

5. Libya in the Covid-19 Era: Between Local Chaos and Foreign Interferences

Andrey Chuprygin

While the Libyan crisis has been on and off the frontpages of the international agenda, it is often linked to Russia every time it hits the headlines. Whether the issue rotates around political toing and froing or military tales of the frontline variety, Russia is bound to be somewhere in the heart of the discussion. Of late, a few new dimensions have been added to the Libyan file, of which Turkey and Covid-19 are the most pressing. What exactly does Russia do in the complicated Libyan environment? How does this correlate with the Turkish attempt to gain a foothold in this North African and Mediterranean country? Such questions, and the related commitments and developments on these matters, are the focus of this piece.

The Russian connection to the Libyan case has been voluntarily or otherwise the virtual cornerstone of any political activity even remotely connected to this North African country. Whenever and whoever starts discussing Libya, regardless of the topic or subject, one can practically guarantee Russia is going to be mentioned. For some, Russian involvement is a blessing, for others it is a curse. Nothing in between. It is somehow flattering on one hand and bewildering on the other. Flattering in that, against the odds, Russia has become an important player in the Mediterranean, thus to a certain extent fulfilling the historical

legacy of the Eastern Policy of Katherine the Great,¹ and bewildering in that it is very difficult to pinpoint how exactly Russia is influencing the Libyan conundrum and what, if any, the consequences of this influence are.

Then there is Turkey, of course, coming through with the grand imperial idea of the Neo-Uthmanic narrative, the “Mavi Vatan”² strategic doctrine and the ethereal thirst for new energy resources which, coupled with the dream of the “Great Resurrection”, defines the current Turkish Mediterranean Paradigm and plunges the North Atlantic military and political construct into a turmoil of epic proportions. It really is a source of real wonder and curiosity how one Southern Mediterranean country (Libya), coupled with the one military political misstep in 2011,³ has defined major shifts in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern constructs during the first quarter of the XXI century.

And, of course there is Covid-19, the Plague of the Century that needs serious consideration. However, this issue is not really going to be covered here. The argument underscoring this work is that Covid-19 might have exacerbated circumstances, played it has played little if any role in the development of the Libyan crisis and it is being artificially introduced into the political discourse in order to underscore the humanitarian aspect of civil unrest in Libya.

Since the time of Qaddafi, Libyan leadership was very non-Soviet, if I may put it that way. There were never brotherly

¹ See, for example: E. Smilyanskaya, *Russian Warriors in the Land of Miltiades and Themistocles: The Colonial Ambitions of Catherine the Great in the Mediterranean*, Higher School of Economics Research Paper No. WP BRP 55/HUM/2014, 13 May 13, 2014.

² The Turkish doctrine, known as “The Blue Homeland Doctrine” (Mavi Vatan), was formulated by Admiral Cem Gurdeniz in 2006. It is aimed at ensuring Turkey’s control in the three seas surrounding it, strengthening its regional and international influence and obtaining energy resources, to support its economic and demographic growth without dependence on third countries.

³ NATO interference in the Libyan domestic affairs which ended in the overthrow and demise of the then Libyan leader Col. Qaddafi.

relations and no love lost between Tripoli and Moscow.⁴ Qaddafi, if anything, longed to be recognised as an equal by the West, especially the U.S., and used his Soviet card as a counterbalance in his relations with American interlocutors (the same could be said about his idol Gamal Abdel Naser of Egypt and several other Mideastern leaders).

Not much has changed since February 2011. Of all the political figures who have come and gone, hardly one was even remotely pro-Russian. So, it is impossible to consciously say there were highly positioned Russian agents of influence in Libya then, as there are none now. On top of this, Russia's lack of action on the Security Council in 2011 left a bad aftertaste in the Libyan political milieu. Add to this a long period of practical disinterest in Libyan affairs, and one has the stage upon which Russian engagement in the Libyan drama started unfolding.

For 5-6 years Russia played the role of a disinterested observer in line with the overall Mideastern approach,⁵ until the engagement in Syria changed the Russian position in the Middle East, bringing a proactive approach. Still in Libya, Moscow adopted a very cautious position. It seems there was an understanding of the importance of the Libyan situation in the context of Mediterranean politics, a temptation to fill the void left by the United States after Washington distanced itself from the volatile high-risk-no-gain situation in Libya, and the attractive idea of reversing negative European relations by dealing with the migration issue and security concerns. But instead of plunging headfirst into the marshland of Libyan civil war, Moscow decided to hedge possible risks by talking to all parties concerned, whatever that might mean at that specific time.

Two problems came up immediately:

1. Which parties specifically should it to talk to? Numerous divisions existed and tendencies were unclear at the best of times.

⁴ G.W. Breslauer, *Soviet Strategy in the Middle East*, Boston, 1990, p. 164.

⁵ M. Belenkaya, *In Libya's War, Russia Is Directionless - and Falling Behind*, Carnegie Papers, 2020.

2. The so-called partners in the West, both Europe and the US, immediately started searching for ulterior motives in Russian positions.

Regardless of the above, one has to acknowledge that for a period of time Moscow played well in Libya, effectively becoming a side to turn to both for Tobruk and Tripoli,⁶ at times when Europe displayed indifference.

This was the case until April 2019 when the Haftar offensive on Tripoli became the game-changer. Not only did the internal political and military situation in Libya immediately become more dangerous and unpredictable, but the whole international approach to the Libyan crisis underwent a drastic change. The talk shifted from the “no substitute for a political solution” to the “Russia interfering in Libyan affairs” narrative. It was educational to watch the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and Saudi Arabia flagrantly violating the UN Security Council embargo, providing the Libyan East (meaning Haftar) with weapons, ammunitions and military material to which Brussels turned a blind eye, while the main rhetoric was about Russia supporting Haftar, worded precisely as “Russia meddling in Libyan affairs”.

On the other hand, the use of “Russian involvement”, and not “Russia involvement”, here is deliberate. The whole narrative is based on a single fact of the so-called Private Military Company (PMC) Wagner working the frontlines with Haftar’s Libian National Army (LNA). But to be fair, this started in September 2019. And before that the main topic was Haftar’s visits to Moscow, which occasionally were transcribed as clear evidence of Moscow colluding with the Libyan East. But to be fair, one has to mention Maiteeq⁷ and other political figures from the Libyan West, Tripoli and Misrata. The number of their visits was twice the number of visits of their Eastern counterparts.

⁶ House of Representatives in Tobruk and Government of National Accord in Tripoli.

⁷ Ahmed Maiteeq, Vice Chairman of the Presidential Council of Libya, Tripoli.

The same is true for the arms and military equipment deliveries. It is a documented fact that the main supplier of Haftar and his LNA should be sought in Cairo and Abu Dhabi. And, at the end of the day – it is highly unlikely that Khalifa Haftar, an American citizen and one-time CIA asset, embraced Russia with all his might. The question of who brought him back to Libya in the first place and financed his first steps should be answered before we enter the world of highly speculative supposition.

In October, reports of Russian PMCs taking part in military activities with Haftar's forces⁸ became the focus of attention overnight, obscuring the main problems of the rivalries in Libya. As a result, in European political circles the nature of debates about solutions in Libya shifted once again from the meaningful to the construed. The search for solutions was once again replaced by a seek-and-blame mode.

This particular strain was found by studying analytical reports from several think tanks furthering the idea of Russia threatening US and European interests in the Mediterranean. This is a Freudian slip if there was one. The majority of the reports in question centre on the Big Game between international players, pushing the interests of the Libyan people to the margins of the discussion. There are distinct, realistic voices, but they are hardly heard over the white noise of the "Libyan experts" peddling "international interests". But to be honest, neither Russian nor American interests should occupy such a prominent place in the debate. This place should be reserved solely for Libyan interests. But, of course, this is a naïve statement.

One might assume the main reason for the Libyanesque confrontations or lack thereof between major international parties is that even with the contradictory positioning in Libya, Moscow is the only player who consistently kept the doors of

⁸ K. Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2019, pp. 197-98.

negotiation open with everyone, acknowledged the existence of multi-layered problems and positioned itself as a valid middleman. Which, from the point of view of Washington, is a problem that needs to be solved somehow. Especially against the backdrop of inconsistent and contradictory announcements by President Trump. And the constant fighting for supremacy between France and Italy, who support different sides of the conflict. Which is all very confusing. However the solution of isolating Moscow from the Libyan case, which seems to be favoured by the US and NATO, is difficult to achieve, because, for a significant period of time, Moscow appeared to be the only foreign party who, while being inactive, did not shy away from the Libyan crisis, and was not implicated directly in the 2011 bombing campaign. And this contributes to shape a more positive image of Russia on the ground compared to others.

But there is, suddenly, a positive side to the situation. Precisely because of the multi-layered Russian involvement in Libya, the US decided to take a more active part in the crisis, if not to remedy the NATO-manufactured disaster of 2011, then at least to spoil Russian advancement. For better or for worse remains to be seen. There is already a tendency for the United States to go its own way, outside of the Berlin framework and concentrating specifically on the Oil Crescent. In this, one could say, they are in tune with Turkey. Will this help solve the situation? It certainly adds to the confusion, especially with Egypt's sabre-rattling and the UAE's attempts at salvaging the Haftar Project. In any case, it is a positive sign as direct American engagement should add to the peace effort in Libya.

Especially in the wake of the Turkish "Mediterranean coming-out", which added a refreshing new factor to an old problem, it looks like we are once again witnessing a change of scene. Direct Turkish involvement in the Libyan civil war has led to a change in the whole Mediterranean ambiance. There is definitely a dramatic increase in international involvement, with several players rushing in at once to make sure they were not left behind. Libya suddenly became the "apple of

discord” in the Mediterranean Basin, amidst the failing NATO methodology, as became painfully clear through the French/Turkish fallout and Greece desperately searching for NATO’s reluctant assistance. At the same time, Washington has been trying to placate everyone with meaningless statements, while there is an educated consensus the United States, if push came to shove, would ally itself with Turkey. This knowledge makes everyone anxious to timely assert their “rightful” place in the resulting structure of the emerging Mediterranean. The shift from the Eurocentric Med to the Mediterranean subjected to the influence of the Middle East is new and disturbing for the traditional Southern European heavyweights France and Italy. And the role of Turkey, which is the closest U.S. ally in the Middle East, but maintains working relations with Russia, contributes to the confusion. And, however one looks at it, Russia becomes a de facto point of convergence for practically all the players involved. And this might as well be instrumental in generating positive movement.

The Covid-19 pandemic was touched on at the beginning of this piece. Debate is already underway as to how the pandemic is going to reshape the face of our civilisation. The argument here is that Covid-19 as an existential factor is only relevant to Western societies. In the Eastern world, in general and in Libya as part of the Eastern and Islamic world, Covid-19 has no significant impact. While definitely being an issue for health services, due to the lack of testing and medical facilities, it does not hold a major place in the country’s social psyche. Against the backdrop of the fallout from the civil war, the lack of basic amenities, the unresolved security issues, the power void and the Islamic tradition of Prophetic hadith,⁹ the Covid-19 pandemic is not at the forefront of the country’s problems and does not constitute a factor in the future of the nation.

⁹ For example, see Al-Hafidz Ibnu Hajar Al-Asqolani, *Kitab Badʿu al-Maʿun Fi Fadhl al-Thaʿun* (in Arabic).

Here, one might be advised to take a closer look at the “non-pandemic” factors in the Libyan domestic scene. Since 2011, many research and political papers have been produced exploring the ways and means of resolving the political crisis that followed the February revolution, as it has been called. The focus has often been divided between the domestic and international players, and their roles in a possible, or probable solution. The prevailing view wants us to believe the real problem on the road to the reconstruction and development in this North African country lies with the lack of consensus between the major regional and international players involved in the Libyan charade, as each one is pursuing its own interests. This may be so; however, the view in this chapter is that the main obstacle to the desired resolution hides not outside but inside the country. It is not Turkey, trying to use the Libyan theatre to further its own ambitions in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. It is not France, trying to sabotage Turkish efforts. It is not Egypt, looking at its neighbour through the biased lens of its own national security. It is not Russia or the United States, engaged in a big shuffle dance over perceived national interests. The main handicap is that Libya has no developed civil society to provide a framework to mobilise the populace to political activity. And without such a framework one cannot realistically expect a political process, with party activism, elections, consensus etc.

Historically, Libya never had a chance to form such a framework, which we take for granted. From the Ottomans to the Italians, to the Brits, to the artificial kingdom, to the cartoonish revolution, and to the decades of paternalistic authoritarianism in an all-encompassing one-man show, there never was a real chance for the country and its people to create a unique national independence model with an articulated national sense capable of evolving into a civil society platform, with its own heroic ethos and enshrined leaders. Through all these decades the country remained regionally fractured, with cities and tribes pursuing their own egoistic goals and

occasionally filling the shoes of the clients for the leader who happened to be in power at the time.

To expect the country, between 2011 and now – overnight, in a historical sense – to develop into a sufficiently sophisticated environment to be able to reach a political consensus is naïve. And we are witnessing this every day. Recently, after the purported success of the 5x5 negotiations in the form of a permanent ceasefire, we see Haftar meeting with Eastern delegates and stressing his resolve to fight till the victorious end and calling on Tuareg tribes to join him in this noble enterprise. And there are the Tripoli militias, which quite expectedly refuse to disarm and dissolve, thus hampering the plan formulated by the Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha in the spirit of de-escalation and compromise.

All observers agree the municipalities have become a powerful new factor, as they have been in the process of ascertaining positions of influence in Libya. Local executive bodies, which provide the population with daily amenities, thus working outside the political minefield, have gained uncontested authority and trust among locals. In the chaos of the civil war and the destruction of the economy and security, municipal committees provide what amounts to the basis of existence for the people. And they have a good chance to become the nucleus of the new emerging civil society in Libya.

Let us now return to the question of foreign players, which is no doubt very important to resolving the Libyan issue, it seems logical for influential countries, hosting conferences and negotiations between the two easily accessible parties to the conflict, namely the Government of National Accord (GNA) of Tripoli and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) of Haftar, to turn their attention to the parties previously ignored by the “big shots” as being too small and too obscure. Noticeably, when international NGOs aim to achieve something they turn to municipal authorities, not the central powers. This is a clear indication that local committees are in fact the real power on the ground, capable of mobilising and negotiating.

Unfortunately, working through municipal authorities requires a different level of involvement from international players, but they are not prepared to commit to this. The inability to work creatively and to think out of the box impedes all efforts by the international community. And while Europe scratches its collective head trying to figure what to do next, and while conferences are piling up on themselves and consultations multiply, proactive regional entrepreneurial elites are moulding Libya to their own ends, changing the balance in the whole of the Mediterranean.

To reverse negative developments in Libya, there is a need for the concerted efforts of all parties concerned, built on the overall understanding the struggle for peace in Libya is in fact a struggle for peace in the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, experiences last year showed that frontline European Mediterranean countries are incapable of reaching a consensus with Mideastern and North African countries, as well as with each other. On top of this, countries like France are practically incapable of imaginative policies in the face of new challenges from the East. The new era of Mideastern Tigers ascertaining their position and probing the waters of the Big Blue Homeland calls for a reassessment in political approaches. The only obstacle left to overcome is to acknowledge that countries like Turkey and Russia also have their own interests and are not going, under any conditions, to be left on the margins of the political process. And of course, there are people in Libya, and therefore their interests must be at the forefront of each and every development in and around this North African country. This is simply called *realpolitik*.