Ottoman ambitions, opposed by a phalanx of Arab states.<sup>180</sup>

The propaganda war further escalated when Turkey took the far-reaching step of dispatching proxy infantry forces to Libyan soil in December 2019. These forces comprised an initial tranche of two thousand fighters drawn from Turkish-backed Syrian militias, some of whose members had fought in Syria's civil war and in Turkey's subsequent intervention in the largely Kurdish province of Afrin.<sup>181</sup> Delivered by civilian aircraft and ships into Tripoli and Misrata, the Syrian fighters, many of whom were ethnic Turkmen with close familial ties to Turkey, were offered lavish salaries and the promise of Turkish citizenship. While these factors certainly played a determining role, interviews with these fighters in January 2020 suggest they weren't the only drivers: Fresh from battles in Idlib and northwest Syria, some arrived in Libya eager for payback against Russian forces or motivated by a genuine desire to prevent a military dictatorship under Haftar.<sup>182</sup>

The Syrians' deployment was shepherded by dozens of trainers from the Erdoğan-linked private military contractor, SADAT, hundreds of uniformed Turkish military officers, intelligence advisors from the Turkish national intelligence service (MIT), and technicians.<sup>183</sup> Turkish drones, artillery, air defense systems, intelligence assets, and electronic warfare equipment also arrived. In the coming weeks and months, this intervention would have a decisive effect on the course of the battlefield—and deal a devastating blow to Haftar's ambitions. Turkey's layered air defense systems, which targeted drones and fixed-wing aircraft, negated Haftar's air advantage over Tripoli and Misrata.<sup>184</sup> Free from this threat from the sky, GNA forces in Tripoli were suddenly afforded greater mobility. Turkish self-propelled artillery provided much-needed fire support and bolstered the GNA fighters' morale. And the dispersal of thousands of Syrian fighters around Tripoli, intermixed with militias from Tripoli, Misrata, and other towns, helped stabilize the front and thrust into sharper relief the LAAF's manpower shortage.<sup>185</sup>

Yet the Syrians also stirred controversy and dissent. Some GNA commanders resented the intrusion of foreign infantry on the front, arguing that it was an insult to Libyan sovereignty and fighting prowess, and that what was really needed was advanced weapons and equipment, not manpower.<sup>186</sup> Politically, the Syrian-Turkish presence created the impression with the GNA and especially Misratan circles that the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Libyan faction was again ascendant.<sup>187</sup> Among Haftar and his foreign backers, the Turkish intervention was a propaganda windfall—pro-Haftar media outlets portrayed the Syrians as al-

Qaida and ISIS members. This was false of course, though a minority of the Syrians probably evinced jihadist proclivities and some had committed abuses in the past.<sup>188</sup>

### **The Global Scramble for Libya, January 2020 to the Present**

By creating a newfound equilibrium on the frontline, the Turkish-Syrian deployment, following on the heels of Putin's gambit of the Wagner fighters, dramatically altered global diplomacy on Libya. Specifically, it enabled a push by Moscow and Ankara to try and mediate an end to the conflict, or at least shape its course to their interests.<sup>189</sup> On January 12, Vladimir Putin, in coordination with Erdoğan, hosted a summit in Moscow attended by GNA prime minister al-Sarraj and Haftar, where the warring leaders held eight hours of talks, resulting in a commitment to a truce.<sup>190</sup> Al-Sraj signed but Haftar only gave a verbal commitment, walking out of the meeting—reportedly at the behest of the Emirates. It was yet more proof that even the strongest outside powers cannot fully control their local Libyan proxies, especially when there is a multiplicity of patrons.

On the ground, the meeting produced an uneasy lull in the fighting, with the Wagner personnel pulling back from the front, save for some desultory sniping.<sup>191</sup> According to a Western diplomat, the GNA had reportedly gone to the meeting after Erdoğan had “twisted its arm.”<sup>192</sup> Meanwhile, some frontline GNA militia commanders were suspicious that a backroom deal was being struck in foreign capitals that would reward Haftar for his aggression on Tripoli. “Is this what our martyrs died for?” one of these GNA commanders angrily asked the author in early 2020.<sup>193</sup>

Partially spurred by the Turkish and Russian summitry and the opening occasioned by Haftar's walkout, the EU and Britain finally mobilized a consensus on talks of their own. A long-planned international conference hosted by German Chancellor Angela Merkel convened on January 18 but in the shadow of the Moscow summit. In the final 55-point communique, the international parties committed to enforcing the arms embargo and working toward a truce.<sup>194</sup> Yet almost as soon as the conference ended, aerial and maritime shipments into Libya resumed, especially by the Emirates. In subsequent weeks, the Emirates' spoiler role proved crucial in the resumption of hostilities and in fueling Haftar's determination to continue his military assault.<sup>195</sup>

The months of January and February 2020 thus constituted a build-up and regrouping of the two sides, abetted by their foreign sponsors, despite their pledges at Berlin. As it had in the past, hypocrisy and recklessness by regional and great powers was plunging the county toward a new phase of war. Wrangling by these powers at the UN Security Council produced a watered-down resolution

that endorsed the Berlin Conference’s communique but lacked any effective enforcement mechanism.<sup>196</sup>

America’s backseat role was instrumental in all of this. In testimony before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee on February 20, 2020, Assistant Secretary of State David Schenker provided the first public mention by a senior administration official of the Emiratis’ negative impact in Libya. Though the secretary offered assurances that the United States was engaging Abu Dhabi behind the scenes, other U.S. officials privately admitted to the author that other U.S. priorities in the Middle East—namely Israel/Palestine peace efforts and countering Iran—in which Emirati partnership is deemed to be indispensable militates against more forceful pressure on Abu Dhabi from Washington.<sup>197</sup>

With this reticence as a backdrop, U.S. diplomacy during this period focused on efforts to entice the Emiratis into a negotiating process by placating their fears about Islamist control over Libya’s financial institutions—a rubric known as the “3M,” or “Money, Militias, and Muslim Brotherhood.” Multiple U.S. officials believed that these factors constituted the primary drivers of Libya’s endemic instability—downplaying the malevolent role of meddling by U.S. Middle Eastern allies. The goal of the 3M, according to one U.S. official in Washington, was to cleave the Muslim Brotherhood away from the GNA “to bring the Emirates into the negotiating process.”<sup>198</sup> Yet on the ground, such an initiative did not lessen the Emiratis’ buildup or the ferocity of the assault on Tripoli, mainly because the Emiratis’ 2019 intervention in Libya was not solely driven by a concern over Islamist influence in Tripolitania—an influence which had at any rate receded since 2017, but ironically increased since Haftar’s attack on Tripoli.<sup>199</sup>

As a corollary to this strategy, the United States pressured GNA Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha to accelerate his efforts at dismantling Tripoli’s more predatory militias and prying them loose from Libya’s state institutions. These efforts had actually started before Haftar’s attack but were placed on hold because of the GNA’s priority of defending Tripoli.<sup>200</sup> Importantly, Turkish political and military backing and plans for security sector assistance bolstered Bashagha’s anti-militia program, especially against the Tripoli-based Nawasi Battalion and the Tripoli Revolutionaries’ Brigade, and, to a lesser extent, the Abu Slim Central Security Force led by Abd al-Ghani al-Kikli (a.k.a. “Gheneiwa”).<sup>201</sup> Yet Bashagha’s policies and the prospect of incorporation into the formal security sector opened up fissures and competition for appointments, and also spurred anti-Turkish sentiment among the Tripoli-based armed groups targeted by the interior minister.

As the United States focused on this largely technical approach, regional powers were shaping the Libyan battlefield in ways that gave them increased leverage in the political sphere.<sup>202</sup> In the weeks and months following the Berlin conference, the Emirates tried to compensate for the Turkish gambit by flying in equipment in heavy aircraft to eastern Libya.<sup>203</sup> Turkey sent hundreds of advisors and

officers, self-propelled artillery, tanks, trucks, counter-battery radars, surveillance and armed drones, and naval frigates with helicopters. This materiel would eventually be used in a counterattack on Haftar's forces, dubbed Operation Peace Storm. In many respects, the military template followed a previous Turkish advance in Idlib, Syria in late February.<sup>204</sup> The Turkish-backed Syrian mercenaries were thrown into the battle en masse, suffering mounting casualties. Turkish air and drone strikes dealt a psychological blow to the LAAF by hitting its operations centers in Tarhuna, including Pantsir air defense systems supplied by the UAE, and in Sirte, which Haftar had earlier seized. Turkish air forces were also able to hold at risk Emirati drones in Haftar's rear areas, especially at the Jufra airbase, forcing the Emirates to re-deploy them further east, to the Emirati-refurbished al-Khadim airbase and to western Egypt.<sup>205</sup> Increasingly, Turkish commanders based on a frigate off the coast of Tripoli reportedly took a more active role in selecting targets for airstrikes; in many cases, they cut out elements of the GNA's military leadership in this targeting process.<sup>206</sup> Eventually, by mid-April, the Turkish-led offensive succeeded in ousting the LAAF from its bases on Tripoli's western flank, in the towns of Sabratha and Surman.<sup>207</sup>

As this was happening, the Emiratis and their LAAF allies pressed on the attack in Tripoli, with indiscriminate targeting that produced mounting civilian casualties.<sup>208</sup> They also sought to counterbalance Erdoğan's Syrian deployment with foreign manpower of their own. The Emiratis and the Wagner Group had already channeled Chadian and Sudanese fighters into the LAAF's ranks—the latter under false pretenses of work in the Gulf.<sup>209</sup> But these were no match in skill or numbers for the Syrians—and, like other LAAF soldiers, were increasingly vulnerable to Turkish airstrikes.<sup>210</sup> To compensate, the LAAF turned to a new foreign supplier of manpower. Following their rapprochement with the Assad government, Abu Dhabi (along with Cairo) brokered a defense pact between Haftar's camp and Damascus. This resulted in the reported deployment of two thousand pro-Assad Syrian militiamen to support Haftar's forces.<sup>211</sup>

### **The Sirte Standoff and Diplomatic Maneuvering, Summer 2020**

By early summer 2020, the two sides had squared off over the Jufra-Sirte axis. Russia has continued its aerial shipments of weaponry, dispatched advanced combat aircraft to eastern Libya, and repositioned Wagner Group fighters in the Sirte environs, strategic air bases across Fezzan, and key oil fields—but not before seeding Tripoli homes with deadly mines and booby traps.<sup>212</sup>

For his part, Egyptian president Sisi issued bellicose statements that Sirte was a redline and threatened a military intervention to halt Turkey's advance—a warning that was endorsed by the Egyptian parliament.<sup>213</sup> But the scale of such a

move, if it happens at all, would likely be modest given the Egyptian military's limitations and Cairo's competing strategic priorities.<sup>214</sup>

Meanwhile, Turkey has been streaming materiel of its own into Libya and repositioning its arsenal for an assault on Sirte.<sup>215</sup> Yet it too faces risks: A further push eastward might dilute its political, security and economic gains in Tripolitania and fracture the already fissiparous GNA coalition.<sup>216</sup> Even so, Turkish military commanders in Libya are reportedly distrustful of Russia designs given Turkey's recent experience with Russia's support for a Syrian regime attack on Aleppo, Syria, which occurred in the midst of Turkish-Russian talks.<sup>217</sup> A Turkish advance on Sirte would likely be accompanied by a deal with Russia on the redeployment of Wagner forces away from the central coastal city—a concession that Ankara hopes might be tied to Russian advances in Syria's Idlib province and that would come at the expense of Egypt.<sup>218</sup>

As the fragmentation in Libya and in the global order is worsening, it is unlikely that any one foreign state can win Libya, especially given the multiplicity of outside actors on the landscape. Turkey is poised to build significant influence over Tripolitania's economic sphere and security institutions, to include fortifying its presence at key western military bases and training and equipping new security forces, with involvement by a Turkish private military contractor linked to President Erdoğan and projected assistance from Qatar.<sup>219</sup> Yet despite this growing entrenchment, Ankara would not necessarily benefit from a formal partition of Libya, which would be invariably marked by conflict: Its long-term economic interests hinge on political stability and trade access to the east. For its part, Russia is spreading its forces across eastern and southern Libya and has been willing to cultivate ties to a broader swathe of Libyan actors, to include elements of the GNA and the Qadhafists. Similarly, the Egyptians, who've also soured on Haftar and have sought to bolster alternative Libyan military commanders and anti-Islamist figures, are eager to re-establish political and economic ties to Tripolitania, especially given the importance of the western region for Egyptian migrant labor and some elements in Cairo are also open to negotiating with Turkey over the eastern Mediterranean gas dispute.<sup>220</sup> Yet at the same time Cairo strives to preserve the LAAF (without Haftar) as the nucleus of a future security architecture in Libya. Consequently, the Egyptians, along with the Russians, have been trying shape a post-Haftar Libya in the wake of the general's battlefield setbacks: Cairo and Moscow are both engaging Qadhafists and both have endorsed a political roadmap by Aguila Saleh, the speaker of the eastern-based legislature, the House of Representatives (HOR), which effectively sidelines Haftar.<sup>221</sup>

Yet the most consequential outside power in the Libyan imbroglio remains the least talked about, especially in Washington and Paris: the United Arab Emirates.<sup>222</sup> Reeling from Haftar's losses in Tripolitania and bereft of appealing military options, Abu Dhabi started to diversify its outreach to eastern-based Libyan

actors, though not to the same extent as Egypt and Russia. It is also deploying a range of spoiling and stalling tactics, designed to stymie Turkish consolidation in Tripolitania and thwart a potential Turkish-Russian entente: encouraging Egyptian belligerence, and reportedly persuading Haftar to refuse a foreign-backed deal to lift his blockade of oil facilities.<sup>223</sup>

All of this diplomatic maneuvering is taking place against a backdrop of profound crises and disarray in Europe and America. European policy on Libya in particular has been marked by paralysis and deep divisions. Nowhere is this more apparent than in France's vocal and obsessive demonization of Turkish intervention in Libya—part of a broader French antipathy toward Turkey that has domestic and ideological roots—at the expense of Emirati and Russian support to Haftar, France's longtime ally in Libya.<sup>224</sup> Operationally, Europe's marginalization is evident in its attempt to enforce the UN arms embargo on Libya with an EU maritime interdiction operation, the so-called Operation Irini, which started on April 1, 2020. Because the EU's interdiction efforts were focused almost entirely on the maritime front, GNA supporters and outside critics charged, correctly, that Irini was biased against Turkey, since its shipments went by sea. In contrast, Haftar received foreign arms from the air or overland from Egypt. Yet even with this focus, the actual disruptions of Turkish seaborne supplies has been spotty to non-existent.<sup>225</sup> On top of this, key European countries—France, Italy, and Germany—are threatening EU sanctions on Libya's foreign meddlers, but given their divergent approaches toward Libya—and, in the case of France, blatant partisanship toward the UAE—their list is unlikely to cover the most serious violators.<sup>226</sup>

In the summer of 2020, the ineffectiveness of European policy on Libya elicited a public rebuke from David Schenker, not just on Operation Irini but on Europe's one-sided stance. "They could at least, if they were serious, I think, call them out—call out all parties of the conflict when they violate the arms embargo," the American diplomat told a reporter.<sup>227</sup> Yet American diplomacy on Libya has hardly been a paragon of effectiveness and even-handedness. Indeed, in its reluctance to formulate a clear policy on Libya and its reticence to exert diplomatic leadership, the Trump administration has in many respects followed the Obama administration's paradigm of "no ownership"—what State Department officials have recently reframed as "active neutrality."<sup>228</sup> As noted earlier, part of this is structural and geo-strategic: Libya is just too peripheral for Washington to warrant significant commitment of U.S. resources or pushback against American allies who've long been intervening—especially when those allies' help is deemed to be essential on other regional priorities. But under the Trump administration, authoritarian ideological preferences and a pronounced tilt toward the United Emirates and Turkey have factored in as well. Having first backed the Emirates in their support of Haftar, the Trump presidency subsequently sent positive signals to Turkey, once Haftar's advance stalled and after the Russian presence widened. As a result, U.S. policy under Trump has

been muddled and anything but neutral. Moreover, by imposing a false moral equivalence Libya's warring factions and issuing toothless expressions of regret on repeated violations and abuses, Washington contributed to a prolongation and intensification of the war.

By the summer of 2020, there were modestly encouraging signs that this reticence was changing. The United States took the positive and long overdue step of threatening U.S. Treasury sanctions on Haftar, a U.S. citizen in conjunction with its application of sanctions on Wagner financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin (for his involvement in Sudan, rather than Libya).<sup>229</sup> In tandem, the U.S. Africa Command began waging a concerted public information campaign to highlight and criticize Russia's buildup of military infrastructure in Libya—though such measures, by themselves, won't deter Moscow's meddling.<sup>230</sup> Diplomatically, the United States, along with Germany, the United Kingdom and the UN, started pressing for a demilitarization zone in Sirte as a means of securing a return to a political process. The U.S. ambassador to Libya engaged in robust shuttle talks with Ankara and Cairo, resulting in their support to a ceasefire agreement announced on August 21, 2020 by GNA Prime Minister al-Sarraj and the speaker of the eastern HOR, Aguila Saleh.<sup>231</sup>

Though the agreement, which endorsed the demilitarization of the Sirte region, called for a resumption of oil production, and included a provision to place oil revenues in Libya's foreign, rather than central bank, was lauded by the UN and in Western capitals, it remains fraught with pitfalls. Most significantly, the signatories have a limited span of control over armed and political actors on the ground, illustrated in the case of Aguila Saleh by Haftar's rejection of the deal and threats to restart fighting. For its part, al-Sarraj and the GNA coalition have been shaken by widespread protests over poor administration and corruption and a surge in coronavirus infections and deaths—which are also present in the east.<sup>232</sup> The GNA has also been riven by a worsening power struggle, which saw al-Sarraj suspend and then reinstate the powerful interior minister Fathi Bashagha for allegedly encouraging the protests.<sup>233</sup> These widening and deeply rooted fissures extend well beyond political elites, to armed groups and towns in and around Tripoli—and to the Tripoli-based Central Bank, whose militia-aligned governor has emerged as a key obstructionist, along with Haftar, according to a senior Western diplomat.<sup>234</sup> On top of these internal dynamics, the prospect for a durable peace is offset by the calculations of outside interveners, who are jockeying to secure their political and economic interests in the wake of the deal. Most notable of these is the Emirates, which, even if it has not militarily thwarted the deal, has not altered its ideologically-driven position on Libya and seems committed to stoking the GNA's collapse.<sup>235</sup> Moreover, Turkey's commitment to the agreement should not be assumed to be interminable, given its distrust of the Emirates. In short, unless there is more sustained diplomatic follow-up, especially from Washington, toward Libyans and toward regional states, the al-Sarraj-Saleh ceasefire, like so many other truces before it, could presage a reconfiguration of the conflict rather than its lasting cessation.

## Conclusion

The internationalization of Libya's civil wars since 2011 has resulted from a confluence of global disorder and regional and local dynamics: The erosion of multilateral norms on embargo enforcement and protection of human rights, paralysis and disunity in Europe, military assertiveness by Middle Eastern powers with hegemonic aspirations, and Russian opportunism and gray zone adventurism. Added to this is America's longstanding retrenchment and ambivalence on Libya, accompanied by a tacit tolerance of and, under the Trump administration, support for its increasingly interventionist Middle Eastern allies.

Regionally, Libya fell victim to a rivalry between two competing visions of Middle Eastern order, led by Turkey on the one hand and the Emirates on the other. A defining feature of this rivalry has been a disagreement about the political inclusion of Islamists—with the Emirates vehemently opposing them because of concerns about their transnational spread. Yet the more relevant divide is over the nature of political pluralism itself: This is not to say that Ankara is pushing liberal democracy, but Turkey, along with Qatar, has been inclined to permit a multi-actor type of governance that included Islamists. Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi prefers to see a more centralized rule in the form of an aspiring strongman.<sup>236</sup> Washington's longtime backing of and deference to Abu Dhabi as a regional proxy, along with French support and the lack of a unified policy in Europe, has been a crucial enabler of the Emirates' efforts to implement this vision in Libya. More recently, elements of the U.S. government, namely the U.S. Africa Command and the State Department, have evinced a tacit acceptance of and limited support for Turkey's role in Libya, until the standoff at Sirte, principally as a counter to Russia.<sup>237</sup>

For all the foreign powers' influence on Libya's scene, it is important not to completely deny agency to Libyan actors. Outside support has indisputably been a conflict amplifier and prolonger. And access to foreign patronage has disincentivized Libyans from reaching an accord. And yet, in the near-decade since the overthrow of Qadhafi, Libyans have exerted more agency in these proxy conflicts than is commonly assumed. Many Libyans admit that it was precisely the divisions of Libyan society and politics—most of which were not primordial but arose during and after the 2011 revolution—which gave foreigners openings to exploit.

Libyan political elites and armed group leaders have proven skillful at soliciting and manipulating competing offers of outside patronage—and they often do not follow the wishes of any of their patrons' lockstep, as evidenced by Haftar's walkout of the January 2020 Moscow summit. Their negative influence in this regard is bolstered by their control of Libya's oil wealth as a source of leverage.

Personal networks of intermediaries, brokers and fixers, further complicate the patron-client relationship and dilute the control of outsiders over local allies.

Moving forward, several trends bear watching to discern the course of foreign involvement in Libya's conflict. The first is the spread of the coronavirus to Libya in March 2020. From the outset, the contagion did nothing to lessen the tempo of the fighting—in fact, the opposite has occurred. Outside calls for a humanitarian ceasefire to deal with the virus have largely gone unheeded and Haftar's LAAF took advantage of international distraction to escalate attacks on civilian targets in Tripoli.<sup>238</sup> Simultaneously, the flows of foreign arms and fighters continued.

Yet the pandemic's long-term economic fallout, combined with a sustained plunge in global oil demand, could shape the capacity and willingness of foreign forces to intervene. As oil-exporting states enter a period of austerity, cuts to defense budgets may result in less Gulf military adventurism. For their part, America and European powers, especially France, could see budgetary and health-related constraints on their intelligence and defense sectors that may limit their ability to intervene in areas like train-and-equip, overwatch, collection, direct action, or sanctions enforcement, especially at sea.

In contrast to this trajectory, another and perhaps more likely scenario is continued and reconfigured interference, using foreign auxiliaries and drones, which are relatively low cost and, in the case of mercenaries, insulated from concerns about infecting the interveners' home-based troops. More advanced weapons systems could also arrive, as shown already by the Russian air defense build-up. The drift toward greater intervention might increase as Libya's conflict becomes more fractious and localized. Having "defeated" Haftar's forces, armed groups and political actors within the GNA coalition could splinter into pro- and anti-Turkish elements, especially with Turkish offers of security sector assistance. Eastern Libya could become similarly rife with divisions if Haftar falls, or when he dies, inviting Emirati and Egyptian (and possibly others) meddling to influence the fallout.

Taken in sum, Libya's confluence of foreign predation and technological innovations has led some observers to speak of the Libyan war as a uniquely post-modern or even science-fiction conflict, conducted by robotic drones, Twitter bots, and foreign mercenaries, with Libyans acting as bystanders.<sup>239</sup> But such a framing does not completely capture realities on the ground or aid in a clearer understanding of the conflict's stakes or potential outcomes.

To be sure, foreign mercenary fighters drawn to Libya's conflict marketplace have contributed to the prolongation and intensification of the combat. And Libya is indeed being used as a laboratory by outside powers for advanced drones and informational warfare tactics, whose full implications may become fully apparent in future wars, much as the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) was a trial run for terror bombing of civilians by fascist air forces.<sup>240</sup> Yet combat on the Libyan

frontlines has always been a viciously intimate and human affair, ultimately waged between Libyan citizens. And this human element is even more evident in the devastation the war has wrought: in the shattered psyches and ruined bodies of the young fighters, in the hundreds of thousands of people uprooted from their homes, in the civilian lives lost to mines and booby traps, and in the tears to the country's social fabric that may take generations to mend.

## Notes

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